



Perils of Not Talking

The challenge of nuclear restraint and stabilisation in South Asia

ON 4 JULY 1999, PAKISTANI PRIME Minister Nawaz Sharif landed in a commercial PIA flight at Dulles International to be met, not by a US personage of appropriate rank, but by Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi Ambassador in Washington. The Pakistani PM was not on a state visit. He had not received even an informal invitation, but he had come, all the same, to plead for President Clinton's intervention in halting the Kargil conflict. According to Bruce Riedel, senior adviser to the President on South Asia, Clinton had already struck a hard bargain on the phone: "...come only if you are ready to withdraw from Kargil, without any conditions" he had told Sharif bluntly two days earlier, "I cannot help you if you are not prepared to pull back."

Swallowing his pride, Nawaz Sharif arrived in Washington, to pull his nation back from the precipice that reckless Pakistani generals had brought it to. That Sharif was accompanied by his wife and children on such a mission was indicative of the sense of insecurity that gripped him. At the same time, for the US President to entertain such an abrupt and unusual request from a head of state also spoke of the high levels of nervousness prevailing in Washington. On July 4, there was some tough talking in Blair House and Sharif was made to sign on the dotted line.

The only reason that the Americans intervened, for once, so forcefully to restrain Pakistan was that they saw mushroom clouds looming over the sub-continent. Intelligence inputs had warned that Pakistan was initiating the process for nuclear warhead assembly and maturing. There were nightmare visions in the White House and Foggy Bottom; to the old hands, it seemed almost like a re-run of the 1962 Cuban crisis.

An Arms Race in the Making

However, according to Gen. Musharraf: "...in 1999 our nuclear capability was not yet operational. Merely exploding a bomb does not mean that you are oper-

ationally capable of deploying a nuclear force in the field..." With the benefit of hindsight, I would tend to agree with the General. A mere 12 months after proving their nuclear devices in a controlled environment, neither India nor Pakistan could have had either the doctrinal clarity and confidence, nor the wherewithal to actually deploy their nuclear weapons under operational conditions. While some politicians on both sides may have indulged in nuclear rhetoric, it is unlikely that nuclear weapons were actually deployed in 1999.

The promised third-leg of India's nuclear triad will soon be provided by INS Arihant, which is the first of a class of three-five ballistic missile armed nuclear submarines (SSBN), planned by India

That was more than a decade ago. Today, both nations claim that they are on track to realisation of a 'credible minimum deterrent', while coyly declining to quantify the 'minima' or define a time-frame for attaining it. With the Damocles sword of FMCT hanging over them, they are, undoubtedly, racing to stockpile fissile material. While diversifying the types of vectors, both adversaries are also busy enhancing their sophistication and range, and multiplying their numbers.

Indian scientists have announced their intention to test a 5,500km inter-continental range ballistic missile (ICBM) within a year. While multiple independently-targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) warheads may be officially denied, they are occasionally mentioned 'sotto voce' by scientists. The promised third-leg of India's nuclear triad will soon be provided by INS Arihant, which is the first of a class of three-five ballistic missile armed nuclear submarines (SSBN), planned by India. In a closely re-

lated context, the DRDO has stated that India's ballistic missile defence (BMD) shield would be ready for deployment by 2013.

For an Indian, these developments are, indeed, heartening demonstrations of the nation's growing technological skills; especially significant in the context of our northern neighbour who is miles ahead of us in conventional as well as nuclear capabilities. However, if our national security demands a state of stable nuclear deterrence on the sub-continent, there should be no doubt in anyone's mind that they are all de-stabilising factors.

It is for this reason that these technologies deserve close scrutiny and examination by decision-makers at the highest level, before induction into service. Furthermore, casual media announcements about scientific achievements and technology demonstrations serve to instil panic in the adversary's mind, and lead to over-reaction. All these factors combine to provide the necessary ingredients to fuel an expensive and dangerous sub-continental arms race.

On its part, Pakistan too has initiated crucial steps, with the active assistance of 'all-weather ally' China, which have compounded the cycle of mistrust and insecurity and, provided added impetus to this unstated arms race. Having made a huge investment in the Khan Research Laboratories complex in Kahuta, where 20,000-30,000 ultra-centrifuges ran ceaselessly for a decade and a half to produce enough highly enriched Uranium-235 (HEU) for 80-90 bombs, the Pakistanis are now switching to Plutonium-239 (Pu-239) weapons.

This change makes sense because as compared to U-235, it takes only 1/4th to 1/6th the amount of Pu-239 to make a weapon of the same yield. Moreover, a few grams of tritium (a byproduct of Pu-239 production) can boost the yield of such a weapon by three to four times. The smaller, lighter and more potent Pu-239 fissile cores are ideal for use on missile and aircraft carried weapon warheads.



LIP SERVICE India's foreign secretary Nirupama Rao with Pakistan's foreign minister Qureshi

Pakistan began to pursue Pu-239 production capabilities in the 1990s, and by 1998 a 40 MWt natural uranium reactor, built with Chinese help, was declared operational at the Khushab Nuclear Complex. Khushab-2, a second similar reactor was inaugurated earlier this year, and together the two can generate about 20kg of fissile Pu-239 annually. Work on the Chinese aided Khushab-3 is understood to have commenced in 2006.

The Game Changer

In 2005, Pakistan announced the test-firing of a cruise missile named Hatf VII or Babur. The provenance of this cruise missile has been attributed to the US Tomahawk (six of these crash-landed on Pakistani territory in 1998), but that is a ploy to deflect attention from the fact that it is actually the Chinese DH-10. An air-launched version named Ra'ad has also been claimed by Pakistan, and the missile is supposed to attain a range of 1,000 km eventually.

Cruise missiles, powered by a clever little turbo-jet engine, although not very fast, are difficult to detect by vir-

tue of an extremely small radar signature, and a flight path just a few metres above ground. Their terrain computer matching navigation system coupled with GPS gives them accuracies of just a few metres. It is these two attributes which invest cruise missiles with deadly significance.

For example, Pakistan could inflict heavy attrition on our strategic assets including warheads and weapon platforms if it undertook surgical strikes using the Babur simply with a conventional warhead. Similarly, nuclear-armed cruise missiles could carry out pinpoint decapitating and disarming first strikes against Indian targets, catching our missile defences totally unawares.

It is now conceivable that with active Chinese assistance, Pakistan will be able to mate plutonium warheads with the Babur, and then go on to adapt the missile for firing through the torpedo tubes of its diesel Agosta 90B submarines. Admittedly, this combination cannot be compared with a SSBN but with air-independent propulsion (AIP), the Agostas could form a functional third leg of a Pak nuclear triad. The Israelis have al-

ready demonstrated this template with their Harpoon firing Dolphin class diesel submarines.

Command Structures

In the nuclear context, one must take note of this interesting observation by Pakistani physicist Dr Abdul Hameed Nayyar: "The Generals who command Pakistan's Army, dominate national security, and control nuclear policy... even when there is an elected civilian government. Their military mind-sets... lead them to find many reasons to continue to seek strategic parity with India... to support a larger nuclear arsenal." To this we can now add the Indo-US nuclear deal as an added rationale for the Generals to justify the production of more fissile material, and diversification of the Pak arsenal.

Under these circumstances, it would be prudent for India to assume that no matter who is the notional head of government, it is the Pakistan Army which calls the shots in matters relating to nuclear deterrence. A brief comparison of the manner in which the two neighbours have gone about evolving their

nuclear decision-making structures is educative.

In January 2003, India's Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) issued a press release which sought to inform the public about 'operationalising India's nuclear doctrine'. It summarised the main elements of the nuclear doctrine as follows:

India would create and maintain a 'credible minimum deterrent'. A posture of 'no first use' (NFU). Nuclear weapons would be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or forces.

Retaliation against a first strike would be 'massive' and designed to inflict 'unacceptable damage'. Nuclear retaliatory attacks could be authorised only by civilian political leadership through the Nuclear Command Authority (NCA).

The press release further amplified the following about command and control:

The NCA comprised a political council and an executive council. The political council would be chaired by the Prime Minister. It would be the sole body which can authorise the use of nuclear weapons.

The executive council would be chaired by the National Security Advisor. It would provide inputs for decision making by the Nuclear Command Authority and execute the directives given to it by the political council.

The appointment of a Commander-in-Chief, Strategic Forces Command, to manage and administer all Strategic Forces was approved.

Pakistan constituted, in 1999, a dedicated military organisation; the Strategic Plans Division at Joint Services HQ to perform functions relating to planning, coordination, and establishment of a reliable C4I network for the nuclear deterrent. A Nuclear Command Authority was formally established in 2000 under the head of government, with an employment control committee and a development control committee to serve it. The two committees had a different composition, but both were chaired by the President. The strategic plans division became the secretariat for the NCA, with Lt Gen. Khalid Kidwai, its director general since inception, serving as secretary.

In November 2009, the Pakistani me-

dia reported that President Zardari had 'divested himself of his powers' as chairman of the NCA, transferring them to PM Yousuf Raza Gilani. Against a historical legacy of three-cornered jockeying for power among presidents, prime ministers, and army chiefs, and given the army's unyielding domination in this arena, one is left wondering at the actual significance of this change.

Doctrinal Dichotomy

While India has a stated commitment to NFU, Pakistan has deliberately maintained an opaque nuclear posture for a long time which, in essence, seeks to keep India off balance with regard to when and under what conditions Pakistan might choose to use nuclear weapons. Certain statements made, in January 2002, by Lt Gen. Kidwai, in an interview with Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, secretary general of the Pugwash Conference have, so far, served as the sole, but deliberately imprecise, indicators of Pakistani intent in the extremely sensitive arena of nuclear deterrence.

Kidwai stated that Permissive Action Links (PALs) were not considered nec-



essary because Pakistani nuclear weapons remained in a disassembled state, but added in the same breath that the warheads could be mated 'very quickly'. Their nuclear arsenal was aimed solely at India and would be used only 'if the very existence of Pakistan as a state is at stake'. In elaboration of the last statement, he outlined four scenarios which have now come to be known as the 'Red Lines':

- ▶ India attacks Pakistan and conquers a large part of its territory.
- ▶ India destroys a large part either of its land or air forces.
- ▶ India proceeds to the economic strangling of Pakistan.
- ▶ India pushes Pakistan into political destabilisation or creates a large scale internal subversion in Pakistan.

Currently, the nuclear deterrents of the two adversaries are enveloped in a cloak of opacity, and there is a total lack of communication between those who are entrusted with conceptual and physical management of the two arsenals. This can engender nothing but mistrust and insecurity; both catalysts for an arms

A modest start could be made by establishing a jointly acceptable lexicon of 'nuclear terms' applicable in the Indo-Pak context, in order to further develop concepts of nuclear restraint

race. I have cited some of the material grounds for the unstated sub-continental arms race under way, but an examination of a few aspects of the doctrinal equation gives cause for even more uneasiness.

Both adversaries have declared their espousal of a credible 'minimum' deterrent, conveying the impression that they would be content with a small number of nuclear devices. Indian strategists, initially, offered various posture options, ranging from 'recessed' or 'de-mated' to 'non-weaponised' deterrence. India's politicians, hazy and ill at ease with the whole subject, spoke of 'a few' or 'a few tens' of nuclear weapons as sufficient to

deter a nuclear adversary. PM Vajpayee went so far as to declare in Parliament that the "fact that we have become a nuclear weapons state should be a deterrent itself."

Such talk turned out to be delusory, because when the Strategic Forces Commander considered the task of a NFU state delivering 'massive retaliation', he found the mathematics quite straightforward. He must be prepared to lose a proportion of his warheads to an enemy first strike, and then have enough remaining to inflict 'unacceptable damage' as mandated by the Doctrine. The elements of an arms race were in place; the more warheads Pakistan and/or China produced, the more we would need, for our deterrent to remain credible.

There is irony in the fact that, in public discourse, Pakistani experts now describe India's NFU undertaking as 'frivolous'. They assert that as the smaller player, Pakistan cannot declare its doctrine and must retain an element of ambiguity. At a recent Track II dialogue in Copenhagen, a former PAF Air Vice-Marshal likened the sub-continental

For ten years, we've brought technology
and defence expertise together.
To help make the world a safer place.

More at EADS.com



AIRBUS A380



EUROCOPTER EC175



A400M



EUROFIGHTER



ASTRIUM E3000



The step beyond



SMOOTH TAKE-OFF DRDO's BMD Interceptor

situation to the NATO-Warsaw Pact equation in Central Europe wherein the conventionally inferior NATO forces retained the option of graduated 'Flexible Response (FR)'. With the entry of Babur on the scene, and availability of an AIP diesel submarine, he also mentioned the need of a Pakistani 'triad' to ensure second strike capability.

RAdm. Raja Menon, India's foremost strategist makes a pertinent comment: "Pakistan's disbelief in our NFU and reliance on FR are a contradiction in terms. Surely their doctrine of falling back on a graduated FR is made possible only because they are sure that we will not launch a first strike. They must choose one option: either believe in India's NFU or act on the premise that we will launch first. Otherwise Khalid Kidwai's red lines can be termed frivolous too."

Need for Nuclear Restraint

India and Pakistan are edging dangerously close to a spiral in the growth of their nuclear weapons establishments. This could become a mindless race,

driven by mistrust and suspicion, rather than the actual needs of deterrence and stability. Even with the best command and control systems, and totally reliable personnel in place, the risks and dangers associated with maintaining large, vulnerable nuclear arsenals are too obvious to enumerate. They assume added significance, given the inexorable rise of Pakistani Taliban and kind of ethnic and sectarian polarisation taking place in that nation.

Pakistanis are at pains to convey that their strategic decision-making is rational and that there are no 'frothing at the mouth' generals across the border. The history of Indo-Pak conflicts in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999, however, shows that operational planning in Pakistan is influenced more by the wishful thinking of its mediocre politico-military leadership, and the 'hope-like-hell' factor, than by good staff-work and cold calculation. In the nuclear domain we do not want to be surprised by a lurking Pakistani Dr Strangelove.

Looking beyond the sub-continental horizon one can see a clear internation-

al thrust towards achievement of the nuclear 'Global Zero'. In this context, India and Pakistan may find themselves the maverick-duo; trying to scramble up the escalatory ladder, while the nuclear powers are steadily climbing down. For example, the UK has announced it will stockpile 'no more than 160' nuclear warheads; France has declared that it was reducing its arsenal to 'fewer than 300' and China is understood to have a stockpile of less than 200, including 130 deployed.

Conclusion

The joint Indo-Pak declaration of 1999 included a MoU in which the two foreign secretaries had agreed to engage in bilateral consultations on security concepts, and nuclear doctrines, with a view to developing measures for confidence-building in the nuclear and conventional fields. All this was, however, overtaken by the perfidy of Kargil.

Predictably, the July Indo-Pak dialogue, resumed after a 19-month hiatus, turned out to be an unmitigated disaster. Whether the talks were sabotaged by the Pak Army or wrecked by diplomatic maladroitness, the sub-continental environment is more vitiated than ever. A tense Kashmir and rising cross-border infiltration combine to make for a volatile mixture.

Such a situation renders it all the more imperative that a nuclear dialogue, insulated from the vagaries of the political and diplomatic climate, be initiated. Conducted on the lines of the Indus Water Talks, it would serve to enhance mutual trust and transparency, and reduce the danger from growing nuclear arsenals. Rising levels of confidence and transparency would also serve to dampen a nuclear arms race in the long run.

A modest start could be made by establishing a jointly acceptable lexicon of 'nuclear terms' applicable in the Indo-Pak context, in order to further develop concepts of nuclear restraint. This could be followed up by the setting up of communication centres for notifications and discussion on nuclear issues. Once this is done, many other avenues of establishing and fortifying nuclear restraint would open up.

Akin to two boxers sparring in the dark, nuclear armed India and Pakistan could bring disaster upon themselves — and others — unless they switch the lights on! ||

(The writer is a former Chief of Naval Staff, Indian Navy and a member of the National Security Advisory Board)