Zachary Davis

Historian Barbara Tuchman described the trail of misperceptions and bad decisions that led to mankind's worst self-imposed disasters as a "March of Folly." Now is the time for India and Pakistan to take steps to ensure that another war or crisis between them does not result in a nuclear exchange that destroys both societies.

The prospects for rolling back India's or Pakistan's nuclear weapons programs during the Obama administration are zero. Nevertheless, the administration can help reduce the risk of nuclear war in South Asia. There is a growing recognition by New Delhi and Islamabad that a crisis, triggered by events such as the November terrorist attack in Mumbai, could escalate out of control and result in an unintended nuclear exchange. The Kargil crisis in 1999 and the 2002 cross-border attack on the Indian parliament brought the two nuclear rivals to the brink of war. Having survived two Cuban missile crises of their own, it is time India and Pakistan take steps to manage the risks inherent in their tense nuclear relationship.

War planners on each side recognize the risks of escalation, but instead of exercising caution to prevent mistakes and misunderstandings during a conflict, they have developed risky strategies they hope will enable them to fight a conventional war without crossing the nuclear threshold. India's Cold Start doctrine, formulated after the 2002 standoff to enable India to respond quickly to cross-border terrorism, is a good example of this dangerous reasoning. Under Cold Start, India would conduct quick, punishing strikes into Pakistan, hopefully without crossing Pakistan's fuzzy redlines for a nuclear response. The vague redlines include cutting off a major supply route, seizing key territory, defeating a major Pakistani military group, or blockading Karachi with Indian naval forces. Indian planners believe they can achieve a quick military victory and sue for peace without Pakistan resorting to nuclear weapons. Pakistani military strategists warn that Cold Start would cross their redlines. Despite President Asif Ali Zardari's recent off-the-cuff statement about adopting a no-first-use policy, Pakistan still depends on nuclear weapons to offset India's overwhelming conventional superiority and will use them as a last resort rather than accept military defeat resulting from an Indian invasion. Flirting with nuclear escalation is perilous business that should be avoided.

The risk of escalation is heightened by the fact that each side has deployed nuclear-capable, short-range ballistic missiles armed with conventional payloads as part of their conventional war plans. These missiles are likely to be used early in a crisis against a variety of targets. There is, however, a growing recognition that the use of these missiles in a conflict could easily be misinterpreted as a nuclear attack. A non-nuclear missile strike on an opponent's nuclear forces, or a nuclear facility despite their agreement to refrain from such attacks, or even an accident involving nuclear assets could escalate quickly and even provoke nuclear retaliation. Existing crisis-management measures, such as the underutilized hotline between New Delhi and Islamabad and the agreements to give advanced notice of nuclear accidents and missile tests, are insufficient. Negotiating the elimination of these missiles—India's liquid-fueled Prithvi I and Pakistan's Hatf I—could remove a significant risk of unintended escalation. Such an agreement could be verified, perhaps with international assistance, and pave the way for other restraints.

For example, the "restraint regime" discussed with U.S. officials after the 1998 tests would lengthen the nuclear fuse by establishing a formal agreement to codify the current practice of keeping nuclear
warheads separate from missile airframes. Movements of warheads from declared locations would set off alarm bells and hopefully trigger efforts to cool down the crisis. Other risk-reduction options could include negotiated protocols to prevent incidents at sea, as India and Pakistan each plan to add a sea leg to their nuclear triads, and an agreement not to deploy nuclear weapons in provocative border locations such as Kashmir. Such arrangements do not address the root causes of insecurity but can add transparency and predictability to a potentially volatile relationship.

These modest first steps are aimed at preventing an accidental or unintended nuclear exchange and starting the bilateral arms control process. The next steps should focus on finding mutually beneficial arms restraints and codifying acceptable force asymmetries that increase the stability of their deterrent relationship. Such restraints might include limits on missile defenses, a ban on multiple warhead missiles, and a cap on the numbers of some deployed delivery systems, such as the extended-range Shaheens and Agnis. The professed adherence by both sides to the goal of minimum nuclear deterrence should make limitations of this sort acceptable, if not desirable. Eventually, these steps could lay the groundwork for someday reducing nuclear arsenals when India and Pakistan are able to resolve the disputes that underlie their enmity. Yet, the place to start is with quiet diplomacy to help South Asia's nuclear rivals craft bilateral agreements to prevent the fog of war from producing an accidental nuclear catastrophe.

As India and Pakistan reach new levels of nuclear maturity, they also inherit responsibilities to promote regional and global nuclear stability. The Obama administration should mount a renewed effort to bring India and Pakistan into the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and revisit the debate over the proposed fissile material cutoff treaty (FMCT). The prospects for overcoming opposition to the CTBT rest heavily on persuading India's hard-line nationalists that joining the CTBT in no way diminishes India's nuclear status but rather enhances it by including India as one of the nations that has tested nuclear weapons. Pakistan would likely follow. The prospects for progress on an FMCT, however, were dimmed by the U.S.-Indian nuclear agreement, which stiffened Islamabad's resistance to a cutoff due to an assessment that such a treaty would lock Pakistan into permanent inferiority compared with India's larger stockpile of weapons-usable materials. The uphill battle to include South Asia in an FMCT might have to wait until both sides have produced mutually agreed stockpiles of weapons-usable materials. China will also have to support the treaty and endorse stockpile limits. Negotiations on stockpile limits, however, could start right away, and preliminary verification measures could also be explored. The initial bilateral visits to nuclear facilities that led to a bilateral safeguards regime between Argentina and Brazil might serve as a model to develop verification protocols.

Finally, the Obama administration should continue the successful programs that help India and Pakistan implement effective export controls and improve the security of ports and borders. More could be done to promote best practices in nuclear (and biological) safety and security. Still, the top priority for arms control should be bilateral agreements that address the two countries' shared interest in preventing nuclear war.
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