

## **Reducing Nuclear Risks in South Asia**

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### Views on Nuclear Risks in South Asia

There is a rich and varied output in strategic and security writings on nuclear South Asia. More is written on nuclear South Asia than on the dangers in the Korean Peninsula and Middle East. Books, articles, seminars, op-eds and blogs on South Asia's real and imagined nuclear dangers and risk reduction is a 'growth industry'. Nuclear South Asia is in fact providing nuclear analysts the opportunity for re-validating or re-examining their dearly held nuclear convictions. South Asia is the post-Cold War test bed on which nuclear deterrence, escalation dominance, nuclear doctrines, force structures, command & control systems, and crisis management principles are being examined afresh. Western experts are not the only ones to benefit from this churning of ideas: Indian and Pakistani policy makers are also coming to their own conclusions.

The Stimson Center has made an important contribution to creating awareness in South Asia on Nuclear Risk Reduction issues. It assisted the Indian strategic community and military to better understand the implications of nuclear weapons. It helped create awareness amongst Indians & Pakistanis of each other's points of view. Krepon-led Nuclear Risks program on South Asia have contributed immensely to not just a better understanding of matters nuclear, but also capacity building amongst South Asian scholars. Krepon has also been a long-standing and respected educator on CBMs in the Sub Continent.

**Global Nuclear Context** : See Gareth Evans' article : ' Nuclear Disarmament Disarmed'. Despite good beginning with New START, the NPT Review Conference, and productive Nuclear Security Summit, US – Russia negotiations have ground to a halt. No other NWS/NAS demonstrates any willingness to move until the possessors of 90% arsenals move forward. US attempts to modify nuclear doctrine to accepting that the alerting of 2000 nuclear weapons from highest alert levels has not started. No sign of movement on CTBT, or of progress on FMCT. No sign of NWFZs in Mid East. Acceleration of nuclear weapons in China, India and Pakistan.

News last month of US Nuclear Regulatory Commission issuing commercial license for a process in which uranium is enriched by laser, which was critiqued as a new chapter in global proliferation of sensitive atomic materials.

News of Russia not being willing to extend the 20 year Agreement with US to dismantling and safeguarding nuclear warheads.

### **South Asian Reality**

Nuclear South Asia has a list of positives to its credit. In spite of tensions and misgivings, a longstanding ceasefire holds on the LOC. Meetings between Border Force Commanders are a regular feature. Negotiations between senior officials at Secretary-levels continue to be held. The multi segment dialogue- Composite Dialogue – is alive and happening. Senior ministers from both countries have visited each other. A strong flow of people is taking place across the borders. All this

does not indicate security being in a destabilised state. No wonder that the 'Street', from Karachi to Kolkata, or, Kerala to Khyber Pass to Chandni Chowk, does not spend time worrying about nuclear weapons and destabilisation.

Despite breakdowns in relations, caused by terrorist attacks, India and Pakistan resumed nuclear talks last September. These talks have resulted in extending the agreements on Pre-Notification of Ballistic Missile Tests and on Reducing Risks related to Nuclear Accidents, for five years. The Joint Communique reiterated the contents of the Lahore Memorandum of 1999, in which both countries had committed themselves to a series of steps towards nuclear restraint and risk reduction. US analysts have called the Lahore Agreement the apex of CBM efforts to date.

Crisis Management : India and Pakistan have been through a number of serious disagreements and tensions since 1998. Despite grave provocations and serious domestic political pressures, both sides have demonstrated considerable crisis containment or consequence management skills. Military responses have not escalated beyond the conventional domains, and have avoided risks of nuclear escalation. There has been a lively public discourse on the question of fighting a limited war in the nuclear environment, which has added a good degree of caution in policy circles.

There have been meaningful Track II engagements between India and Pakistan, and between India, Pakistan, and China. These have helped clear the air on misperceptions and misinterpretations. The governments of the two countries have used this to better understand the security dynamic which operates during the build-up to and during crisis.

Deterrence Stability Phrases like Dangerous Deterrent, Unstable Peace, etc. have been used to describe the South Asian scene. Stable deterrence is a product of sustained effort. Michael Krepon: "Deterrence stability does not evolve naturally and can't be taken for granted. The most dangerous period is after the countries acquire nuclear capabilities. It is an awkward period in which red lines, risk reduction measures and nuclear balance need to be worked." Krepon will be the first to agree that this needs time, patience, and perseverance. That is how the two nuclear super powers got it done during the Cold War.

How has South Asia measured on this scale? In the decade and half since their nuclear tests, India has published its nuclear doctrine and Pakistan has indicated its thresholds. Both sides have put into place legislation and systems to improve safety and security. They have put in place Command and Control systems at Strategic and Operational levels. There is restraint in the nuclear rhetoric.

In his elegantly written book, *Better Safe than Sorry*, Krepon recommends:

The time has come to reaffirm the utility of deterrence, containment, and diplomacy as essential elements of comprehensive national strategy to reduce nuclear dangers and as complements to military strength. All of them require adaptation to address new dangers of proliferation and nuclear terrorism. The other element is of Cooperative Threat Reduction which terminology is forward looking and politically less divisive.

While results may be slow to come, every element in this list is being worked in South Asia. The argument that nuclear deterrence is either unnecessary or unstable in South Asia is therefore a misplaced one.

## Nuclear Capability Build Up

“Arms build-up” and “arms race” are a constant refrain on South Asia. Example: The Economist, (25 August 2012), after an attack on a Pakistan air base, used the headline, ‘Build-up of Nuclear Arms in South Asia remains Fearsome’. Capability accretion is a reality in South Asia. This accretion in nuclear capabilities in South Asia is not sui generis. It is part of an action – reaction sequence being played out in the geo-political environment prevailing in regions beyond South Asia. One observer of the South Asian nuclear scene interprets it as a vigorous attempt by both states to seek strategic and tactical stability. He goes on to say that in India and Pakistan, strategic and tactical stability are not mutually incompatible, and that it has aided efforts to preserve the status quo and led to a decline in tensions.

The reported development of non-strategic nuclear weapons in Pakistan can either be viewed through this prism of a search for stability or as a destabilising development. There is no official Indian response to this, even as there is some discourse in the public domain. Analysis therefore will at best be speculative. If the so-called tactical nuclear weapons are to be used during operations, it amounts to their becoming a war fighting tool. The Indian position may well be that a nuke is a nuke and the use of even a tactical one is a strategic strike. A lowest yield nuclear weapon will have strategic consequences in both countries. The Indian nuclear doctrine does not differentiate between a strategic or tactical strike. The Indian decision makers may not attach importance to either the yield of the weapon used, or the territory on which it is detonated. If Indian interests or assets are targeted by a nuclear strike, the response could well be strategic on the lines indicated in the India doctrine. The set of circumstances in which such weapon(s) will be used will remain uncertain, considering the horrific public consequences of such use. Hundreds of thousands lives taken out for hundreds of tanks is a tough call apart from being a Faustian bargain. The development, however, introduces the element of uncertainty in the nuclear operational scene. The challenge for operational planners in India and Pakistan will not change from that of identifying the certainties on which to base their options. India’s NSA Mr. Shiv Shankar Menon in a speech in August this year had stated, “As a nation, India has consistently shown tactical caution and strategic initiative. Equally, initiative and risk taking must remain strategic and not tactical.” The debate on non-strategic nuclear weapons with Pakistan has only begun and is a long way from running its course. No doubt the Stimson Center and others will contribute to it in no small measure.

The search for strategic stability will continue to drive the development of a nuclear triad and other capabilities. The larger building blocks of the nuclear matrix in South Asia are known and are being put in place. What remains to be seen is the speed and scale on which the strategic apparatus will come about.

India and Pakistan each has its own outlook on how far it wishes to go on the nuclear capability route. Both sides have often reiterated that they are not in an arms race for matching numbers or systems. Neither can be expected to change direction or momentum, until their desired capabilities are attained. India and Pakistan will continue to seek improvements in their nuclear capabilities according to their perception of adequacy. Neither side can also be expected to define the levels at which it will stop seeking and building additional capability—the Cold War had no instance of it either.

## Nuclear Risks Re-visited

What risks can we expect in the circumstances that prevail in South Asia? Given the desire for stability demonstrated by both sides, what trigger can introduce instability and raise the risk quotient? The answer is indicated in an article titled, *Beyond Denial*, by Scott Sagan. The first is that of nuclear security and safety. Sagan posits that during the Cold War while both sides sought perfect security through nuclear deterrence, they needed to work it with imperfect humans inside imperfect organisation. The dangers of such an arrangement have been a long stated 'Saganism', made famous through his persuasive writings, as in *The Limits of Safety*. No country can be free from this risk. Nor will India and Pakistan. This risk can however be minimised and it is being done.

The second risk relates to South Asia where the two nuclear states will always operate in an environment different than in the Cold War. The US and Soviet Union were autonomous nuclear players with no other restraining influence, other than perhaps, domestic public opinion. India and Pakistan are, to use a football parlance, in the junior league where major powers will be referees, capable of issuing yellow and red cards. South Asia will thus not have autonomous nuclear players using nuclear weapons arbitrarily. There will be no freewheeling nuclear jousts like those of medieval knights, watched by cheering subjects. According to Sagan this can lead to situations in which one side, more likely the weaker one, can initiate a crisis with a view to involving the major powers in taking sides. Past events bear out the reality of such crisis intervention by major powers in South Asia. Whether this will be a recurrent reality remains to be seen. My view is that India and Pakistan have far too much riding on larger national interests – the need for economic growth, image as stable players in the comity of states, and more importantly, the grave dangers of crises getting out of hand, for them to choose such options in future. It will be safe to assume that their experiences since 1998 have shown the diminishing strategic returns of such ventures.

## The Future

In August this year the Stimson Chairman's Forum looked at new measures which can be attempted in reducing nuclear risks in South Asia. It started with the assumption that years of negotiations have only led to incremental outcomes and therefore new, bold and symbolic initiatives are needed. It was stated there are 'many dance moves to pick from.' One inevitably wondered if the moves were to be from the discipline of Kabuki, or Kathakali or the vigorous Bhangra! There was a reference to Washington being the lead player on this dance floor, which would have made it quite a dance ensemble. Some rightly questioned the belief that the US can call the shots in a region, where its credibility as an honest broker is in doubt. A former US Ambassador to Pakistan preferred a combination of both the incremental and symbolic bold measures approach. What is important is that there was no mention in the Forum, of either the political investment required to be made, or the costs to political leaders of such initiatives, both in India and Pakistan. South Asia's leaders, not unlike the US Presidents in the Cold War and even today, cannot be oblivious to public opinion when it comes to nuclear weapons. The primacy of the political ingredient in nuclear risk reduction cannot be ignored in South Asia. It also offers the most promising area for new attempts in risk reduction. In the absence of the Political element other measures will amount to no more than technical fixes.

Is there a 'Black Swan' in this sky which can ruin the best laid plans? What can surprise the two countries and international community? International terrorism and its extensive reach is the intangible danger which can upset the arrangements for stability India and Pakistan can make either

individually or bilaterally. This is also an international or global security requirement. The Nuclear Security Summits during the Obama Presidency have made a singular contribution on this. Such work will have to be sustained.

The future of Nuclear Risks in South Asia is not well served by the fear generated in the discourse on it. The sense of imminent Armageddon is never far from the American writings on nuclear South Asia. Such prognosis is not helpful to objective analysis. Where there are nuclear weapons there are risks. Even the most experienced states in this game cannot claim certainty or immunity in such matters. Fear therefore cannot be the basis for rational action.

We shall let Krepon have the last word on this: Speaking at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: "Fear based strategy of reducing nuclear dangers is not politically sustainable, and can lead to significant errors in judgment and policy." There is much to be gained by such an approach, particularly amongst those who ponder and work on reducing nuclear risks in South Asia.