



RCAS Commentary

US Weapons' Sales to India De-stabilize South Asia's Fragile Stability

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(RCAS)

February 10, 2024

About RCAS

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RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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South Asia's Fragile Stability

Zafar Nawaz Jaspal

The transformation of international geopolitics has increased strategic cooperation between India and the United States, which has a deterministic effect on the South Asian strategic environment. Besides, India's aspiration to be a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region reinforces the Americans' Indo-Pacific strategy, Quad, and I2U2-mini-lateral strategic groups stewarded by the US. But such developments encourage a de-stabilizing arms race rather than conflict resolution in South Asia.



▲ The General Atomics-made MQ-9B SkyGuardian drone flies over Europe. (General Atomics)

China and its like-minded littoral states of the Indian Ocean are sensitive to India's blue water Navy buildup with the assistance of the US. Pakistan considers India's military improvement a direct threat to its national security. Therefore, Islamabad has been carefully monitoring the US transfer of sophisticated military hardware to India and adopting a balancing strategy without joining any strategic bloc.

The Biden administration desires India's leading role in the US and NATO's perspicuous strategy to contain China's systematic rise in global geopolitics. It has sanctioned India to purchase state-of-the-art weaponry from the United States.

Notably, India has been the major defense partner of the US since 2016; Washington has agreed to sell advanced weaponry, including new emerging technologies, to India in recent years.

On February 2, Washington agreed to sell \$4 billion worth of the most advanced Predator drones built by General Atomics to New Delhi. India's armed forces purchased 31 MQ-9B Sky Guardians for the Indian Air Force, eight for the Army, and fifteen Sea Guardian drones for the Indian Navy. According to the US State Department: "The proposed sale will improve India's capability to meet current and future threats by enabling unmanned surveillance and reconnaissance patrols in sea lanes of operation."

The Sea Guardians drones can monitor the seas and submarines, remain airborne for 35 hours at a time, fire hellfire missiles, and carry around 450 kg of bombs. Moreover, to enhance its naval capability, India also bids to purchase six Boeing P-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft from the US. These will supplement 12 P-8I Poseidon aircraft that the Indian Navy already operates. These weapons increase the Indian Navy's punch in the Indian Ocean region.

The US is also assisting India in the realm of new emerging technologies. They signed the US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) agreement to collaborate in artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, 5G/6G, biotech, semiconductors, and space. Notably, the cooperation in the said technologies contributes significantly to modernizing India's missile systems.

The induction of these lethal, long-range weapons in the Indian military arsenal will increase India's military capability and compel Pakistan to acquire more advanced ships and submarines, modernize its air force, and invest more in fabricating and integrating emerging technologies to solidify its defensive fence.

Pakistani defense policymakers seem mindful of the changing geostrategic dynamics in their neighborhood and increasing military threats from their eastern neighbor. They understand that if they do not take timely action, New Delhi will have such a lead over Islamabad in defense spending and armed forces modernization that Pakistan will be left with few options. Therefore, despite economic constraints, it has been advancing its armed forces' conventional and nuclear war-fighting capabilities.

On January 2, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) displayed the induction and operationalization of the advanced weapon systems in its arsenal, which evolve it into an effective next-generation air force. Pakistan's Army Chief General Syed Asim Munir opined that installing new weapons in the air force substantially contributed to ensuring the balance of power in the region.

The Pakistan Navy has been upgrading its fleet as well, by purchasing technologically advanced naval vessels, including submarines from China and Turkish-designed Babur-class corvettes, and indigenously manufactured drones. Besides, Pakistan retested the Ababeel medium-range ballistic missile, designed to carry multiple nuclear warheads, on October 18. It was in response to India's buildup of hypersonic cruise missiles and ballistic missile defense systems.

The modernization of Pakistani missiles, air forces, and the Navy could sustain the conventional balance of power with India. It increases the nuclear threshold between India and Pakistan and could endure strategic stability in South Asia. Paradoxically, the modernization of both sides' armed forces boosts the arms race between them, which has the built-in characteristics to de-stabilize regional strategic stability.

In summary, the steadily increasing firepower of the Indian military with the transfer of American military technology and equipment compel Pakistani defense policymakers to equip their armed forces with state-of-the-art weapon systems to sustain the strategic equilibrium between India and Pakistan despite the defense budgetary constraints due to economic fragility. Nevertheless, this action-reaction further worsens the ugly strategic stability in South Asia.

The article was first published at ARAB News Pakistan, Feb.7, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2455496>.

About Author



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