

Book Review

Ahmad Khan and Eligar Sadeh (2024) *Sabre Rattling in Space: A South Asian Perspective*.
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Sabre Rattling in Space: A South Asian Perspective by Ahmad Khan and Eligar Sadeh offers a wide-ranging analysis of how space is becoming an arena of strategic rivalry, with a particular focus on India, Pakistan, and China. The authors situate South Asian space competition within a global context, arguing that great-power distrust, especially between the United States and China, “trickles down” into regional security dynamics. They frame this contest as a security trilemma: A concept borrowed from International Relations theory, in which actions by one state to enhance its security inadvertently make two other states feel threatened. For instance, they note that after China’s 2007 anti-satellite (ASAT) test, India’s own space programme shifted sharply towards militarisation in response. This cascade of moves and counter-moves among three nuclear-armed neighbours (India, Pakistan, and China), with the United States as a powerful external actor, lies at the heart of their thesis. As Khan and Sadeh put it, space weaponisation has wrought a “paradigm shift in international security,” such that Asia’s entry into the space domain now has profound political and military implications.

Dr Ahmad Khan has a PhD from the National Defence University, Islamabad. He currently serves in Pakistan’s Strategic Plans Division (SPD). He has extensive academic experience in space and nuclear security. Dr Eligar Sadeh is an American astropolitics expert

and aerospace engineer, editor of the journal *Astropolitics*, and former NASA/industry project manager. Khan's background suggests a strong grasp of South Asian security dynamics, while Sadeh's profile underlines knowledge of space technology and global strategy. This dual perspective is reflected throughout the book's multi-layered analysis.

Conceptually, the book is ambitious. The authors draw on established theory, including Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex framework, to organise their analysis. They argue that South Asia constitutes a kind of "super-complex" involving India, Pakistan, and China, whose interactions in space cannot be understood without considering wider great-power rivalry. This three-tiered approach (global, regional, and national) is novel and helps to systematise what might otherwise seem a disparate set of issues. The authors provide a useful historical perspective: It reviews Cold War space competition and arms-control efforts, noting that launch of the Sputnik inaugurated an earlier space arms race. By linking that history to today's US–China space race, the authors underscore that regional South Asian tensions over satellites and missiles are part of a much larger strategic picture.

In subsequent chapters, the book turns to detailed country case studies and capability surveys. The author surveys each of the major space farers' policies and doctrines. The United States is presented through its new Space Force strategy, China through official white papers and military documents, and India and Pakistan each through their own national plans. Khan and Sadeh demonstrate broad knowledge of these programmes. For example, they note India's increasingly comprehensive space agenda, from its Chandrayaan Moon missions to the development of Agni ballistic missiles, and they tie these to political priorities. India is characterised as a "regional space power with global ambitions": Its leaders view space assets as essential for communications, navigation, intelligence, and missile defence. Crucially, the authors emphasise that India's 2019 ASAT test was both a reaction to China and a confirmation of a more assertive doctrine. In contrast, Pakistan's space sector is portrayed as chronically under-resourced. The text recounts the early history of the Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission (SUPARCO; noting Nobel laureate Abdus Salam's involvement) but stresses that "government neglect" and the imperatives of nuclear deterrence have left Pakistan's space programme quite modest. It even points out that Pakistan only adopted a formal space policy in 2023. These narratives, grounded in published studies by South Asian analysts, give readers a clear sense of each country's capabilities and intentions.

The discussion then shifts to the militarisation and weaponisation of outer space. In this case, the authors present in a systematic way what the United States, China, India, and Pakistan have come up with, as far as counter-space capability is concerned, including ground-based lasers and electronic jammers, to the kinetic anti-satellite networks. This comparative mapping forms one of the strongest empirical inputs of the book, as not many studies have united the ASAT programme in India, the jamming satellites and jammers in China, and the US X-37B into a single analytical context. In the case of South Asia, the implications are even more severe because the growing Indian space-based missile-warning and surveillance system has positioned it substantially further into the technological realm beyond Pakistan, and Islamabad is left in a significantly disadvantageous structural posture.

Following these technicalities, Khan and Sadeh broaden back out to the institutional context. They emphasise that "global and regional space order" is a useful survey of how the Cold War order has fractured into today's contested space environment. The book traces the rise of the so-called Second Space Age, noting India's and China's recent achievements, and identifies the emerging "Asian space race" in which new actors and more ambitious

projects (including private enterprises) challenge old multilateral regimes. Authors then examine the US–China space relations, outlining their political, economic, and deterrence dimensions, and highlighting how technological interdependence clashes with political tension over export controls. Although largely summarising the existing analysis of great-power rivalry, this discussion helps to explain why the South Asian states respond as they do: Pakistan, for instance, fears being eclipsed by an Indo-US space partnership, while India relishes new American cooperation that has opened up technology to *Indian Space Research Organisation* (ISRO).

These elements are explicitly tied into the space–security trilemma framework. Here, the authors revisit how the Sino-US competition projects down to the subcontinent. They quote the acid test of the trilemma: “actions taken by one state to protect itself from a second makes a third feel insecure.” More precisely, the trilemma denotes cascading, reciprocal dynamics: A’s defensive or offensive moves raise B’s perceived threat and provoke B to take counter-measures that in turn heighten C’s insecurity, creating feedback loops that can entrench regional competition rather than resolve it. This distinguishes triadic trilemma dynamics from a bilateral security dilemma because the effects propagate through a third actor, producing non-linear strategic consequences. In practical terms, the Sino-US space race spurs Indian developments, which in turn raise Pakistani anxieties and drive its own nascent space ambitions.

Khan and Sadeh present a compelling case that Pakistan is not in a position to ignore the rapidly increasing militarisation of space without enhancing its strategic vulnerability because of its limited resources. The authors highlight how India’s expanding missile-defence network compels Pakistan to upgrade its missile forces and how Pakistan’s strategic posture is constrained by the absence of space-based C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) capabilities. The authors succeed in explaining how South Asian security has expanded into both earth and space realms, rendering space oversight a more dangerous threat. They are backed up with numerous references to official writings, policy reports, and open-source intelligence, giving readers a clear idea of the missile testing trends in India and their more general context. This concept of integrating the South-Asian strategic thinking of Khan and the astropolitical expertise of Sadeh has created a balanced evaluation of the issue at hand that not only acknowledges the concerns of Pakistan but also the increasing space ambitions of India, thus filling a big gap in regional security literature.

There are also a few limitations of the book. The authors argue that a formal arms race in space (like during the Cold War) has not yet emerged. However, their detailed comparison of counter-space capabilities arguably suggests the early dynamics of such a competition. The book gives less weight to alternative Chinese motives for space development, such as civil programme, economic security, dual-use commercial agendas, etc; instead, Chinese activities are presented mainly as power projection. The authors also emphasise kinetic counterspace but give comparatively less attention to the non-kinetic measures, such as cyber and electronic countermeasures by noting that some empirical discussions reflect the research period of the dissertation of the author and therefore precede several recent developments in space security policy and technology.

Although Khan and Sadeh are quite successful in tracing the technical lines of South Asian potentials in counterspace, their greatest contribution is in the conceptual realm. They show how the great-power competition externalises risk by using a regional security trilemma. This framing explains the reason why the gradual developments in satellites, missile warnings, and loitering munitions do not simply increase national power but, instead, transform strategic incentives at cross-border levels. The book thereby already

serves as a warning and a diagnosis. As a warning, it shows how asymmetrical space benefits amplify instability; as a diagnosis, it highlights systemic interactions beyond technology-based decisions. However, the policy implications may be elaborated. The forms of concrete confidence-building, transparency procedures, and dual-use assets cooperative norms are outlined but not operationalised. That gap would enhance the use of the book by practitioners who would need a theoretical context to support their steps in stabilising South Asia. A short-term plan of gradual transparency and crisis communication would be particularly useful.

Overall, *Sabre Rattling in Space* is a valuable contribution. It identifies and elaborates themes, the space-security trilemma, great-power spill over, and the erosion of a post-Cold War “space order,” which have received too little attention in a South Asian context. It assembles a wealth of factual details under a coherent framework, which is not a small feat. The authors’ main conclusion that space competition will drive all three regional rivals to invest more in satellites, sensors, and counter-space systems is well supported. In an era when outer space is rightly called the “ultimate high ground” of strategy, Khan and Sadeh’s work rightfully reminds us that South Asia has joined the above-mentioned scramble.