

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION IN SOUTH ASIA

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US AND SOVIET RESPONSES

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nuclear Proliferation in South Asia

US AID SC/IFILSP/OLS

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Scenarios

Four scenarios have been outlined in the workshop synopsis

- i) Unlikely prospects of South Asian nuclearisation by foreign powers
- ii) Uncontrollable regional nuclear arms race
- iii) Controlled regional nuclearisation and
- iv) Unilateral nuclearisation by India or Pakistan

It is indeed unlikely that foreign powers would be basing nuclear weapons in the Subcontinent. But if the South Asian landmass is considered as a geo-strategic entity then nuclear developments around it have a bearing on its nuclearisation. Ship-borne nuclear weapons are permanently in the Arabian Sea. Diego Garcia has a contingent nuclear force. The CLMCC which is headquartered in the Gulf and which oversees US military interests in South-West Asia, has a nuclear element. The Soviet power is also knocking at the doors of South Asia. China, which has an extensive land border with India has its power impacting on the Subcontinent by its position in Tibet

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So, nuclearisation of South Asia's neighbourhood is an accomplished fact which cannot but have its influence on nuclearisation of South Asia itself.

The scenario of an uninitiated and uncontrolled regional nuclear arms race has only a remote chance. For so many years now the Indian Government spokesmen have been asserting that New Delhi would respond to a nuclear challenge from Pakistan. Since 1993 or so Pakistan has achieved a nuclear capability and the Indian leaders have acknowledged it. There is thus an implicit nuclearisation at least in political sense already under way. The as yet unknown technological dimensions of this nuclearisation demonstrates a remarkable restraint on the part of both countries. This restraint is likely to continue.

The third scenario of a controlled nuclearisation on mutually agreed ground rules and force levels between India and Pakistan is equally unconceivable. This scenario obviously assures that for India and Pakistan their security concerns are exclusively mutual. This is not correct. India is facing a nuclear adversary, China, with which it had fought a war and which is still in occupation of large chunks of Indian territory. China is now enlarging its forces, including nuclear forces. Tactical nuclear weapons have reportedly been developed by China and their development in Tibet in due course could be expected. Future Indian nuclear force must necessarily have to take the Sino-Indian nuclear equation into account, besides the possibility of nuclear blackmail exercises from our neighbours including

the subcontinent. Similarly, for Pakistan, India is not the only security concern. Developments in the Gulf, the situation in Iran and the direct Soviet or Soviet-supported pressure from Afghanistan are all factors of Pakistan's security problems,¹ besides the larger issue of projecting Pakistan nuclear capability as a cutting edge of the 'sword of Islam' itself.

Finally, the scenario of unilateral nuclearisation. India, after demonstrating its capability over a decade ago, has refrained from unilateral nuclearisation of the Subcontinent. An Indian decision to go nuclear has, for some years now, been precluded by the progress of Pakistan's nuclear effort. Pakistan, under what late Bhutto called a 'full nuclear capability' three years back by mastering the technique of enriching uranium, has established capabilities, neither country is likely to hold back and a response to a challenge from the other is unlikely to be inhibited by factors of external support.

US and Soviet Responses

In trying to assess the likely US and Soviet responses to nuclearisation of South Asia, a basic assumption has to be made. The assumption is that South Asia's stability is in the interest of both the superpowers. A crucial component of this stability is lasting peace between India and Pakistan. Both these and Shanghai have at times tried to bring about this (in the case of 1960 and recent US initiatives have become more serious and of such effects)

The question then is whether nuclearisation would be seen by the superpowers as enhancing or promoting stability in South Asia. The second aspect of the question is about the superpowers' vital strategic interests in South Asia and whether nuclearisation would further or retard them.

Just after two years of defeating India militarily in a border war, China got nuclear in October 1964. There is no evidence to show that the introduction of nuclear power in Sino-Indian equation was viewed as superpower calculations then as having a destabilising effect on South Asia. However, considering the increasing Sino-Soviet schism and the reverse Sino-US hostility, it is reasonable to presume that both Washington and Moscow would probably have regarded an Indian nuclear response to China in mid '60s as favouring their interests.

In May 1974 India conducted a nuclear test. By then superpower interests both globally and in the South Asian region had undergone changes. The conclusion of the PT and the frontier of détente concretised the US-USSR parallelism in their nuclear non-proliferation strategy. The Nixon visit and the Shanghai communique opened a new era of Sino-American friendship. In South Asia, a new phase of superpower relations began following the turbulent event of 1971 leading to the birth of Bangladesh.

Following the 1973 test, similar to the 'oil crisis' the US committed to a major military presence in the Gulf-Indian Ocean region. The subtle nuances of Indo-Soviet cooperation and India's independence on land

status were much less appreciated in Washington than in India. In this situation the United States found the Indian test as a threat to the nuclear status-quo in South Asia.

The US apprehensions that the 1974 test could be the beginning of an Indian weapon programme proved correct as has been pointed out. It did not mark a unilateral nuclearisation of South Asia but instead a unilateral nuclear disarmament by India by reducing its stockpile from one to zero². In that sense it restored the status-quo ante strains on South Asian nuclear stability revealed five years later in 1979 when Pakistan's clandestine efforts to reach nuclear weapon capability were unveiled. The US was concerned that a nuclear Pakistan would lead to a nuclear India and a chain of proliferation in which others would join South Asia thereby defeating the US global non-proliferation strategy.

Initially, therefore, the US responded with a sanction by involving the Symington Amendment and cutting off of US economic and military aid to Pakistan. Soon thereafter following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan the US administration dropped the sanction mainly by offering a permanent waiver of the Symington Amendment. Instead it held out a carrot in the form of long-term strategic cooperation with Pakistan offering it substantial military assistance which was also explained as a reward to persuade Pakistan from its quest for nuclear capability.

The first five-year military aid agreement is coming to an end and a new US-Pak deal has been finalised for the

no effective effort from 1997. The US administration has not been in a position to convince itself that Pakistan has given up its weapons plans or even slowed down its nuclear aids that objective. All available records in public indicate that Pakistan has already reached or is very near to a weapons capability.

The US has imposed three conditions on Pakistan not to conduct nuclear proliferation, not to reprocess plutonium and not to enrich uranium above 5%.³ The last two are not easily verifiable even by the US. The first a test may not be absolutely necessary to establish a capability and even to build a small stockpile unless an open demonstration is desired by Islamabad. Thus the US cannot and should not approach nuclear proliferation as Pakistan's route to nuclear weapon status. The US seemed to have realised the use of having a nuclear ally on its side rather than distancing from it.

Regardless of what happens in Afghanistan, Pakistan will continue to be seen as a strategic asset for US. The US has major long-term interests in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean -- especially in what is described as South East Asia. US supported nuclear Pakistan would be an effective barrier against the perceived Soviet reach south into the Indian Ocean. It would also be seen as a factor of stability in the otherwise volatile Gulf region.

True, the US was responsible for convincing Pakistan of its nuclear non-proliferation pact in 1976. The nuclear pressure was also brought to bear on other areas so that

specific nuclear trade ties with Pakistan. With China, the US made the withdrawal of Chinese technicians from Shuto as a condition for a US-China agreement on civil nuclear cooperation.

The change of regime in Islamabad in 1977 is probably thought to force a change in Pak nuclear plans. Shutto had alluded to this. But Gen Zia pursued the Pak programme with equal vigour. Another regime change is unlikely to be any different as far as Pakistan's nuclear policy is concerned. Benazir had only supported her country's nuclear policy. There seems to be a national consensus in Pakistan on this. In his February 1986 address to the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, Gen Zia made two important points. First, he said Pakistan would not compromise on its stand on the nuclear issue despite nuclear pressure. Secondly, and more significantly, he claimed that he had succeeded in convincing the United States to treat India and Pakistan on equal footing on the nuclear issue⁴. Does it not mean then that without an open deconstruction, as India did in 1974, Pakistan has already attained the status of a nuclear explosive capable power? It seems so especially in view of Gen Zia's assertion that if Pakistan made nuclear weapons, it could not announce it by an explosion⁵.

The US having failed to stop Pakistan from going nuclear, might as well go along with Pakistan and accept the reality and try to adjust that reality to suits its interests. Israel is an unacknowledged but known, nuclear state. Israel's nuclear status did not inhibit US-Israeli relations which are predicated on strategic mutual interests in the region. US-Israeli relations of

course are not on the same footing as US-Israeli relations and Pakistan might learn something from the Israeli model⁶. It is difficult to see how the US can afford a break with Pakistan or even to be indifferent to a nuclear Pakistan. The choice for both the US and Pakistan is to pull together.

Above all, South Asia's strategic stability could be strengthened by nuclearisation. Nuclear weapons might promote the confidence of countries to stand up to the challenges from stronger nations. India and Pakistan seem to be entering a new phase of good neighbourliness in their relations. There is realisation in both countries that a change in South Asia's status quo could be detrimental to the interests of both. Many factors are at work in this direction and the emerging Indo-Pak nuclear stand-off could already be one among them.

Like Washington, Moscow also has no option but to support its policies towards a nuclear Pakistan. Moscow could be content with durable peace in the Subcontinent and also greater independence that Islamabad might show as a result of its nuclearisation. In any case, Pakistan is not likely to achieve a minimum deterrent vis-a-vis the USSR in the near future nor is Pak nuclear status likely to hurt vital Soviet stakes in Gulf and South Asia. The Soviet objective would continue to be to reduce US presence and influence in Pakistan. This can be attained only by moving closer to Pakistan and working out a mutually beneficial cooperative relationship.

In short, while both superpowers might vie with each other for a greater say in a nuclear Islamabad, Pakistan's own growing independence would see to it that no US-USSR

clash of interests is involved and that in fact the influence of both are diluted over a period of time. This is different from an abrupt 'decoupling' of superpowers from South Asia in the face of nuclearisation.

A nuclear weaponised India is much less likely than Pakistan to be seen as strategically disadvantageous by either superpower.⁷ India has no direct clash of interests or running disputes with either US or USSR. New Delhi has excellent relations with both Washington and Moscow. While India is against the present global political and economic inequities it pleads for gradual peaceful transition to a better world. While the anti-imperialist content of its foreign policy might have been an irritant at times, the West appreciates the Indian traditions of political stability and democratic pluralism as contributing to the West's own larger global interests. The United States has acknowledged India's increasingly important strategic role as a major regional and world power. In the US perception India is a critical and successful test case that shows that democratic politics and economic development are not only compatible but mutually supportive.³ The Soviet Union looks to regard India as one of the leaders of the Non-aligned and Third World movements and a strong India is a stabilising force in the India-China-USSR triangular relationship. Greater harmonisation of the subcontinent's interests and those of the superpowers in the region could be expected.

The argument of a proliferation chain sparked off by nuclearisation of the Subcontinent is tenuous. It is

and South Africa achieved nuclear capability long before
 a potential country has taken a cue from the last seven
 years of nuclear activity in South Asia to rush forward its
 nuclear status. If that happens - say in Latin America
 between Brazil and Argentina - it would be totally
 independent of decisions in the Subcontinent.

The other argument which is equally tenacious is
 that India and Pakistan might wage a nuclear war which
 could involve the superpowers. In the past conflicts
 both countries have shown tremendous restraint and there
 is no reason to believe that this restraint will not be
 reinforced by the nuclear factor. Moreover both India
 and Pakistan are parties to UN resolutions and other
 international conventions 'not to use or threaten to
 use nuclear weapons under any circumstances' and to declare
 use or threat of use of nuclear weapons as crime against
 humanity.

- 1 Early in 1979 even before the Soviets moved into Afghanistan, Gen Zia told the visiting US official Warren Christopher that the stable situation in Asia and upheavals in Iran and Afghanistan were a necessary for his country to possess more than conventional military clout. See P. S. Aronson, 'Perceptions and Policies of India and Pakistan' in I. Subrahmanyan (Ed), India and the Nuclear Challenge (Delhi 1986) p 228
- 2 Raju C C Thomas 'The Strategic Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation in South-East Asia India's Perspective' The Journal of Strategic Studies Vol 2 No 4 December 1985
- 3 Leonard Spector The Nuclear Challenge (London 1985) p 116-19
- 4 Quoted in The Times of India (Delhi) February 15 1986
- 5 Gen Zia has been quoted as saying 'I as an all-India leader have never made a weapon and if it comes it will not be made in Pakistan' Pakistan's Nuclear Dilemma (Delhi 1984) p 63
- 6 George H. Spector 'Some Fallacies and Problems and a Nuclear Non-Solution' The Journal of Strategic Studies Vol 8 No 4 December 1985
- 7 See Rodney Jones 'Strategic Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia' (Article from the United States), The Journal of Strategic Studies Vol 2 No 4 December 1985. According to Jones "Nuclear proliferation would be strategically relevant to a major power when it impinges in an unmistakable way on that power's vital interests. It could so impinge on vital interests if it alters the global balance of power, particularly if it is a direct or indirect military threat to the major power's territory or other vital assets, or to those elements of its national security it deems vital as all of this tends to embolden a power to a nuclear collision or a conventional one, or to opposing major powers that could easily escalate into a general war.
- 8 Quoted in The Times of India (Delhi) February 21 1986