

Burden of Power

As India and Pakistan are poised to start bilateral talks, FORCE reproduces excerpts from an article, which first appeared in FORCE October 2003 issue.

The piece appears closest to the official Pakistan position



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Given the present state of the nuclear and missile capabilities, and the known nuclear and missile plans of India and Pakistan, the general perception is that the nuclear capability, including delivery systems, is not going to be rolled back and nor is its evolution going to be halted. From all indications both sides will continue to build up and operationalise strategic capabilities. This implies continuous and, perhaps, enhanced fissile material production, improved warhead designs, varied and more delivery systems and, of course, operational and training measures. There is also going to be a progression towards survivable assets and an assured second strike capability because this is the only way the 'first use' and the 'no first use' debate is going to be resolved. The tests in 1998 should have removed any lingering doubts that India may have had about Pakistan's grasp of nuclear and missile technology. The implications of nuclear weapons in relation to the conflict in Kashmir must therefore be understood because there have been three wars in the past over this issue. There are thoughts on the possibility of a limited war as escalation of the situation in Kashmir and of sub-conventional war moving into a nuclear exchange without the tier of a conventional war. We have recently seen India's use of its military power in a strategy of coercion even though the political and military objectives of the threatened war were never clear, and there are doubts that the coercion worked. India and Pakistan may now be slowly moving out of their 'zero dialogue' situation and there is definitely a realisation of the cost and dangers of continuing hostility and an arms race.

There is a perception that by highlighting India's growing military power Pakistan can be pressured into agreeing to compromise on issues that it considers essential to its security. Pakistan fully appreciates the economic fall-out of an arms race with India but it is also not possible for Pakistan to live in the shadow of hegemony. For Pakistan, 1971 underscored the vast asymmetry in conventional forces. And 1974 created a new imbalance in the power equation. Pakistan sought to maintain balance and deter by selective up-gradation of its conventional capability and by exploiting situations to its advantage. The nuclear factor and the advent of ballistic missiles have left Pakistan with no choice but to pursue its own deterrence – the acquisition of a credible ultimate force multiplier. In my opinion, deterrence in the sub-continent now has the follow-

ing features:

- Nuclear threat warrants a nuclear response capability.
- Nuclear capability has to be credible.
- Nuclear weapons and delivery means must be secure and survivable.
- Nuclear stockpiles could have finite limits on the basis of threat and response perceptions.
- Overwhelming conventional threat that endangers survival could lead to a nuclear exchange. Thresholds must be signalled and understood.

In Pakistan's perception, India brought the ballistic missile factor into South Asia. In fact, this was inevitable after the development of nuclear capabilities because reliance has to be on aircraft as well as missiles as delivery systems. Pakistan's restraint and reaction to Indian nuclear and missile tests has made it the easier target for sanctions, pressures and allegations. Pakistan's indigenous expertise has been grossly under estimated because of this factor. With India's forward deployment of the Prithvi missile as a starting point both sides have made advances in the production of missiles with different capabilities and have gone on to make structural and organisational arrangements for planning, control and deployment. Strategic planning has to take into consideration the characteristics of missiles. Missiles are less expensive and more effective than aircraft. Missiles once launched cannot be recalled and this makes accidental launch a catastrophic event. In the absence of any crisis management arrangement in a crisis prone area like South Asia the warning times would be extremely short. So far the technology for silos that could withstand a nuclear strike is not there in the sub continent therefore the reliance will be on mobility and dispersal with implications for command and control. It is not possible to determine whether a missile is carrying a nuclear or conventional warhead therefore the one at the receiving end will always act on a 'worst case' basis in the absence of any risk reduction contacts. In Pakistan's perception the threat from India is very real and warrants fool-proof deterrence capabilities. This perception is enhanced by the fact that India has failed to agree to any measures or steps that would place a constraint on the use of its superior military strength. The 2002 military standoff confirmed this perception especially when India initiated missile flight testing as a means of intimidating Pakistan. Pakistan's response was a clear signal that it would

not be intimidated.

This environment, and more significantly, economic considerations should encourage thinking towards taking the developing strategic capabilities to a 'leveling off' or a plateau stage in the escalation ladder. Right now, both India and Pakistan are at the stage of probing and assessing possibilities and definite steps may be premature but the contours of a strategic restraint regime could be considered. A regime of this sort was proposed by Pakistan in the past but India's response was negative, and even now the move towards such a regime would depend largely on Indian strategic thinking. The main elements that could be considered are briefly discussed here.

A conducive political climate to promote a culture of conflict resolution is an essential pre-requisite to any viable restraint regime. Dialogue between India and Pakistan that leads to a process of bilateral or tripartite negotiations for the resolution of Kashmir and other issues has to be a starting point. The bilateral imbalance may warrant an external facilitator. A dialogue for restraint may be an urgent requirement and could be started separately. Given India's concerns about China, the focus could be on Pakistan-specific capabilities but these would have to be discussed.

As the first step may take time because of India's present attitude there could be an agreement to enforce a cease fire along the Line of Control (LOC) in Kashmir and the Line of Contact in Siachen. UN or international observers could be deployed as monitors to give an objective assessment of infiltration and the cease fire. In the Siachen area there could be agreement to revert to the deployment at the end of the 1971 war. The recent cease fire proposal by President Musharraf has not been seriously considered by India. Proposals like the 'joint patrolling idea' need to be discussed so that these are not seen as attempts to extract an advantage.

The contours of a regional regime that includes reciprocal restraints on nuclear, missile and conventional force capabilities including a Joint Verification Committee or Commission (JVC) could be considered. This would mean a whole raft of 'confidence building measures' (CBMs) meant to encourage conflict resolution and reduction of tension, nuclear deterrence related to conventional force imbalance and geographic constraints, arms control measures and an institutionalised crisis management arrangement.

There could be agreement not to test or

deploy missiles beyond a certain range and above a specified payload – this could take into account the ranges and payloads already under development, for example Agni II announced by India. Limits on testing of all categories, locations of tests and a 14-day advance notice could be included. The implications of Ballistic Missile Defence could be discussed. Recent and present capabilities are already eroding the possibilities because of a lack of communications.

Nuclear weapons need to be seen realistically. There cannot be transparency on the state of preparation, assembly, locations and readiness. Segregation of nuclear capable delivery systems would make Pakistan's limited assets vulnerable. There could, however, be agreement not to move to a 'red alert' or 'mated' status without notification to the JVC that could then initiate crisis control measures.

While asymmetrical proportionate force reduction may be a future option there could be consideration of designating of 'low force zones' at some stage, strike force numbers and locations and a system of notifying and monitoring movements from peace locations to combat assem-

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blies. The existing CBMs could be improved and modified or new ones added. For example the existing CBM on notification of troop movements could lead to an expanded nonaggression agreement. This would end the First and No First Use (NFU) debate. In any case, NFU has to be backed up by other reassuring steps if it is to have any real meaning.

Nuclear Risk Reduction Centres (NRRC) could be established in both countries. These would be linked by 'hotlines' and be part of the crisis control arrangements. The JVC mentioned earlier would have representatives from both countries and could include UN or other external representatives – all CBMs could be monitored and verified by the JVC. The JVC could be specifically responsible for 'red alerts' including the acts that have led to such an alert.

While ambiguity may be accepted in certain areas there should be transparency in all measures taken for control of nuclear weapons, safety, unauthorised access and accident prevention. In the current environment there could be agreement not to

threaten war through statements, missile testing or deployment of conventional forces for war.

There are, of course, many technical aspects of nuclear risk reduction that need to be discussed and incorporated. This is an area in which advice and technical assistance from the Western states can be invaluable. Personnel reliability programmes can be reviewed and improved. Permissive Action Links (PALs) can be discussed. Surveillance and Warning systems could also be discussed in the context of the India-Pakistan environment. The thrust would be on arrangements to enhance security and to reduce the chances of miscalculations and accidents. This would lead to an environment in which non-state actors could not create misunderstandings.

The hope that overt nuclear status in the sub-continent would lead to stability in India-Pakistan relations has not materialised. This hope was based on the assumption that India's conventional superiority would be offset by Pakistan's nuclear capability and lead to an end to conflict. Kargil demonstrated that unresolved issues can lead to war and India also demonstrat-

ed this when it seized Siachen and initiated full-scale deployment for war last year. Both India and Pakistan understand thresholds realistically and will not risk a nuclear exchange. In fact, both sides do not want a war and will stop short of actually destroying the peace that has existed for the last 30 years in spite of the Kashmir situation – Kargil and the 2002 stand-off indicated this. There can be miscalculations and there can be events that trigger actions and there can be accidents under the stress of crisis situations. A strategic restraint regime that leads to risk reduction is extremely important for both India and Pakistan and is something that should be debated for future consideration. India needs to dispel the perception in Pakistan that it will not agree to any steps that even remotely constrain it from using its military instrument regardless of the environment that such thinking promotes. Pakistan too, will have reservations unless there is reciprocity at every stage. ●

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