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SOUTH ASIA

Subcontinental Woes: Quest for Nuclear Confidence Building Measures in South Asia

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Chaos and Crisis

To the utter surprise of the Islamabad administration, the newly crowned Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government has resorted to a two pronged strategy: taking ample time to place its own power centers in order while rescheduling the parleys and keeping the whole political atmosphere of the subcontinent warm with some irresponsible rhetorics. May be the postponement has been providing the new government the opportunity to redefine the parameters of the forthcoming Indo-Pak talks. Before his first official press conference, India's External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh slammed the previous government's foreign policy and reiterated his stand on the Indo-Pak peace process focussing on the Simla agreement. Though, later he clarified that he had too mentioned other bilateral declarations and joint statements.

Islamabad has not fallen behind either. Visibly upset over the election results that ousted the Vajpayee government and watching the political development closely, it has started reading between the dotted lines while urging India to restrain from unnecessary rhetorics. Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri had taken exception to his Indian counterpart, Natwar Singh's unofficial comments on the 'bedrock' Simla agreement and on the issue of plebiscite in Jammu and Kashmir.

It seems that the showy courtship rituals of animal kingdom are underway in South Asia. Before meeting for parleys, both the countries are trying to display their missile plumage to the world. Islamabad went on to flex its missile muscle by conducting two successive tests of nuclear capable missiles in less than a week. On May 29 last, it had test fired a new version of the Ghauri V missile, which has a maximum range of 1,500 km. The latest of them came on June 4 on the pretext of improving missile arsenals. In the face of it, India has begun integrating its Agni III Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) (3, 000 KM range) to test it soon.

It is not clear whether the recent missile tests by Pakistan irrespective of the intentions involved, were conveyed beforehand to India. Though Pakistan officials claimed to have maintained all the formalities before conducting the tests, Indian Home Minister, Shivraj Patil's comment in this regard drew special attention after the May 29 test. May be ignorant of the practiced policy of not criticizing Islamabad for missile tests, Patil condemned the act as 'escalating arms race'. Officially, the Indian establishment has not responded to the test till date. Whereas, slamming domestic critics on their face by conducting two successive missile tests (and more in the offing), President Pervez Musharraf reiterated the fact that Pakistan's nuclear force is for deterrence and the country is ready for a reduction if mutual action takes place in the subcontinent.

Chinese syndrome:

Natwar Singh's call for a tripartite nuclear doctrine including China into the Subcontinental security realm left more room for skeptics to cast doubts over the outcome of the forthcoming parleys on nuclear CBMs. As evident from the present UPA government's common minimum program, it is committed to 'maintain a credible nuclear weapons program while evolving demonstrable and verifiable confidence-building measures with its nuclear neighbors'. In other words, China will be a natural choice for any kind of negotiations involving nuclear weapon in the region for this Government. Even Mr. Singh has clarified his view on this issue with all positive expectations a month before the UPA government came to power in an interview with the Magazine, *The Force* (May 2004, New Delhi). As for the informed sources, the doctrine is largely based on the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's 1988-plan for a world free of nuclear weapons.

It is more or less explicit by now that India's nuclear arsenal is not Pakistan-specific. The other major aspect could be the Chinese factor in the development of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and long-standing partner of that country in its defence and strategic interests. Of course, the nuclear ambition of Myanmar must also have taken into account.

As the suggestion to include China in the process appeared to have dismayed Pakistani officials, it is most likely that Islamabad would consult Beijing administration before reaching any decision on the proposed common nuclear doctrine. However, China has responded cautiously to the Indian proposal. Whilst its Foreign Ministry spokesman has reportedly indicated the country's stand for complete prohibition and destruction of nuclear weapons and its support for South Asian peace, experts opined that China's stand on the issue is very diplomatic and it seems that Beijing does not want to be seen with India and Pakistan at least in the nuclear issue. Any kind of involvement would be read granting legitimacy to both India and Pakistan as Nuclear power states.

Elusive NRR:

The rescheduled itinerary as of now is that Pakistan and India will hold expert level talks on nuclear CBMs on June 19 and 20, and

a foreign secretary level parleys on June 27 and 28 in New Delhi. Besides a array of issues in hand, the focus remains on the question of a credible Nuclear Restraint Regime (NRR) as proposed by Pakistan, which would reduce the risk of accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons. With the chance of a nuclear confrontation in any kind of crisis growing higher since 1998, the two sides have launched a series of initiatives to improve relations and initiatives to handle the nuclear threat. India has already issued a nuclear doctrine with no first use option while Pakistan with limited capability has yet to follow suit. Both countries in the past have adhered to an agreement not to attack each other's nuclear installations and agreed to exchange the list of nuclear installations on 1st January every year. Another practice, which is underway, is the advance notification of missile tests.

Though the memorandum of understanding on nuclear CBMs was signed at Lahore in February 1999, it didn't yield any substantive results thereafter. To recollect, the Lahore Declaration envisioned mutual consultations on security concepts and nuclear doctrines with a view to developing measures for confidence building in both nuclear and conventional spheres. The accompanying Memorandum signed by the foreign secretaries of the two countries called for limited transparency measures. As we know, confidence-building measures can be any set of unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral actions or procedures that act to reduce military tensions between or among states, before, during or after conflict. The need of the hour is to design plausible pathways for a set of future credible CBMs. The vital question is what are the options we have? Conventional wisdom suggests five important yet basic elements which could be the basis of any future nuclear CBMs between any countries: 1) non-deployment of missiles having nuclear weapon, 2) a continuous process of mutual consultation and communication, 3) establishment of nuclear risk reduction centers (NRRC), 4) a mutual agreed verification mechanism, and 5) non-transfer of nuclear technology.

The proposed NRRCs need to be established to reduce the risk of accidental nuclear war between the two countries that might result from accidents, terrorist attack or any miscalculations. The most important among all is the better communication channel between India and Pakistan to defuse tensions during moments of crisis and to facilitate a regular consultative mechanism. May be round the clock hotline service will serve well than any early warning system especially when there is close geographical proximity and minimum flight time.

It is observed that crisis management becomes more difficult when countries have nuclear weapons and that when deployed in strategic locations with right kind of delivery vehicles. The experience of India and Pakistan in the past demonstrated that nuclear capability did not deter low-level skirmishes, which might be escalated into a full-fledged nuclear confrontation. In this regard, many experts believe that both the countries should enter into an agreement on the non-use and non-deployment of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs). This category of missile system is highly destabilizing due to their greater mobility and military utility. However, a mutual no-first use (NFU) treaty would be helpful in reducing nuclear crisis in the region more than anything.

At present, both the countries high on expectations are opting to be silent over the minute details of the discussions. Even as the idea of common nuclear doctrine is currently gaining maximum attentions as innovative and promising for Asian security, Pakistan cautiously waiting for a 'technical evaluation' and careful consideration of the proposal.

Nevertheless, the verbal squabbling notwithstanding, the gloomy cloud partially receded over the future of Indo-Pak peace talks, especially with the official clarifications and hotline conversations between the political elite's of the both the countries. Both Pakistan and the Indian government have promised to carry forward the year old peace process initiated by the outgoing Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. The foreign ministers have too agreed, though after statements and counter statements, not to talk to each other through the media, but to talk one to one for the greater cause of the ongoing peace process. The optimism is evident from Natwar Singh's remark when he said during a telephonic conversation with his counterpart in Pakistan, that the future of Indo-Pak relationship no longer rests in the past and both the countries won't like to be prisoners of past either. Irrespective of the metaphorical spirit of cordiality and bonhomie, it's the political will of both the countries, is going to matter most when it comes to adopt any kind of confidence building measures into practice.

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