

Toward a Nuclear Freeze in South Asia

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Ten years ago this month, tens of thousands of Indian and Pakistani soldiers faced off in a confrontation over the disputed Kashmir region. If not for intensive U.S.-led crisis diplomacy, that standoff and another in 2002 could have led to war between the two nuclear-armed rivals.

Since then, Indian and Pakistani nuclear and missile stockpiles have grown even larger, and the underlying conditions for conflict still persist. Indian military planners foolishly believe they can engage in and win a limited conventional conflict without triggering a nuclear exchange even though the Pakistani army's strategy relies on nuclear weapons to offset India's overwhelming conventional superiority.

Unfortunately, U.S. policymakers downplayed regional nonproliferation and risk-reduction priorities in the pursuit of other objectives. Beginning with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's visit to India this month, the United States should help to re-establish nuclear restraint and arms control as a top priority for the region.

Despite its struggle against extremists inside its own borders, the Pakistani army sees India as its main adversary. Pakistan is expanding its uranium-enrichment capabilities and building two new plutonium-production reactors for weapons purposes even though it already possesses enough fissile material for 60-80 bombs.

One excuse for Pakistan's ongoing buildup is the U.S.-Indian nuclear cooperation initiative. Approved last year, the deal exempts New Delhi from long-standing restrictions on civil nuclear trade in exchange for India's promise to refrain from nuclear testing and support a global ban on fissile material production for weapons, among other nonproliferation commitments. The deal gives India access to global nuclear fuel markets, freeing up its limited domestic uranium supplies for use exclusively in weapons production. India has enough fissile material for well more than 100 bombs.

India and Pakistan each claim to want only a "minimal credible deterrent," but the end of their nuclear and missile buildup is not in sight. Indian and Pakistani support for negotiations on a global fissile material cutoff treaty (FMCT) is weak at best.

Ambassador Nirupama Rao said May 29 that New Delhi would allow multilateral talks to begin but would "not accept obligations" that hinder India's "strategic program" or research and development or those that "place an undue burden on our military nonproscribed activities." That, of course, is the very purpose of an FMCT.

Nor have the two states moved closer to a legally binding test ban since Washington persuaded them to declare testing moratoria in 1999. In recent months, Pakistani and Indian officials have said they have no plans to join the United States and China as signatories to the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Given the billions of dollars of U.S. military aid flowing into Pakistan and India's commitments made in the context of the nuclear cooperation deal, the Obama administration can and should use its leverage to put the brakes on their nuclear arms race. As Clinton suggested in a June 20 speech, the nuclear deal "can and should also serve as the foundation of a productive partnership on

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nonproliferation."

For his part, Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon said June 3 that India would "welcome real action toward nuclear disarmament" and "will work with our partners internationally towards that objective." Now that President Barack Obama has jump-started global disarmament efforts and pledged to engage other states in the effort, India and Pakistan must do their part by embracing rather than rejecting commonsense nuclear arms control strategies.

A good starting point would be for India to invite Pakistan and China to halt fissile production for weapons pending the conclusion of a global FMCT. India, which has more than enough separated fissile material to maintain a large nuclear deterrent force, would win wide international acclaim for the proposal and remove the rationale for Pakistan's fissile buildup.

The Obama administration can nudge New Delhi along by strictly adhering to a key provision of the implementing legislation for the nuclear cooperation deal. That provision requires a report to Congress by the end of this year and each year thereafter that assesses whether India has or has not increased unsafeguarded fissile material production.

Clinton should not hesitate to put the CTBT back on the U.S.-Indian bilateral agenda. She should urge her Indian counterparts to reiterate Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's 1998 commitment that India would not be among the last states standing in the way of the treaty's entry into force.

New Delhi is clearly not yet ready to sign the CTBT, but it is not in its strategic interests to resume nuclear testing. As then-Sen. Obama (D-Ill.) said on the floor of the Senate on November 16, 2006, "[I]n the event of a future nuclear test by the Government of India, nuclear power reactor fuel and equipment sales, and nuclear technology cooperation would terminate."

It may be difficult for the Obama team to nudge India and Pakistan toward greater nuclear restraint, but failure to bring about change risks the most severe nuclear proliferation consequences in the years ahead.

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