

# Nuclear Risk Reduction: Is Cold War Experience Applicable to Southern Asia?

*Michael Krepon*

Nuclear risk reduction during the Cold War was a high priority and constant preoccupation of US and Soviet leaders. Over the course of three decades, Washington and Moscow worked hard to put in place nine key elements to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. Despite sustained, high-level efforts to prevent a nuclear exchange and reduce nuclear dangers, US and Soviet leaders experienced several close calls and barely avoided potentially catastrophic accidents.

In vastly different circumstances, India, China, and Pakistan are now at the early stages of developing or modernizing nuclear weapon and ballistic missile capabilities. While recognizing the obvious differences between the US–Soviet experience and the India–China–Pakistan triangular relationship, it might nonetheless be useful to consider whether the key elements of nuclear risk reduction developed elsewhere might also apply in some fashion to southern Asia.

## KEY ELEMENTS OF COLD WAR RISK REDUCTION

The first key element in the US–Soviet context was a formal agreement not to change the territorial status quo in sensitive areas by military means. The most sensitive Cold War fault lines were divided Germany and Korea. Tacit agreements not to seek changes in the status of Berlin came after the Berlin blockade in 1948–1949, when the Kremlin stopped re-supply by land of the western sector of the city, and in 1961, when the Kremlin built a wall to stop emigration from East to West Berlin. The *status quo* in Korea was tested and restored only after a lengthy and costly war. The nuclear shadow hung over the Korean conflict, which erupted in 1949, the same year in which the Soviet Union detonated its first nuclear device. The use of nuclear weapons to end this conflict was advocated by some, but rejected by Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 166–7; Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1983), 426; Herbert Brownell with John P. Burke, *Advising Ike* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993) 138–9.

The most serious challenges to the *status quo* in sensitive areas took place in the formative stages of the US–Soviet competition. These challenges—such as the Kremlin’s blockade of West Berlin—occurred despite US nuclear superiority. In this case, the shadow of the atomic bomb was ever-present. Indeed, President Harry S Truman ostensibly deployed nuclear-capable B-29 bombers to Great Britain during the Berlin crisis. Nonetheless, the two dominant factors were of a tactical nature—Washington’s commitment to conduct a round-the-clock airlift, and the Kremlin’s control over the roadways into Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

After these momentous events, and after the Cuban missile crisis, US and Soviet leaders appeared to accept tacitly, but not formally, the territorial *status quo* in particularly sensitive locations. At the same time, both superpowers continued to jockey for advantage where the stakes were lower. When either Washington or Moscow managed to get stuck in a quagmire of their own making in some peripheral location, such as Vietnam or Afghanistan, the other did not hesitate to raise the costs. At times this led to brief military interactions, such as when US fighter aircraft bombed Russian ships supplying North Vietnam or air defense sites manned by Russian advisors assisting Hanoi. But competition on the periphery was not allowed to escalate to central strategic concerns in Europe and in nuclear arms control negotiations. This was most evident in May 1972, when President Richard M. Nixon dramatically escalated the US bombing campaign in North Vietnam before traveling to Moscow to conclude the first Strategic Arms Limitation accords.

The tacit agreement not to seek territorial changes by force of arms was formalized in the Helsinki “Final Act” in 1975. The guiding principles of the Helsinki accord were respect for sovereign equality and the territorial integrity of participating states, rejection of force or threat to use force, and the inviolability of frontiers. These principles were given added weight because thirty-five heads of state with a direct stake in avoiding another war in Europe endorsed them. Indeed, the allies of the two superpowers as well as non-aligned and neutral countries were instrumental in brokering this agreement.

The Helsinki accord was immediately denounced by those in the United States who viewed the accord as a capitulation and as an acceptance of “captive peoples” in Eastern Europe by President Gerald R. Ford and his administration. In point of fact, states that fell into the Soviet orbit against their will were strong supporters of what became known as the “Helsinki process,” eventually becoming its principal beneficiaries.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Parrish, *Berlin in the Balance, 1945–1949: The Blockade, the Airlift, the First Major Battle of the Cold War* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1998) and W. Phillips Davison, *The Berlin Blockade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958).

Critics of a US policy of engagement with the Soviet Union held the pessimistic view that *détente* would work to the Kremlin's advantage. In retrospect, engagement proved to be as essential as containment in winning the Cold War. While the Helsinki accord barred any change in the territorial *status quo* by force of arms, it did not freeze the division of Europe. To the contrary, Helsinki facilitated a wide variety of East–West interactions which, over time, had a profound impact on the *status quo*. The process of engagement and the standards set in the Helsinki accord were late in coming, however. Washington and Moscow did not agree to a code of political conduct until twenty-five years after the nuclear standoff was established.

A second key element of Cold War nuclear risk reduction was tacit agreement by US and Soviet leaders to avoid nuclear brinksmanship in each other's neighborhood. The most well-documented and harrowing case of nuclear brinksmanship was the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, which involved the forward deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, the shipment by sea of missiles designed for nuclear attack, and the imposition of a blockade on the high seas.

Some historians have argued that the Kremlin's surreptitious effort to place tactical nuclear weapons and missiles in Cuba were defensive maneuvers, prompted by fears of another US-backed effort to overthrow Fidel Castro.<sup>3</sup> Even if this were the case, Moscow's forward deployment of nuclear weapons and missiles was certainly not perceived by US leaders as defensive in nature. Nor did Soviet leaders view the deployment of US missiles based in Turkey as a defensive posture. Rather, the forward deployment of nuclear-capable weapon systems during the Cold War was viewed as an offensive threat, not as a reinforcement of the *status quo*.

It is worth noting that the Cuban missile crisis came thirteen years after the Soviet Union joined the United States as a nuclear weapon state. Offsetting US and Soviet nuclear capabilities did not reduce the severity of the Cuban missile crisis, nor did it produce stabilizing or cautious behavior. The Kremlin's security concerns were not alleviated by joining the nuclear club. Indeed, some historians postulate that a growing asymmetry in US and Soviet nuclear capabilities prompted the Kremlin to take this desperate gamble in search of a quick "missile-gap repair."<sup>4</sup> This crisis, which led to the removal of ballistic missiles from both Cuba and Turkey, did have a chastening effect, however. After this brush

---

<sup>3</sup> Sovietologist Herbert S. Dinerstein concluded that Soviet missiles were supposed "...to protect Cuba and other progressive regimes" and "to deter a direct U.S. attack on Cuba" in Herbert S. Dinerstein, *The Making of a Missile Crisis: October 1962* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 186–7.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase was coined by James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 116. For a similar assessment, see Barton J. Bernstein, "Reconsidering the Missile Crisis: Dealing with the Problems of the American Jupiters in Turkey," in James A. Nathan, *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 65; and Dinerstein, 186.

with nuclear disaster, US and Soviet leaders continued to jockey for geopolitical advantage—but with a common understanding not to play for such high stakes so close to each other’s home.

A third key element of Cold War nuclear risk reduction was a common agreement by Washington and Moscow to minimize or avoid dangerous military practices. In the early decades of their strategic competition, US and Soviet forces engaged in activities with a potential for grave escalation or accidents. Surface naval vessels and submarines collided or jostled for position in strategically sensitive bodies of water; combat aircraft carried out war-fighting exercises in close proximity to national borders; and provocative intelligence-gathering operations were carried out. Guidelines to lower the temperature of US–Soviet military interactions also took time to evolve. Like the Helsinki Final Act, risk-reduction accords also took time to be realized. The first such agreement, to avoid incidents at sea, was negotiated in 1972—more than a decade after the Cuban missile crisis. The “IncSea” accord started a process that continued until the end of the Cold War, when an agreement to prevent dangerous military practices on land and in the air was belatedly negotiated in 1989.

Special reassurance measures for ballistic missiles and nuclear weapon systems were a fourth key element of Cold War nuclear risk reduction. Reassurance was provided by formalized, prior notifications of missile launches and other arrangements, embedded in treaties, requiring transparency in the deployment and dismantlement of nuclear forces.

These reassurance measures also did not come quickly. Typically, nuclear weapon states just beginning to develop their capabilities are not inclined to clarify their holdings. In such circumstances, transparency could demonstrate weakness rather than strength, or facilitate an adversary’s targeting. In addition, the military and strategic cultures of most states do not prize openness. Transparency is an acquired habit—one that nuclear powers usually accept only after they believe they have acquired an assured second strike capability.

The first reassurance measure related to nuclear weapons was a commitment not to place weapons of mass destruction in outer space or on celestial bodies. This threat was conceivable but remote in 1967, when the Outer Space Treaty was negotiated. In contrast, the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty imposed restraints on existing military capabilities. In this accord the United States and the Soviet Union agreed not to deploy national missile defenses on land, at sea, or in space. The ABM Treaty sanctified “national technical means” as instruments to monitor treaty obligations and forbade both countries from interfering with these remote capabilities, mostly satellites, as well as from engaging in deliberate concealment measures to impede verification.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> These obligations in Article XII of the ABM Treaty would become null and void with the Treaty’s abrogation.

Killing or disabling satellites, like deploying missile defenses, was well within US and Soviet military capabilities. Had standard military impulses dominated policy, both superpowers would not have accepted defenselessness to missile attacks. Nor would the ABM Treaty's prohibition against the weaponization of space have been accepted. Instead, the Pentagon and the Soviet Ministry of Defense would have contested the high ground of space. Had the weaponization of space and anti-satellite capabilities been pursued in the same manner as other aspects of the military competition, there would have been little reassurance and less assured means to monitor treaty obligations. The marriage of reassurance and restraint made nuclear arms control possible during the Cold War.

A fifth key element in Cold War nuclear risk reduction was trust in the faithful implementation of treaty obligations and confidence-building measures. Without trust, these arrangements were nothing more than paper promises. On occasion, trust was generated through unilateral or reciprocal actions, such as by the removal from operational status of the least safe and secure nuclear weapons in 1989 by presidents George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev. This extraordinary set of undertakings was carried out against the backdrop of treaty obligations previously negotiated—the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Unilateral measures that are not backed up by treaty obligations might still be useful, but they are also likely to be more tenuous.

Treaties that are faithfully executed build trust, and trust in treaty obligations requires verification. As President Ronald Reagan used to say—quoting from a Russian proverb—“Trust, but verify.” The sixth key element of Cold War nuclear risk reduction was verification. US and Soviet leaders did not believe in each other's pronouncements—at least not during much of the competition. (During the Cuban missile crisis, for example, the Kremlin flatly denied having placed missiles in Cuba.) All of the key elements of nuclear risk reduction needed to be observed. Word needed to be matched by deed, and deed needed to be monitored. The ABM Treaty's protection of “national technical means” was therefore not only essential for specific treaty provisions, but also for nuclear risk-reduction measures, broadly defined.

Over time, remote, technical means of monitoring obligations were supplemented by intrusive measures. In 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev convinced his colleagues in the Kremlin to accept on-site inspections, a historic shift in Soviet military culture. After being successfully applied in the Stockholm accord relating to confidence-building in Europe, on-site inspections were then negotiated for subsequent nuclear arms control and reduction treaties.

The political symbolism of inspections was as important as their substantive value in building trust during the Cold War. Inspections quieted hard-line opponents in both countries, as they demonstrated convincingly how much bilateral relations had changed from the premises still held by committed opponents of cooperation. Successful blocking actions in the past were based on a lack of

trust; inspections at military installations previously closed to foreigners removed the blocks from more ambitious accords, accords that greatly increased reassurance while reducing nuclear risks. On-site inspections were not used to score points, to place one another at a disadvantage, or to engage in public relations exercises. Instead, inspections were businesslike, focused on monitoring very specific obligations spelled out in treaty texts.<sup>6</sup> On-site inspections symbolized a sea-change in relations by demonstrating a willingness to accept harder tests of trust.

The professional conduct of inspections produced other beneficial effects. Responsibility for the implementation of Cold War treaties fell mostly to men and women in uniform. As a consequence, military bureaucracies took greater “ownership” of the treaties under their care. They took pride in carrying out inspections in a professional manner, and resisted efforts by political figures to politicize the accords. By participating in a direct way in treaty implementation, military institutions became parties to a process of trust based on verification.<sup>7</sup>

A seventh key element in Cold War nuclear risk reduction was the establishment of reliable lines of communication across borders, for both political and military leaders. The first communication channel, the “Hotline,” was established immediately after the Cuban missile crisis, which clarified the dangers inherent in taking many hours to send, receive, translate, and interpret messages. Subsequently, the Hotline was improved by the establishment of improved communication links.<sup>8</sup>

The eighth key element of nuclear risk reduction during the Cold War was the establishment of reliable and redundant command and control systems, as well as the intelligence capabilities to track the disposition of opposing nuclear capabilities that could cause devastating harm. Unlike nuclear risk-reduction measures such as treaty inspections and Hotline arrangements, which required close collaboration, improvements in command, control, and intelligence capabilities were unilateral undertakings. The expense of these arrangements was considerable, but received a high priority.

The exceptionally large and diverse nuclear forces deployed by the United States and the Soviet Union posed serious challenges for both countries, particularly with respect to the deployment of tactical

---

<sup>6</sup> For a first person account of the initial inspections, see Don O. Stovall, “The Stockholm Accord: On-Site Inspections in Eastern and Western Europe,” in Lewis A. Dunn and Amy E. Gordon, *Arms Control Verification & The New Role of On-Site Inspection* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1989), 15–39.

<sup>7</sup> For an official history of this process, see Joseph P. Hanrahan and John C. Kuhn, III, *On-Site Inspections Under the CFE Treaty, A History of the On-Site Inspection Agency and CFE Treaty Implementation, 1990–1996* (Washington, DC: The On-Site Inspection Agency, US Department of Defense, 1996). See also David Willford, *A Brief History of the On-Site Inspection Agency*, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> See Barry M. Blechman and Michael Krepon, *Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1986).

nuclear weapons. Because both arsenals were large and capable enough to worry national leaders about being greatly disadvantaged in the event of a surprise attack, many thousands of nuclear weapons were kept ready for rapid launch. The requirement for prompt utilization worked at cross-purposes with the requirement for positive central control, a dilemma that US and Soviet leaders resolved primarily by crisis management and by avoiding the nuclear threshold.

The ninth key element of nuclear risk reduction during the Cold War was a mutual US and Soviet commitment not to be satisfied with existing measures. Washington and Moscow worked to upgrade and strengthen nuclear risk-reduction accords in quiet times as well as during crises. As noted above, the original Hotline has been improved considerably. Agreements to minimize dangerous military practices started with naval forces and were then expanded to ground and air forces. Remote monitoring arrangements were supplemented with on-site inspections. At the end of the Cold War, nuclear risk-reduction was receiving as much, if not more, attention than in previous chapters, with the negotiation of the 1992 Open Skies Treaty and the broader scope of controls promised in the second Strategic Arms Reduction accord, signed in 1993.

During the Cold War, the body of risk-reduction measures grew considerably. These arrangements were substantive as well as symbolic. The emphasis was on concrete, observable obligations, rather than rhetorical expressions of good intentions. The United States and the Soviet Union were obligated to demonstrate good faith to each other, and to the international community. This body of work became no less, and perhaps more, important after the Cold War ended, and a new complex of nuclear dangers came to the fore. Nuclear risk-reduction measures subsequently focused on the safe dismantlement of obsolescent nuclear forces in the former Soviet Union, the control of fissile material and weapons of mass destruction, and the provision of shared early warning arrangements to Moscow. The purposes and techniques of nuclear risk reduction were applicable to vastly different circumstances because the dangers inherent in nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles remained constant.

The tenth key element of nuclear risk reduction during the Cold War was good fortune. Even with all of the measures described above, US and Soviet leaders still found themselves “eyeball to eyeball” with nuclear danger on several occasions. High alert rates compounded nuclear dangers during the Cold War, including aircraft crashes and runway fires involving nuclear weapons.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Essential reading in this regard is Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) and Bruce G. Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1993).

## EVALUATING THE US–SOVIET EXPERIENCE

Good fortune, divine intervention—or plain dumb luck—was important in helping US and Soviet leaders to avoid nuclear disaster during the Cold War. No high-ranking official in Washington or Moscow could depend on these intangibles for nuclear safety, however. Consequently, US and Soviet leaders took unilateral steps to improve command and control, deploy redundant and survivable retaliatory nuclear forces, and put in place expensive verification capabilities for monitoring opposing nuclear forces and crisis behavior. These unilateral steps were widely viewed as essential, but insufficient. US and Soviet leaders also engaged in cooperative arrangements to build trust, control their nuclear competition, and reduce risks. Cooperative arrangements included treaties requiring intrusive monitoring, executive agreements to avoid or minimize dangerous practices, and communication links.

Nuclear risk reduction during the Cold War was a central preoccupation of US and Soviet leaders, given the adversarial nature of the geopolitical competition. Citizens in both countries expected their leaders to defend their national interests, but not in a reckless way. As a result, public support for nuclear risk reduction was unflinching, especially during rough patches in bilateral relations.

The US–Soviet experience with nuclear risk reduction is sobering in many respects. To begin with, there were close calls even with the considerable effort expended to avoid crossing the nuclear threshold. Brushes with nuclear confrontation occurred not only in the early stages of the nuclear competition, when they would be most expected, but also after both Washington and Moscow accepted the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction, and after signing two historic strategic arms limitation accords. No sooner had the White House and Kremlin seemingly agreed to safe “rules” of competition, were these rules challenged by Soviet support for Egypt and the Arab world in the 1973 Middle East war. Long after both countries had assembled huge nuclear arsenals, they were still flirting with nuclear disaster. As late as 1983, the Kremlin’s paranoid intelligence agencies were watching blood banks in the United States for preparatory signs of a surprise attack, while the US Central Intelligence Agency was issuing worried estimates of a confident Soviet adversary seeking to secure nuclear advantage.<sup>10</sup>

Nuclear weapons prompted paranoid behavior and worst-case thinking for most of the Cold War and clouded intelligence estimates when this war was winding down. The most dangerous nuclear crises occurred from 1947–1961, when there was no safety net to accompany an intense phase of geopolitical competition, and when the development and deployment of new nuclear arsenals were underway. During

---

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Vincent Pry, *War Scare* (Atlanta, GA: Turner Publishing, Inc., 1997); Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990); and “Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict, 1983–93,” NIE 11-3/8-83 (6 March 1984) in Donald P. Steury, compiler, *(Declassified) Estimates on Soviet Military Power, 1954 to 1984, A Selection* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1994).



this early phase of the competition, neither side had the monitoring capabilities to determine whether it was ahead or behind in the nuclear arms race. Secrecy protected new nuclear arsenals and transparency increased insecurity. Using the language of western nuclear deterrence theory, neither side had yet acquired assured retaliatory capabilities, and thus new offensive capabilities increased fears of a pre-emptive strike.

A decade after the Cuban missile crisis, this phase of nuclear insecurity formally ended with the signing of the first strategic arms limitation accord and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 1972. Nonetheless, the institutionalized anxieties generated by the nuclear competition continued to hold sway. Even after decades of remote monitoring produced an acquired familiarity with nuclear forces and operations, and even with the “cushion” provided by huge nuclear arsenals, Washington and Moscow suffered from severe miscommunication and spikes in nuclear danger. Hard liners in both capitals played off of each other in repeatedly pernicious ways, as was evident in the interactions between the Reagan and Andropov administrations.

## **LESSONS FOR SOUTHERN ASIA?**

The Cold War experience with nuclear risk reduction was obviously unique. It took place in the context of a bipolar strategic and ideological competition. A great physical distance separated the antagonists. Both the United States and the Soviet Union accumulated huge and diverse nuclear arsenals, which were governed by treaty constraints. And both superpowers managed alliances under protective nuclear umbrellas.

Clearly, none of these conditions apply to southern Asia. And yet, the key elements of nuclear risk reduction during the Cold War still appear to be applicable. Regional stability and risk reduction in southern Asia obviously require tacit or formal agreements not to change the territorial *status quo* in sensitive areas by military means. How could India, Pakistan and China reduce nuclear risks if they engage in brinkmanship along national borders or lines of actual control? In southern Asia, no less than along the inter-German or Korean borders, there is an evident need to minimize or avoid dangerous military practices. Nuclear risk reduction between India and Pakistan or between China and India is very hard to envision without special reassurance measures directly related to weapon systems that are most worrisome. The absence of trust in the faithful implementation of agreed obligations is no less corrosive between India and Pakistan or India and China than it was between the United States and the Soviet Union. Proper implementation of risk-reduction agreements reached is therefore required in both cases, as is the imperative to build trust through verification. It is also self-evident that nuclear risk reduction, regardless of region, requires reliable lines of communication across borders, redundant command and control systems, and ceaseless attention.

The essential question, then, is not whether, but how the key elements of nuclear risk reduction should best be adapted to southern Asia's unique strategic and political cultures, geography, geopolitics, and nascent nuclear and missile programs.

The regional competition in southern Asia consists of two dyads—India versus Pakistan, and China versus India—and one triangle. In each of the dyads, the stronger of the two antagonists does not outwardly acknowledge the competition, making cooperative nuclear risk reduction extremely difficult. Nor do Pakistan and China acknowledge their previous collaboration against India. A triangular effort at nuclear risk reduction would be plagued by this history, and by the lack of symmetry resulting from complex three-cornered interactions.

Triangular or bilateral treaty obligations involving China, India and Pakistan would be very difficult to negotiate since neither equality nor formalized inequality is likely to be acceptable to one or more parties. Even if treaties were negotiable during the formative and most dangerous phase of their nuclear competition, India, Pakistan and China do not have the independent, redundant means to monitor treaty obligations, the willingness to accept the transparency necessary for treaty verification, or a true interest in accepting intrusive monitoring by third parties. The role that treaties played in reducing nuclear risks during the Cold War is therefore unlikely to be available to national leaders in China, India and Pakistan. In this event, stand-alone nuclear risk-reduction arrangements become more essential, but also more difficult, given the absence of trust that verifiable treaty obligations might generate.

National leaders in China, India, and Pakistan have all declared their firm intention not to repeat the nuclear excesses of the United States and Soviet Union. No one expects them to accumulate the liabilities that come with bloated nuclear arsenals. But excessively large nuclear arsenals carried the presumed benefit of providing insurance against a surprise attack, making strategic defeats or pre-emption improbable. Small nuclear arsenals might not provide that much of an insurance policy, particularly in the risk-laden, early phases of a nuclear competition.

Put another way, limited arsenals might generate risks, rather than guarantee risk reduction. Indeed, the historical record suggests that security concerns have been particularly worrisome to states possessing small nuclear arsenals. This was certainly true for the US–Soviet experience, when nuclear risks were greatest in the early phases of arsenal-building, when vulnerabilities were evident, verification weak, and command and control untested. The brief, crisis-filled record since India and Pakistan acquired nuclear capabilities seems to confirm this proposition. If China, India, and Pakistan are to demonstrate a superior wisdom that resists ever-increasing nuclear capabilities, they must first demonstrate a superior wisdom to reduce nuclear risks.

This analysis suggests that nuclear risk reduction will be a far more complex undertaking in southern Asia than was the case for the United States and the Soviet Union. As bad as Cold War nuclear dangers were, bipolarity provided a measure of simplification. The nuclear balance could be codified in treaties predicated on equality. A common understanding of stabilizing and destabilizing activities could also be negotiated. Competition was pervasive, and yet aspects that were most dangerous were placed off-limits. Berlin and Korea were divided, but Washington and Moscow did not exchange artillery fire across these lines. US and Soviet military planning was not predicated on daily, violent interactions.

India, Pakistan, and China are very far from these stabilizing conditions. In Central Europe, international boundaries were fixed, but India, Pakistan, and China share “lines of actual control,” instead of international borders. The relatively quiet Line of Actual Control dividing India and China is nonetheless the occasional scene of jockeying between military patrols. The situation along the Line of Control dividing Kashmir is usually far worse, with Indian and Pakistani troops over-running each other’s posts, engaging in small arms, mortar, and artillery fire, and regularly taking casualties. Nothing in Cold War experience remotely replicates these patterns of ritualized violence.<sup>11</sup>

## THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

Indian and Pakistani government officials and strategic analysts assert that they will not fall into the traps of US–Soviet competition. To avoid these traps, restraint in deployments and force sizing is necessary, but insufficient. Nor can national leaders hope to succeed at nuclear risk reduction solely by undertaking unilateral actions to improve command and control and cross-border monitoring. Successful nuclear risk reduction in southern Asia—as was the case for the United States and Soviet Union—requires collaborative as well as unilateral actions.

The rhetorical declarations of peaceful intent and negotiated confidence-building measures (CBMs) that Islamabad and New Delhi have relied upon instead of treaties provide a completely inadequate basis for nuclear risk reduction. Rhetorical pronouncements have usually been advanced to place “the other” at a political disadvantage.<sup>12</sup> The impulse for negotiating CBMs has usually followed wars or crises on the Subcontinent and waned after a crisis has passed. The subsequent record of existing CBMs—where obligations are initially honored, only to be superseded by unrestrained military practices—hardly builds confidence. In this context, “confidence-building” is designed primarily to

---

<sup>11</sup> India and Pakistan broke this pattern by accepting a cessation of fire along the Line of Control in November 2000.

<sup>12</sup> See P.R. Chari, “Declaratory Statements and Confidence-Building in South Asia,” in Michael Krepon, Jenny S. Drezin, and Michael Newbill eds., *Declaratory Diplomacy: Rhetorical Initiatives and Confidence-Building*, Report 27 (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 1999).

assuage foreign audiences that leaders in South Asia are capable of managing their differences. But confidence-building is not applied in any serious way to military interactions. Existing CBMs could provide a solid foundation for nuclear risk reduction—but only if there is a sea-change in Pakistani and Indian implementation practices.

If nuclear risk reduction is treated in the same cavalier, political fashion as confidence-building, then Pakistan, India, and China face a rough and dangerous passage. The introduction of overt, offsetting nuclear capabilities and ballistic missiles has clearly increased tensions and risks in the Subcontinent, at least in the short run, as was most evident in the intense, limited war fought in the heights above Kargil in 1999. How long this period of tension and risk extends depends, in large measure, on how serious political leaders are in pursuing an alternative course.

Serious nuclear risk reduction is not possible in the absence of meaningful official dialogue. Since the 1998 nuclear tests, substantive dialogue on nuclear matters between India and Pakistan has been minimal. And for two years after the Kargil misadventure, India rejected official dialogue with Pakistan. A policy of diplomatic isolation or nuclear non-engagement runs at cross-purposes with the pursuit of risk reduction.

Given the dismaying history of Indo–Pakistani interactions, it is understandable why New Delhi would believe that a policy to isolate Pakistan’s perpetrators of Kargil and supporters of militancy in Kashmir would yield more benefits than a dialogue on nuclear risk reduction. But India’s leaders have a higher responsibility to their citizens than to Pakistan’s isolation, as is evident by New Delhi’s announcement in May 2001 to resume talks with Pakistan. Even if subsequent discussions over Kashmir again prove to be barren, it is incumbent upon Indian leaders to try once more to enlist Pakistan’s military leaders in collaborative risk-reduction efforts. New Delhi could facilitate greatly such a course by taking new initiatives to alleviate tensions in Kashmir, especially those generated by Indian security forces.

As Pakistani officials repeatedly declare, nuclear risk reduction is inextricably linked to tensions in Kashmir. But those tensions are also inextricably linked to the transit of militant groups based in Pakistan across the Line of Control. Those carrying out militant operations often receive logistical, intelligence, and material support from Pakistan’s military leadership. These operations have no chance to pry Kashmir from Indian control, but they have a high probability of isolating Pakistan and weakening its civil and democratic institutions. If Pakistan’s military leaders are truly serious about a nuclear risk reduction agenda, they would need to dampen the fires of militancy in Kashmir, since escalatory spirals begin with crossings of the Line of Control.

Typically, when India and Pakistan have reached an agreement in principle, one or the other side has refused to formalize it, wary of a domestic backlash. This pattern might well be revisited, once

bilateral discussions resume on nuclear risk reduction. Near-term agreement on such matters as prior notification and directional constraints on ballistic missile flight tests seem quite possible, given the clear overlap between Indian and Pakistani risk-reduction agendas.<sup>13</sup> Another indicator of seriousness would therefore be for Indian and Pakistani leaders to promise their citizens to refrain from holding risk-reduction measures hostage to favored outcomes in Kashmir. If successfully negotiated, another test of seriousness would be proper, sustained implementation of any agreements reached.

The barriers against nuclear risk reduction between Beijing and New Delhi are much more scalable. They can be reduced further only if both capitals pursue with specificity and dispatch applicable measures, rather than to engage in a vague and leisurely “strategic dialogue.” Serious risk reduction between China and India would be greatly hampered if Beijing’s covert support for Pakistan’s nuclear and missile programs continues. Even so, a serious dialogue on applicable measures cannot be avoided. Both New Delhi and Beijing are modernizing missiles that place each other’s distant cities within cross-hairs. The readiness posture and positioning they choose for these missiles would either increase tensions or alleviate them. Another key manifestation of serious nuclear risk reduction would be concerted actions by New Delhi and Beijing to turn their imprecisely demarcated Line of Actual Control into an international border.

## CONCLUSION

The United States and the Soviet Union were fortunate to manage their competition without the use of nuclear weapons. Perhaps India, Pakistan, and China will be similarly lucky, but they would be wise not to depend too heavily on faith, good fortune, or divine protection. It took Washington and Moscow two decades to pass through a dangerous opening phase of nuclear competition to establish treaty-based and less formal risk-reduction arrangements. India, Pakistan and China are now in this difficult passage, but without the likely prospect of treaties to curtail regional nuclear dangers.

If New Delhi, Beijing, and Islamabad are to find nuclear safety, they will likely do so through a combination of reassurance measures, restraint, bilateral cooperation, and unilateral preparation. In the absence of verifiable treaty regimes, nuclear risk reduction is likely to be found—if at all—through an acceptance of bilateral asymmetries in force sizing and deployment readiness. Pakistan, the state with the weakest military posture and most vulnerable nuclear deterrent, would have to refrain from competing with India, while maintaining some nuclear capabilities in a survivable, but non-deployed status—an extremely difficult posture to attain. New Delhi would need to refrain from competing with China and from posturing its nuclear capabilities so as to threaten Pakistan. Beijing will do much to establish the

---

<sup>13</sup> See chapter 3 of this report, Chris Gagne, “Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia: Building on Common Ground.”

pace and scope of the nuclear competition in southern Asia by the nature of its strategic modernization programs. This, in turn, would depend in part on the missile defense architecture chosen by Washington. The more ambitious the US architecture, and the larger China's nuclear arsenal grows, the more likely it will generate cascade effects elsewhere in the region.

The establishment of asymmetrical nuclear postures in southern Asia would require extensive thought and discussion. This is an enormously difficult and ambitious agenda, one every bit as challenging as the US–Soviet experience of nuclear risk reduction. Successful nuclear risk reduction will require a seriousness of purpose on the part of India, Pakistan, and China that has previously been lacking. Success also requires sustained, substantive, official dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad, and between New Delhi and Beijing. Nuclear stabilization will likely rest on a unique mixture of transparency and survivability for nuclear capabilities, as well as creative monitoring arrangements that provide reassurance without increased vulnerability.