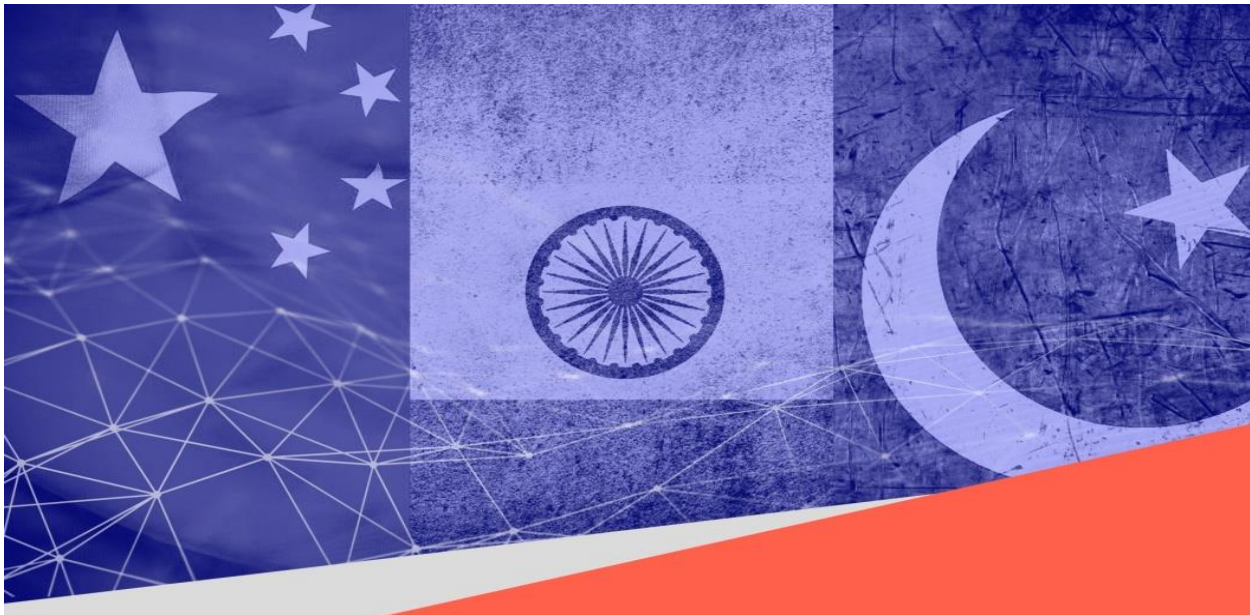


The Growing Threat of Accelerated Arms Buildup in South Asia: A Dangerous Game of Catch Up

- *Ainun Nishat Chowdhury*¹

Introduction:



South Asia, famed for its complicated geopolitical dynamics, has seen a concerning trend of an arms race among its states. South Asia's arms race, characterized by rising military spending, the acquisition of advanced weaponry, and the development of cutting-edge technologies, has emerged as a major source of concern in the region. The South Asian region has become a hub of geopolitical tensions and strategic struggle, with countries like India, Pakistan, and China vying for military domination. Furthermore, defence ties between India and the US have been crucial in the South Asian arms race. This alliance has evolved due to geopolitical factors, including shared

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concerns about China's growing influence and military capabilities. Historical conflicts, unsolved territorial disputes, and regional power rivalry have fueled the arms race, threatening regional security, stability, and global dynamics.

Historical Background:

The region's historical backdrop, characterized by tensions, conflicts, and territorial disputes, has a significant impact on the arms race in South Asia. In 1947 British India was divided into India and Pakistan, now two distinct countries. Violence and racial riots hampered the process and forced millions of people to flee their homes. Future confrontations were foreshadowed by the enormous mistrust and hostility that the split engendered among the newly established nations.

The first nuclear test conducted by India, code-named "Smiling Buddha," in 1974 signalled a crucial shift in the dynamics of the region's security.² The world community was alarmed by this development, pushing Pakistan to seek out its nuclear capacity in reaction. Since attaining their independence, India and Pakistan have fought in several armed engagements and border clashes. The Indo-Pakistani Wars of 1947-1948, 1965, 1971, and the Kargil War in 1999 contributed to further mistrust and an arms race. The protracted dispute over the Kashmir area is one of the most important causes fueling the arms race in South Asia. From the beginning, tensions between the United States and China posed a security concern to South Asia. International participation has historically been crucial in reducing tensions between the nuclear-armed neighbours. However, the growing rivalry between China and the United States threatens to upset this delicate balance in South Asia.

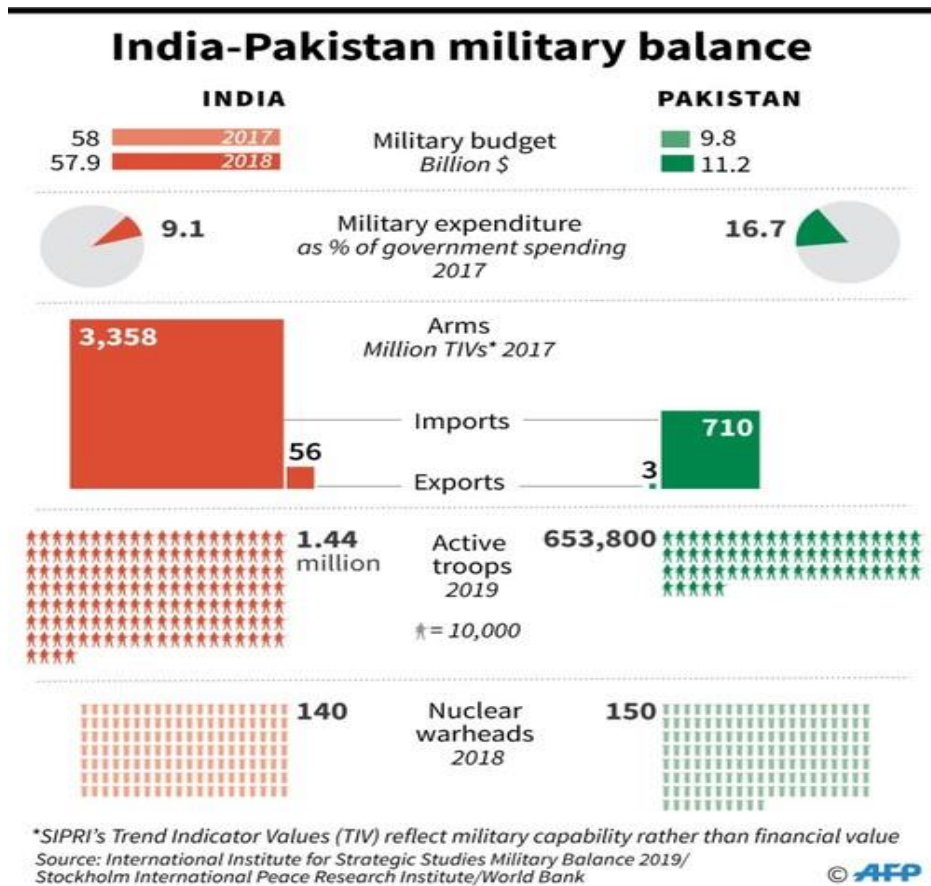
Analyzing the growing tension between India and Pakistan:

The rivalry between India and Pakistan over security has long been a problem in South Asia. Both nations have been creating and testing new weapon systems to improve their strategic deterrence capacities. While India's main priority is its strategic deterrence against China,

² Vinod, Nibandh. "Smiling Buddha: All You Need to Know about India's First Nuclear Test at Pokhran in 1974." News18, May 18, 2023. <https://www.news18.com/news/lifestyle/operation-smiling-buddha-all-you-need-to-know-about-indias-first-nuclear-test-at-pokhran-in-1974-5188699.html>.

Pakistan focuses on conventional weapons to prevent India from engaging in military operations below the nuclear threshold.

In 2012, Pakistan launched the Shaheen IA ballistic missile, while India completed the first test launch of the Agni V ballistic missile.³ These nuclear-capable missile tests have sparked concerns about a possible nuclear arms race in the region. India’s efforts to update its military hardware are highlighted by the recent approval of \$8.5 billion in purchasing missiles, helicopters, artillery weapons, and electronic warfare systems.⁴ India has focused on bolstering its navy and raised concerns over Chinese actions in the Indian Ocean. The \$6.77 billion in endorsements for naval hardware proves this.⁵



³ Dalton, Toby, and Jaclyn Tandler. Understanding the arms “race” in South Asia, September 2012. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/13/understanding-arms-race-in-south-asia-pub-49361>.

⁴ “India Approves Purchase of Military Equipment Worth \$8.5 Bln.” Reuters, March 16, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-approves-purchase-military-equipment-worth-85-bln-2023-03-16/>.

⁵ “India to Invest US \$46.96 Billion on 101 Naval Ships: Expert.” NDTV.com, May 16, 2011. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-to-invest-us-46-96-billion-on-101-naval-ships-expert-455947>.

It is anticipated that Pakistan will get further military equipment transfers from China in the upcoming months. China's long-term goal appears to be twofold: financially undermining India by confronting it directly on the eastern border and equipping Pakistan so that India would have to increase its investment in defensive capabilities. Pakistan believes having nuclear weapons will prevent India from launching extensive military operations in retaliation for Islamabad's support for militant organizations in the contentious Kashmir region.

The United States has been assisting India to modernize, notably regarding defence technology and apparatus. The United States sees India as a partner in preserving peace and fending off any threats in the region because of its strategic relevance to the area. South Asia now features a complex and dynamic strategic terrain due to China's involvement and the security rivalry between India and Pakistan. An arms race has been feared due to the pursuit of enhanced military capabilities, notably nuclear weapons. Modernization of military hardware and increased deterrence are motivated by regional dynamics and perceived threats, but external actors like the US also contribute to and influence the region's security situation.

Assessing the USA- India tie

India and the United States have been boosting their defence and arms cooperation ties, motivated by a common desire to oppose China's ascent as a global force. The United States regards India as an important component in its attempt to counteract China's expanding influence, notably in the Indian Ocean region. This mindset has resulted in a significant increase in US arms sales to India during the last decade.

India has been more dependent on American defence technology in recent years. India's security assessments have long considered China to be a threat. Launching the US-India initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) in early 2023 has given bilateral defence industry cooperation more momentum.⁶

⁶ Chaudhuri, Rudra. What is the United States-India initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), February 27, 2023. <https://carnegieindia.org/2023/02/27/what-is-united-states-india-initiative-on-critical-and-emerging-technologies-icet-pub-89136>.

INDIA-U.S. DEFENCE TIES

BY SAMEER PATIL

The recently signed Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) between India and the U.S. symbolises the strengthened defence and security partnership between the two countries and the growing interoperability capabilities between the two militaries. Since the signing of the Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship in 2005 (renewed in 2015), bilateral defence engagement has been thriving, characterised by high-level dialogues, joint exercises, defence trade and technology cooperation. American support has also ensured India's entry in global technology export control regimes – Australia Group, the Wassenaar Arrangement and the Missile Technology Control Regime. Membership of these regimes has enabled India's access to high technology in the civilian space and defence sectors. U.S. military equipment has added considerable value to India's power projection capability.

MAJOR AGREEMENTS AND MECHANISMS:

2009	Counter Terrorism Cooperation Initiative
2012	Defence Technology and Trade Initiative
2015	Framework for the India-U.S. Defense Relationship
2015	Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region
2016	Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement
2016	Framework for the US-India Cyber Relationship
2018	Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement
2019	Industrial Security Annex
2020	Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement

MAJOR DEFENCE EQUIPMENT SOLD TO INDIA:

EQUIPMENT	YEAR OF PURCHASE
C-130J transport aircraft	2008
C-17 transport aircraft	2009
P-8i maritime patrol aircraft	2009
Chinook CH-47 heavy-lift transport helicopters	2015
AH-64E Apache attack helicopters	2015
Harpoon anti-ship missiles	2016
MH-60 Seahawk Maritime helicopters	2020

MAJOR JOINT EXERCISES:

SERVICE	EXERCISE	COMMENCED IN	FREQUENCY
Army	Yudh Abhyas	2004	Annual
Air Force	Red Flag (Multinational Exercise)	IAF began participating in 2008	Annual-IAF participates once in 5 years
Navy	Malabar	1992	Annual
Special Forces	Vajra Prahar	2012	Intermittent
Tri-service	Tiger Triumph	2019	N.A.

DIALOGUES:

- 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue
- Defence Policy Group
- Homeland Security Dialogue
- Strategic Intelligence Dialogue
- Cyber Security Dialogue
- Maritime Security Dialogue

Current bilateral defence trade: \$20 billion [since 2005]

EXISTING DEFENCE TECHNOLOGY COOPERATION:

PROJECT	STATUS
Near term projects	Air-launched Small Unmanned Systems (UAS), Light Weight Small Arms Technology and Intelligence-Surveillance-Targeting & Reconnaissance
Medium-term projects	Maritime Domain Awareness Solution and Virtual Augmented Mixed Reality for Aircraft Maintenance
Long-term projects:	Terrain Shaping Obstacle and Counter-UAS, Rocket, Artillery & Mortar (CURAM) system for the Indian Army

MAJOR COMMERCIAL PARTNERSHIPS:

U.S. COMPANY	INDIAN PARTNER	EQUIPMENT
BAE Systems	Mahindra Defence	Manufacturing and assembly of M777 howitzers
Boeing	Bharat Forge	Titanium forgings for the Boeing 737 aircraft
Boeing	Dynatomic Technologies	Components for Chinook Helicopters & P-8i aircraft
Lockheed Martin	Tata Advanced Systems	Components for C-130J aircraft
Sikorsky Aircraft Company	Tata Advanced Systems	Aerospace components

Source: Gateway House Research

India and the United States have built a political and bureaucratic structure, including the 2+2 Dialogue, the Defense Policy Group (DPG), and several bilateral and Quad working groups, to facilitate security cooperation. The creation of the surface-to-air missile (SAM) system Akash is one of several notable examples.⁷ To pursue its objective of reaching \$5 billion in annual defence exports by 2025, India has successfully taken advantage of its triumphs in the domestic defence

⁷ “Akash Weapon System: Bharat Dynamics Limited India.” AKASH WEAPON SYSTEM | BHARAT DYNAMICS LIMITED INDIA. Accessed May 27, 2023. [https://bdl-india.in/AKASH#:~:text=AKASH%20is%20a%20Short%20Range,Counter%20Measures%20\(ECCM\)%20features.](https://bdl-india.in/AKASH#:~:text=AKASH%20is%20a%20Short%20Range,Counter%20Measures%20(ECCM)%20features.)

industry.⁸ Military exports significantly increased from approximately \$145 million (900 crores) to more than \$1.7 billion (14,00 crore) between 2014 and 2022 due to increasing contracts signed by military industries.⁹

The growing South Asian arms race and its wider ramifications for regional security are highlighted by the expanding defence cooperation between India and the United States and India's improvements in domestic defence production. In general, Washington's strategy to prevent China's growth relies heavily on the India-U.S. defence and armaments alliance. India is also motivated to compete with China for resources due to historical animosities and border conflicts.

Analyzing China-Pakistan Nexus

The historical relationship between China and Pakistan has been marked by strong cooperation in many areas, particularly military and defence concerns. Through the provision of modern weapons, military technology transfers, and extensive training opportunities, China has helped Pakistan develop a self-sufficient defence sector. China and Pakistan signed a Joint Declaration on the Direction of Bilateral Cooperation in 2003, which improved defence cooperation.¹⁰ Since then, China has given Pakistan military support through the J-10CE, Al Khalid tanks, and the first delivery of the VT-4, a Chinese-made main battle tank. Beijing keeps up its significant investment in Pakistan's defence to deter India.¹¹ Chinese transfers have sought to compete with Indian capabilities, as seen in Islamabad's recent acquisition of J10C jets to compete with Rafales and J-F17 Thunder fighter jets to help Pakistan deter India in airspace and replace its reliance on American F-16 jets.¹² A four-warship agreement signed in 2018 has been completed

⁸ Jaishankar, Dhruva. "Precision Targets: Accelerating the U.S.-India Defense Industrial Partnership." ORF America, March 20, 2023. <https://orfamerica.org/newresearch/us-india-defense-cooperation>.

⁹ Jaishankar, "Precision Targets: Accelerating the U.S.-India Defense Industrial Partnership — ORF America."

¹⁰China-Pakistan joint declaration, November 4, 2003.

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/200311/t20031104_679089.html.

¹¹ Naseem, Noorulain. "U.S.-China Strategic Competition and the Resulting Arms Race in South Asia • Stimson Center." Stimson Center, February 7, 2023. <https://www.stimson.org/2023/u-s-china-strategic-competition-and-the-resulting-arms-race-in-south-asia/>.

¹² Naseem, "U.S.-China Strategic Competition and the Resulting Arms Race in South Asia • Stimson Center."

with China's delivery of two frigates to Pakistan's navy.¹³ The two Type 054A frigates will protect the waterways surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).¹⁴ China sent Pakistan the first batch of six J-10 fighter jets in March last year. Pakistan placed an order with China for eight Hangor Class submarines, projected to arrive before 2028.¹⁵

Additionally, continuous discussions are taking place between China and Pakistan regarding providing a hypersonic missile to counter India's \$400 missile defence system.¹⁶ Competition between the US and China could accelerate this dynamic. China has expressed concern that India would acquire nuclear-powered submarines through AUKUS and is concerned about QUAD and its 2020 Malabar military drills.¹⁷ According to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade, China exported arms, ammunition, components, and accessories to Pakistan for US\$629.01 Thousand in 2022.¹⁸

The Indo-Pacific's expanding arms race raises concerns about regional stability, fueled by China's cooperation with Pakistan. The alliance between China and Pakistan has accelerated the arms race in South Asia. India has increased its defence capabilities in response to Pakistan's military advancements, fueling a cycle of armament accumulation. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, which is expected to comprise more than 200 nuclear missiles within the next five years, is being developed with help from China.¹⁹ Concern over an opposing naval presence and potential competition in the Indo-Pacific has increased due to China's recent expenditures on Pakistan's naval capabilities. China wants to have a strategic footing on the western edge of the Indo-

¹³ "China Completes Warship Deliveries to Pakistan as Military Alliance Grows." Reuters, May 11, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-completes-warship-deliveries-pakistan-military-alliance-grows-2023-05-11/>.

¹⁴ "China Completes Warship Deliveries to Pakistan as Military Alliance Grows."

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Naseem, Noorulain. "U.S.-China Strategic Competition and the Resulting Arms Race in South Asia • Stimson Center." Stimson Center, February 7, 2023. <https://www.stimson.org/2023/u-s-china-strategic-competition-and-the-resulting-arms-race-in-south-asia/>.

¹⁷ Naseem, "U.S.-China Strategic Competition and the Resulting Arms Race in South Asia • Stimson Center."

¹⁸ "China Exports of Arms and Ammunition, Parts and Accessories to PAKISTAN2023 Data 2024 Forecast 1992-2022 Historical." China Exports of arms and ammunition, parts and accessories to Pakistan - 2023 Data 2024 Forecast 1992-2022 Historical. Accessed May 27, 2023. <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/exports/pakistan/arms-ammunition-parts-accessories>.

¹⁹ Naseem, Noorulain. "U.S.-China Strategic Competition and the Resulting Arms Race in South Asia • Stimson Center." Stimson Center, February 7, 2023. <https://www.stimson.org/2023/u-s-china-strategic-competition-and-the-resulting-arms-race-in-south-asia/>.

Pacific, which will allow it to exercise influence and possibly upset the balance of power in the area.

Implications for Regional stability and Global security

The presence of two nuclear-armed powers in South Asia, Pakistan and India, complicates the region's dynamics. Here are some important things to think about:

Increased Risk of Conflict and Nuclear Escalation: An arms race in South Asia increases the possibility of military conflicts between Pakistan and India, raising worries about possible nuclear escalation. A growing arms race can exacerbate both nations' security concerns and considerably raise the likelihood of a mistake or unintentional escalation to nuclear conflict, given the history of hostilities and the existence of nuclear weapons by both nations.

Arms Spending and Economic Impact: When there is a regional arms race, large funds that could be used for infrastructure, healthcare, education, and poverty reduction are diverted to military spending. The region's overall growth and stability may need to be improved by this resource allocation, further exacerbating existing social and economic problems.

Nuclear Proliferation Issues: The weapons competition in South Asia impacts international non-proliferation efforts. To avoid unauthorized access to or use of nuclear weapons or related technologies, the South Asian region is intensively watched by the international community. The possibility of nuclear weapons technology or materials ending up in the wrong hands or being utilized by non-state actors raises concerns.

Regional Power Balance: An arms race can upset the region's current power dynamics, creating a security dilemma where each state's efforts to increase security through armament are seen as a danger by its neighbours. This could start a cycle of adversarial weaponry purchases, weakening stability and building distrust.

Diplomatic and Peacebuilding Efforts: Diplomatic and peacebuilding efforts can be hampered by an arms race, which makes it more challenging to find peaceful solutions to conflicts or resolve underlying political disagreements.

Analyzing the Impact on Bangladesh

The arms competition between India and Pakistan significantly impacts Bangladesh. India aims to sell military equipment to Bangladesh, which has a \$500 million line of credit operationalized for defence purchases.²⁰ On the other hand, China is going to develop a FM-90 missile maintenance facility in Bangladesh.²¹ Due to Bangladesh's proximity to the two countries, the weapons race raises questions about regional stability and the possibility of escalation, which might immediately affect Bangladesh. The engagement of influential global players like China and the United States increases the intricacy. Bangladesh must carefully evaluate its military needs and maintain a balanced strategy to safeguard its security interests.

Potential Solutions and the Way Forward

1. Confidence-building measures (CBMs) should be implemented to calm tensions and improve openness. Regular military-to-military conversations, exchange of defence concepts, notification of military drills, and setting up immediate access between military leadership to avoid misunderstandings are all possible components of CBMs.
2. India and Pakistan should agree to take action to lower their nuclear risk. This might entail the adoption of no-first-use guidelines, improved nuclear capability communication and information sharing, and the investigation of possible bilateral or regional arms control agreements.
3. Initiatives for regional cooperation that support stability, economic growth, and interpersonal interactions should be supported. To address shared issues and advance regional integration, platforms like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) can be reactivated.

²⁰ Laskar, Rezaul H, and Rahul Singh. "India Eyes Bangladesh as Market for Range of Military Hardware." Hindustan Times, January 3, 2023. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-eyes-bangladesh-as-market-for-range-of-military-hardware-101672753197985.html>.

²¹ Tiwari, Sakshi. "China to Set up a Massive Missile Facility in Bangladesh as Beijing Continues to Encircle India, Arm Neighbours." Latest Asian, Middle-East, EurAsian, Indian News, February 19, 2022. <https://eurasianimes.com/china-to-set-up-a-massive-missile-facility-in-bangladesh-india/>.

4. It is important to promote regional economic growth and efforts to eradicate poverty. Economic stability can lessen social and economic inequalities, lessen the need for a military buildup, and increase the likelihood of peaceful interaction.
5. Initiatives under Track-II diplomacy involving academics, professionals, and members of civil society in both nations should be supported. These unofficial discussions can help develop creative ideas, foster consensus, and establish a favourable environment for formal talks.
6. Regional and international powers, including the United Nations, the United States, China, and other pertinent players, should be involved to mediate and facilitate the peace process. Their participation might offer objective viewpoints and support for initiatives to foster confidence.
7. Unresolved issues should be addressed, especially the Kashmir conflict, which has been a major cause of hostility between India and Pakistan. Finding a peaceful solution can be facilitated by encouraging bilateral talks, involving the affected parties, and investigating innovative ideas.

Conclusion

The rapid arms buildup in South Asia is a dangerous game of catch-up that endangers local stability and international security. This arms race dynamic, driven by historical rivalries and territorial disputes, boosts military capabilities and diverts funds away from socioeconomic growth, perpetuating a cycle of mistrust and hatred. The presence of nuclear weapons only adds to the gravity of the situation. South Asian nations need to prioritize communication, diplomacy, and confidence-building measures. At the same time, international actors promote de-escalation and foster a regional security framework based on cooperation and mutual trust.