Stepping Away from the Nuclear Abyss: Some Proposals

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Following the examples set over the last fifty years by the U.S. and the other nuclear weapon states, the governments of India and Pakistan have now clearly chosen to rely on weapons of mass destruction and terror as the basis for their relationship with each other and the rest of the world. The nuclear tests they conducted in May 1998 and the accompanying political and military crisis raise genuine fears for the future of the people of South Asia. It is important therefore to understand some of the motivations and linkages that policy makers in the two countries work with and seek steps towards a safer future.

India's current Bharatiya Janata Party can be distinguished from other Indian political parties and traditions by the fact that its politics are based on a violent intolerance of religious and ethnic minorities and determination to forge a new, Hindu, India. Just as it has not hesitated to use violence for achieving domestic ends, it regards the development of military might as the means to ensure that it gets its way in international affairs. This is at the core of its decision to move so decisively and quickly after coming to power and order the nuclear tests. The tests marked a rupture with over two decades of successive Indian governments supporting the nuclear weapons infrastructure but procrastinating about going the whole hog. Despite the many security-related justifications offered, for the BJP, the tests had as much to do with national pride as with other factors. In the words of India's Minister of Science and Technology, the tests "reflected India's endeavors to find a rightful place among the World's powers."

Such remarks coming from the highest levels of Indian government suggest that the BJP may not settle for anything less than a fully nuclear India, i.e. with deployed nuclear weapons. Reports of work on a new longer-range Indian missile and a nuclear submarine suggest the possibility that a real Indian nuclear force is being pursued. This, combined with the current levels of development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, make it unlikely that India's quest for a nuclear arsenal will be ended anytime soon.

Only if the nuclear weapon states genuinely moved to eliminate nuclear weapons would any Indian government be likely to consider nuclear disarmament. For in that case, India would have a status equal to that of the "great powers." Indeed, shortly after the nuclear tests of May, the Indian government called for a convention banning nuclear weapons. More recently, as part of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, India and Pakistan along with other SAARC countries called for the elimination of all nuclear weapons.

It is this perspective that suggests that while supporting reductions in nuclear arsenals of the nuclear weapon states, Indian political leaders are unlikely to accept serious restraints on India's programs prior to a clear commitment by the nuclear weapon states that they are indeed disarming. It should be said, however, that there is a segment among India's nuclear hawks, who have consistently espoused acquiring a full-fledged nuclear arsenal and opposed any restraint, who now see value in participating in arms control agreements that they had previously decried. Such participation now would, in their view, consolidate the gains they feel India made by carrying out its nuclear tests. India's hawks may become its arm controllers.

The position of Indian opponents of nuclear weapons is a far more principled one. In a recent comment, Praful Bidwai, a leading anti-nuclear intellectual and activist, condemned India's nuclear tests as "strategically irrational, politically outrageous and morally repugnant" and then went on to argue that India "should avoid the temptation of looking for devious bargains that... perpetuate nuclear weapon-states hegemonies and legitimize machtpolitik."

Pakistan's leaders have far simpler motivations and far smaller ambitions. For decades they have engaged in fearful competition with India, no matter how self-destructive. Pakistan's nuclear weapons were presented first as a counter to India's nuclear weapons, but have since become seen also as an "equalizer" against India's conventional military superiority. In the wake of India's tests and the attendant belligerence by the BJP government, Pakistan's leaders took the opportunity offered them, an opportunity some of them had long hoped for, and followed suit. It is now hard to see Pakistan's leaders giving up nuclear weapons without some sense of maintaining parity with India, and even insisting on creating such parity when it comes to conventional weapons. Pakistan's refusal to agree to the No-First-Use proposal offered by India is a result of this perceived imbalance.

It is in this light that the linkage Pakistan's leaders make between their nuclear weapons and the Kashmir dispute needs to be seen. Kashmir is undoubtedly a major flashpoint, one that has led to wars in the past. The recent shelling across the border indicates that the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan have not stopped the low-intensity battle there, only the stakes have been raised. A settlement of the Kashmir dispute therefore seems vital as a way of reducing the risk of conflict escalating, perhaps inadvertently, into nuclear war.

However, there is a lesson to be learned from the persistence of massive nuclear arsenals in the U.S. and Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union -- even where the apparent source of conflict between two states is removed, if these states have nuclear weapons then the weapons remain, and so does the danger. The settlement of the Kashmir dispute may leave the same legacy. Settling Kashmir will also not remove the risk of war. The last war between India and Pakistan had nothing to do with Kashmir, and resulted in the largest number of casualties in any Indo-Pakistan war, the creation of Bangladesh from the former East Pakistan and 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of war.

Despite these reasons, if India does put caps on its nuclear program, Pakistan may well be forced to follow suit. Pakistan's smaller infrastructure and economy is simply not capable of living up to the international pressure that is sure to ensue in the event that India acquiesces to the various arms control proposals suggested. The announcement of even limited sanctions after its nuclear tests was sufficient to trigger a near collapse of the Pakistani economy and has caused widespread hardship.

Seeking Pakistani participation in arms control through the imposition of sanctions and other punitive measures is, however, fraught with dangers. The last decade has seen Pakistan start to show signs of a deep crisis of legitimacy as a state and in its social order. The polity is fragmenting into warring religious and ethnic sectarian groups who battle out their differences on the streets of its cities amid collapsing infrastructure and lack of even basic social services. Sanctions have only led to further erosion of state authority and an increase in the popularity of religious nationalist groups.

In this context it is significant that the radical Islamist groups were the most vociferous in demanding that Pakistan conduct nuclear tests and they have subsequently adopted the bomb as their own. What is important is that many within the Pakistani state, the military and within the nuclear weapons program have sympathies with one or other of these groups. In such a situation, the state may not be able to ensure control over its nuclear weapons.

The site of conflict may not be restricted to Kashmir, even though Pakistan's Islamist groups have played an increasingly important role there in the struggle against Indian occupation. They are also drawn to other profound and long-standing instances of injustice, such as the annexation of Palestine. More broadly, the sanctions which have devastated Iraq and the pressures on Iran, presented largely in terms of containing

proliferation "risks," are widely seen as little more than a way of maintaining the dominance in the Middle East of a nuclear-armed Israel. In such an international environment, it seems inevitable that there will be crises which will lead to public pressure for Pakistan to intervene, despite the government insisting that their nuclear weapons are not an "Islamic bomb."

In light of the Indian state's insistence on some kind of parity with the nuclear weapon states, and the compulsions on Pakistan to follow despite socio-economic collapse, the challenge to the nuclear weapon states and those who would propose nuclear policies to them is to accept explicitly the need for nuclear disarmament and to begin fighting for it. This is undoubtedly a difficult challenge. But not as difficult as it once was. The peace movement and the non-nuclear weapon-states, which have struggled for decades to be heard, now find their arguments echoed by the likes of the former head of Strategic Command, George Butler, and other senior military and political figures from the nuclear weapon-states. It is also worth noting that on May 28, 1998, following the first set of nuclear tests by Pakistan, President Clinton said, “I cannot believe that we are about to start the 21st century by having the Indian subcontinent repeat the worst mistakes of the 20th century, when we know it is not necessary to peace, to security, to prosperity, to national greatness or personal fulfillment.” This is perhaps the closest any U.S. president has come to officially stating, albeit grudgingly and not focussing on U.S. policies, that it is a terribly wrong to believe that nuclear weapons are necessary for peace or security.

Steps Forward

Following India's tests, the Prime Minister declared a moratorium on further nuclear tests. After its tests, Pakistan has made the same announcement. The positions of the two governments on signing the CTBT have been fluctuating. Recently, at the United Nations, both countries indicated a willingness to sign the test ban and help it enter into force provided sanctions were lifted, and other publicly unspecified conditions were met. There is however, a danger that refusal or delay in meeting India and Pakistan's demands

may lead to another round of tests. In all likelihood, as with France and China, after testing there would be prompt accession to the CTBT, rendering further sanctions and condemnation futile.

The other arms control measure that India and Pakistan have been encouraged to participate in is the Fissile Material Production Cutoff. Recently the Conference on Disarmament seems to have reached a breakthrough in getting India and Pakistan to agree to start negotiations on the FMCT. India has agreed to drop its condition that the FMCT be linked to a time-bound program of nuclear disarmament and Pakistan has agreed to negotiate on a treaty that would not consider past stockpiles. This is surprising and it is still to be seen if India and Pakistan maintain this new stance once negotiations start. Even after the tests, Pakistan's ambassador at the Conference on Disarmament has said "as regards the FMCT, for Pakistan this issue is now dependent on India's nuclear status, its degree of weaponization and size and quality of its fissile material stockpiles. Pakistan cannot afford to allow India to once again destabilize the balance of deterrence in future through asymmetry in the level of stockpiles."

In the atmosphere of distrust prevailing in South Asia, this divergence of interest in the FMCT makes the possibility of both countries signing the FMCT unlikely for some time to come. Since negotiations over such a treaty would take a long time, especially given the difficulties that are bound to arise in India and Pakistan over verification and inspections, starting negotiations alone is not sufficient.

A way round this problem is for the nuclear weapon-states, as part of preparing the ground for abolishing nuclear weapons, to formalize their existing moratoria on fissile material production and begin to place significant fractions of their fissile material under international safeguards. This would address India's long-standing concerns that safeguards were discriminatory unless the nuclear weapon states allowed their facilities to be inspected. At the same time India could be asked to put its nuclear power reactors under safeguards. Without the possibility of running its power reactors at low burn-up, Indian capacity to produce large amounts of fissile material and so quickly build up its stocks is limited [see A. H. Nayyar, A. H. Toor and Z. Mian, "Fissile Material Production

Potential in South Asia, *Science and Global Security,* Vol. 6, No. 2 1997]. This step gains in importance if it can be done soon, since India is scheduled to start reprocessing power reactor fuel at the new Kalpakkam Reprocessing Plant in the near future. In exchange for such a restriction on India's fissile material production capability, Pakistan could be asked to not begin operation of its new plutonium production reactor at Khushab.

These agreements in themselves do little to reduce the immediate sense of danger to the people of the two countries. The most such measures could do is to restrict the potential devastation that they could wreak on each other. The other set of measures that should be pursued in parallel relate to the weapons themselves.

Over the last few years, it has been proposed that the nuclear weapon states take their deployed weapons off alert and introduce measures that increase the time it would take to launch a strike. In the case of South Asia, it is believed that India and Pakistan have not yet placed their nuclear weapons on missiles or otherwise deployed them. With this in mind, it is possible to build on proposals for a verified system of de-alerting the nuclear warheads of the nuclear weapon-states. It may be fruitful to invite India to participate in the verification of such de-alerting. This would meet some of its aspirations for recognition by engaging it in a process otherwise restricted to nuclear weapon states - India would be a participant-observer in the disarmament process. It may also put to rest some of the BJP government's claimed concerns about China.

For its part, India could be asked to make an unverified commitment to keep its nuclear weapons de-mated as well as stop the testing and deployment of missiles, in particular the Agni missile, which is under development and which may allow it to threaten China. The relatively small size of the Indian arsenal means that India may be unlikely to accept full reciprocity in verification. In the current climate, if nuclear weapon-states demand reciprocal verification, India may well opt out.

An Indian agreement with the nuclear weapon-states freezing further development and deployment of its long-range missiles is likely to be seen as irrelevant by Pakistan. The contiguous border and the size and shape of Pakistan ensure that nearly all its major cities and military installations are within range of India's short range Prithvi missile. There would therefore need to be a parallel but overlapping bilateral agreement between India and Pakistan covering such missiles.

One possibility would be for India to stop manufacture of its Prithvi missiles and agree to move its existing missiles to monitored storage far away from the border. In exchange, Pakistan would commit not to test or deploy long range missiles, such as the intermediate range Ghauri - which is justified by Pakistan's government as a response to Prithvi. The difference in size between India and Pakistan means such an arrangement could remove the immediate threat to Pakistan's major cities, while ensuring that Pakistan could not threaten any major part of India. The value of such a step for India is that despite public rhetoric in Pakistan, it is highly unlikely, that with just one test conducted so far, the Ghauri would be ready for deployment; halting future missile tests would therefore be significant.

The limited means available to both states and the importance they still attach to ambiguity about the numbers of nuclear weapons and missiles makes verification of such an agreement very difficult. However, the absence of even limited trust between the two states makes verification vital, especially since it is claimed Pakistan may have short-range Chinese made M-11 missiles which it has so far chosen not to deploy. One possibility would be for a single cooperative monitoring center, or two co-located ones, with international satellites providing Indians and Pakistanis identical high resolution imaging data from a several hundred km wide swath on both sides of the border. The exact width of the swath could be such as to ensure that neither Prithvi nor the M-11 could be deployed close enough to the border to be able to threaten significant areas of the other state without being detected.

Since both India and Pakistan could deliver their nuclear weapons by aircraft, any arrangement would have to cover not just missile development and deployment, but also airbases. India and Pakistan could simply agree to monitor activity at airbases through inspections.

This proposal, again, is only likely to create stability until the next crisis. The only certain way to prevent the deployment and possible use of nuclear weapons in South Asia as elsewhere is the absolute and unconditional abolition of nuclear weapons.