A Triangular MIRV Restraint Regime in Southern Asia

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June 7, 2017

Editor’s note: This essay is part of an initiative launched by the Stimson Center’s South Asia Program, which we call the Off Ramps Project. The nuclear competition among China, India and Pakistan is accelerating with the introduction of new ballistic and cruise missiles. Counterforce capabilities are growing. China has begun to place multiple warheads on some of its ballistic missiles, Pakistan has advertised its ability to do so, and India has demonstrated this capacity in its space program. Diplomacy is dormant as these and other nuclear capabilities expand. What to do? Stimson has asked rising talent in this field, as well as a few veterans, to offer creative ideas that can help ameliorate and decelerate this dangerous triangular nuclear competition.

Introduction

The advent of multiple independently-targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) in Southern Asia can be quite consequential in terms of the unfolding triangular nuclear competition involving China, India, and Pakistan. The three nuclear-armed neighbors have demonstrated their MIRV capabilities, with China being the earliest entrant, having reportedly placed them on its DF-series missiles. In decades ahead China’s MIRV programs would be sure to mature. In the absence of confidence-building and nuclear risk-reduction measures (NRRMs), the advent of MIRVs will exacerbate concerns for the respective national security policies of all three countries and for the regional strategic balance. Although the presence of MIRVs in Southern Asia will not be as pernicious as it was during Cold War, they will have ripple effects in threat-perception, doctrine, and the perceived need for counter-measures. The complicated nuclear interactions among China, India, and Pakistan are about to become even more complex.

As was evident during the Cold War, MIRVs undermine strategic stability and invite an intensified nuclear arms race. President Richard Nixon’s National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, opposed a ban on MIRVs during the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. He
came to regret this soon afterward, when he said, “I wish I had thought through the implications of a MIRVed world more thoughtfully in 1969 and 1970 than I did.”

Reiterating his stand during the debate over the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he said: “In retrospect, I think if one could have avoided the development of MIRVs, which means also the testing of MIRVs by the Soviets, we would both be better off. What conclusion then I would have come to I don’t know.” With the passage of time, Kissinger became more conclusive. Writing in Time magazine in 1983, he opined that, “there can be no doubt that the age of MIRVs has doomed the SALT approach.”

If the Cold War consequences of MIRVing are any guide, the negative fallout of deploying MIRVs will outweigh justifiable gains in Southern Asia, as well. These negative repercussions will include increased nuclear weapon stockpiles, increased counterforce capabilities, and a greater orientation toward nuclear war-fighting strategies. Limiting these capabilities is in the interest of all three countries. This Off Ramps essay suggests a triangular mechanism to implement a ceiling on the maximum number of MIRVs per missile, and perhaps aggregate totals, as well. The sections that follow will elaborate on this proposal and the reasons behind it, discuss hurdles against its implementation, and reasons why a MIRV restraint regime is nonetheless in the interest of China, India and Pakistan.

**Imperatives and Challenges**

Chinese MIRV deployments have reportedly already begun in Southern Asia. If India and Pakistan follow China’s lead, the number of warheads in each country is bound to increase even more in the vicious circle of a “security trilemma.” The more MIRVs proliferate, the more prevailing credible minimum deterrence postures in the region are likely to evolve into nuclear war fighting doctrines, raising reciprocal fears of pre-emptive strikes. MIRVed missiles carrying a large number of warheads are tempting targets for the adversary, posing a “use it or lose it” impulse in a serious crisis.

Moreover, a serious MIRV competition would stimulate expenditure, not just on additional warheads, but also on more redundant means of delivering nuclear weapons to address perceived vulnerabilities. This would be a waste of money that could be used in more constructive projects. Additionally, the more countries deploy MIRVs on land-based missiles, the more they are likely to rely on sea-based deterrent systems, just as was the case during the Cold War. But sea-based nuclear deterrents pose difficulties with command and control and could be liable to accidents and unauthorized use.

Growing, unabated stockpiles of MIRVed warheads suggesting a first-use posture will be in no one’s strategic interest in Southern Asia. As during the Cold War, more MIRVs are not synonymous with more security. The open-ended pursuit of MIRVs is likely to impact nuclear doctrines in Southern Asia more than anything else. It could prompt China and India to revisit their nuclear doctrines and possibly abandon their “No First Use” (NFU) postures.
Pakistan is already pursuing counterforce capabilities and has a declared first-use posture. Three first use postures backed up by MIRV capabilities would have dangerous implications for deterrence stability in Southern Asia. These dilemmas can be alleviated through a MIRV restraint regime. Despite the difficulties involved, China, India and Pakistan should have an interest in developing common understandings on MIRV limitations to forestall even more of a nuclear arms race.

What happens in South Asia cannot be divorced from nuclear-related developments elsewhere. An intensified nuclear competition in Southern Asia involving MIRVs could also have spillover effects in East Asia and Northeast Asia, and vice versa. As Krepon et al., have noted, “nuclear enclaves, wherever located, are inherently sensitive to advances by their neighbors, and all have powerful backing.”\(^1^0\) Beijing has high stakes in the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific region; an offense-defense competition in Southern Asia could well be transposed elsewhere. Beijing could expedite the development of hypersonic glide vehicles and MIRVs in response to Indian deployments of Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) or to South Korea’s deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system.\(^1^1\) An intensified strategic competition around China’s periphery could have profound ripple effects on Chinese nuclear doctrine and on the calculations of Japan and South Korea, as well as India. Therefore, much is riding on a MIRVed restraint regime in Asia, and to de-link as much as possible Southern Asian nuclear complexities from those unfolding elsewhere in the Asian Pacific region.

### A MIRV Restraint Regime

A binding, trilateral arms control treaty regime governing MIRVs in Southern Asia is most unlikely. Therefore, as Michael Krepon has noted, if MIRVs are to be limited “for reasons of national interest, it will be by tacit understandings.”\(^1^2\) This could be done through bilateral and trilateral political agreements backed up by the ability to confirm agreed limitations on MIRVs. The starting point for a customized MIRV restrain regime in Southern Asia would be a common understanding among the parties that such a regime would reinforce but not undermine the operation of nuclear deterrence. Restraints would serve strategic stability by undercutting first strike scenarios and reducing the possibility of accidental, inadvertent, or catalytic war.

As in U.S.-Soviet MIRV limitations, agreement could be sought on the maximum number of MIRVs flight-tested on different types of missiles, which would then serve as the maximum they would be allowed to carry. No flight tests of missiles carrying MIRVs would be allowed to carry more than the maximum number that is mutually agreed upon. The superpowers called these mechanisms “counting rules.” Agreements might be reached on the number of MIRVs flight-tested and the number of deployed MIRVed-capable missiles. If possible, China, India and Pakistan could also agree to the total number of MIRVs they would be allowed. Aggregate totals would be based on the assumption that every missile of different types would be considered to carry the maximum number of MIRVs agreed upon. For example, if
agreement could be reached that a certain type of missile could only be flight tested carrying, say, two MIRVs, then all missiles of this type that have been inducted would be assumed to carry this number.

In addition, to strengthen mutual trust, all three countries could adopt the transparency measure of providing advance notification of MIRVed flight tests. It would not be difficult for India and Pakistan in this regard as they already have the Pre-Notification of Flight Testing of Ballistic Missiles Agreement in place since 2005. This regime could be further broadened to include China and the MIRV component.

Lastly, to ascertain the informal limits (subject to their mutual agreement, of course), mutually acceptable technical means could be utilized to monitor whether certain types of MIRVed-capable missiles – such as China’s DF series, India’s Agni missiles, and Pakistan’s Shaheen and Ababil missiles – are not flight tested with more than the agreed number of warheads. The United States and the Soviet Union/Russia were able to monitor each other’s missile flight tests in this way. They could be consulted if China, India or Pakistan are unable to this by themselves and seek assistance.

Track II “trialogues” might be convened to give impetus to such an initiative. If there are favorable signs, a troika mechanism or a high-level working group consisting of diplomats, defense officials and national security advisers of the respective countries could be formed to consider MIRV limitations.

Given New Delhi’s bonhomie with Washington in recent years, and given Beijing’s concerns over U.S. intentions, a quadrilateral dialogue forum for building consensus on a MIRV restraint regime, utilizing U.S. experiences, could also be handy.

A MIRV restraint regime would be important, but it would not resolve the competing strategic ambitions that China, the United States and India in the Asia–Pacific region. If a MIRV restraint regime is somehow able to be agreed upon, it would be understood that these states, as well as Pakistan, would not agree to foregoing other cutting-edge technologies, or otherwise modernizing their deterrent forces.

**Hurdles**

Given their asymmetric level of strategic capabilities, it is hard to envision equal numerical caps on MIRVed warheads that China, India and Pakistan would be willing to agree to. China is unlikely to agree to parity with India, and India is unlikely to agree to parity with Pakistan. They would also have great difficulty agreeing on any proportionate ratio that they would be obliged to maintain. China would also be sensitive to U.S. MIRV, counterforce and missile defense capabilities. Even so, counting rules on MIRVs for different types of missiles might be agreeable, and could have great benefit.
Another hurdle is the deployment of BMD by China and India. (Pakistan has not, at present, indicated an interest in deploying BMD.) If the Cold War experience is a guide, deployments of BMD – even missile defense systems that are of poor effectiveness – would likely increase requirements for more MIRVs. However, BMD programs are largely constrained by costs, technological challenges, and the absence of sponsorship with the armed forces. Beijing and New Delhi might decide not to massively deploy costly missile defenses of very limited effectiveness. China, which is wary of U.S. nuclear capabilities, might wish to avoid a parallel MIRV competition with India – especially an India that sees “Chinese MIRVs as compounding and complicating a simplistic Indian deterrence posture.”

In addition, Beijing might see value in crafting confidence-building measures with India to avoid excessive costs of growing fleets of nuclear-powered, ballistic missile-carrying submarines heavily loaded with MIRVed submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). As both countries have not been inclined to adopt nuclear-war-fighting capabilities, they might be willing to accept limits on MIRVed SLBMs.

Another hurdle is that there is no precedent available for MIRV limitations in Southern Asia. At the most basic level, there are not even constructive dialogues on nuclear issues between India and China, and between India and Pakistan. Plus, the prior effort to limit MIRVs in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks between Washington and Moscow was initially unsuccessful, and then extremely loose, stoking concerns about nuclear war-fighting intentions.

**Conclusion**

A MIRV restraint regime for Southern Asia may currently seem inconceivable. Even so, the effort is worth exploring. China, India and Pakistan are gearing up for an intensified strategic competition, of which MIRVs are an important part. As Krepon writes, “One of the responsibilities of states that possess nuclear weapons is to pursue nuclear risk reduction measures with nuclear-armed states, especially those with which they have previously fought wars. By this yardstick, China, India, and Pakistan can be found wanting.”

Above all, China, India and Pakistan would be wise to resist the “lure and pitfalls” of excessive numbers of MIRVs and counterforce targeting. A trilateral approach that seeks tacit agreements and political commitments to constrain MIRVs is worth considering. China, India and Pakistan could craft an institutionalized mechanism or a dialogue forum to explore possibilities. The existing strategic commonalities, complex though they may be among the three nuclear-armed neighbors, can nevertheless act as a starting point for future cooperation.

The proposed trilateral MIRV restraint regime would be unlikely to prevent qualitative improvement altogether, but could have the positive effect of slowing down the rate at which the MIRV race is unfolding in Southern Asia. Undoubtedly, there will be enormous obstacles to carve out such an initiative, but implementing this restraint could set a precedent, heralding an era of substantive Sino-Indo-Pak trilateral strategic engagement.
If Beijing means what it says – that it seeks Indian inclusion in its multilateral trade and infrastructure development plans – cooperative steps towards such a MIRV restraint regime could pave the way for further regional cooperation. As for New Delhi, a MIRV restraint regime could help keep its northeastern theatre relaxed, especially when it is concerned about the strategic nexus between Pakistan and China. For Pakistan, agreement on MIRVs would test its long advocacy of a South Asian strategic restraint regime. The role of the United States would be crucial in promoting and facilitating a MIRV restraint regime, both through formal and informal channels, subject to the comfort levels of all parties.

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1 Office of the Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2015, 
7 The term “security trilemma” is attributed to Linton Brooks and Mira Rapp-Hooper, who have used it to describe the complexities of power politics in Asia Pacific region. See Linton Brooks and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “Extended Deterrence, Assurance, and Reassurance in the Pacific during the Second Nuclear Age,” in Ashley J. Tellis, Abraham M. Denmark, and Travis Tanner, eds., Strategic Asia 2013-14: Asia in the Second Nuclear Age (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asia Research, 2013): 292-93.
16 Ibid.