South Asia Is A More Dangerous Place After the 1998 Nuclear Tests

Thirteen years after the May 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear test explosions, South Asia is a more dangerous place.

India's May 11 and 13 nuclear test explosions were its first since its inaugural nuclear weapons test in 1974. Pakistan responded soon thereafter and conducted its first nuclear weapons test detonations (five) on May 28 in the Chagai Hills region.

The nuclear tests immediately increased tensions in the region and shocked the world. In India and Pakistan, the test stirred up an orgy of nuclear nationalism in some quarters and prompted protest in others. Leaders in capitals around the globe responded with a chorus of calls for nuclear restraint on the part of both New Delhi and Islamabad.

In the aftermath of the tit-for-tat test explosions, the United States joined other United Nations Security Council members to approve Resolution 1172, which calls upon New Delhi and Islamabad to refrain from further nuclear testing and fissile material production and join international nuclear nonproliferation mainstream by signing and ratifying the CTBT.

But in the years since, both countries have expanded their nuclear arsenals and developed a wider range of delivery systems. The two countries barely avoided open war after border clashes and cross-border terror attacks in 1999, 2002, and 2008. The risk of a border skirmish that leads to a devastating nuclear exchange is still very real.

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.

Pakistan's development and recent testing of nuclear-capable short-range missiles is a destabilizing and potentially dangerous development. It suggests that Pakistan would seriously contemplate use on the battlefield in the event of an incursion by Indian forces.

During the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, military and political leaders realized that the use of nuclear weapons could not be limited to the battlefield and that even so-called battlefield nuclear weapons would have devastating impacts as these weapons are often far larger than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The fact that Osama bin Laden and the Taliban have been operating within Pakistan's borders,
perhaps with support from the ISI, only underscores the risk that extremists may infiltrate some part of Pakistan's vast nuclear weapons establishment and compromise the security of the nuclear material, nuclear weapons technology, or even the nuclear weapons.

While Pakistan's military and civilian leadership is well aware of the risk and is taking steps to maintain nuclear security, even the best efforts can fail. In the event of a conflict with India, the command and control of Pakistan's nuclear assets could break down.

As senior White House Coordinator Gary Samore commented in an interview published in the May 2011 issue of Arms Control Today:

"The Pakistani government takes the nuclear security threat very seriously, and they've put a lot of resources into trying to make sure that their nuclear facilities and materials and weapons are well secured. What I worry about is that, in the context of broader tensions and problems within Pakistani society and polity ... even the best nuclear security measures might break down."

The security of South Asia's nuclear-armed neighbors depends on nuclear restraint and rapprochement on Pakistan's and India's. Both countries already have more than enough nuclear firepower to deter a bolt-from-the-blue nuclear attack by the other, and in the case of India, from China. Each country has enough fissile material for about 100 or more nuclear warheads and the missiles and aircraft to deliver the weapons in the region.

Further fissile material production only increases the nuclear security burden and increases the risk of diversion to terrorists or third countries. And the risk of a border war or another crisis resulting from a cross-border terrorist attack an Indian response to a border attack is still very real and such an event could easily escalate and trigger a nuclear exchange affecting hundreds of millions of people.

The past decade has shown that it is extremely difficult to encourage India and Pakistan to exercise nuclear restraint unilaterally. Rather, international approaches that apply to all nuclear-armed states, such as the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), are likely to be more effective than a regional approach.

Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Ellen O. Tauscher underscored the importance of the CTBT for nuclear security in Asia in a May 10 speech on "The Case for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty." Tauscher said, in part:

"... a CTBT that has entered into force will hinder other states from advancing their nuclear weapons capabilities. Were the CTBT to enter into force, states interested in pursuing or advancing a nuclear weapons program would risk either deploying weapons that might not work or incur international condemnation and sanctions for testing."

"While states can build a crude first generation nuclear weapon without conducting nuclear explosive tests, they would have trouble going further, and they probably wouldn't even know for certain the yield of the weapon they built. More established nuclear weapons states could not, with any confidence, deploy advanced nuclear weapon capabilities that deviated significantly from previously tested designs without explosive testing," Tauscher explained.

"Nowhere would these constraints be more relevant than in Asia, where you see states building up and modernizing their forces," Tauscher said. "A legally binding prohibition on all nuclear explosive testing would help reduce the chances of a potential regional arms race in the years and decades to come."

Today, leaders in New Delhi and Islamabad may not yet ready to sign the CTBT, but it is not in its strategic interests of either state to resume nuclear testing.

U.S. leadership on the CTBT is critical to moving the other hold-out states, including China, to ratify the treaty and to put the spotlight on others, including India and Pakistan, to sign and ratify.
As Gary Samore noted in his comments in the May issue of *Arms Control Today*, the CTBT "serves U.S. national security interests by giving us one tool to help constrain the nuclear buildup in Asia. I do believe that if the U.S. ratified the CTBT, it's likely that China, India, and Pakistan would all ratify."

In the meantime, leaders from the United States and other global powers should urge their 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 and encourage Pakistan's leadership to recommit to joining the CTBT if India does.

Now is the time to act to slow and reverse the nuclear arms race in Asia. Failure to do so risks the most severe nuclear proliferation consequences in the years ahead.