

Pugwash Workshop on

Avoiding an India-Pakistan Nuclear Confrontation

Lahore, Pakistan, 11-12 March 2003

Workshop Report by Samina Ahmed

The workshop's primary objective was to assess the threat of an India-Pakistan nuclear confrontation and to identify ways of preventing such a conflict. The workshop's deliberations and discussions reflected a range of mainly Pakistani perceptions on the potential of an India-Pakistan conventional conflict and possible nuclear escalation. India and Pakistan's nuclear doctrines and directions were analyzed with the objective of identifying ways of minimizing nuclear risks. Finally, the workshop examined options of resuming a dialogue between the two nuclear-armed neighbors.



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The workshop was attended by 32 participants from five countries. Pugwash expresses its thanks to the Pakistan Pugwash Group for hosting the meeting, and to Ambassador Aziz Ahmad Khan of the Foreign Ministry of Pakistan for facilitating many of the logistics of the meeting

Avoiding a Pakistan-India nuclear confrontation

From December 2001 until July 2002, Indian and Pakistani forces confronted each other across the international border and along the Line of Control. Concerned about the potential for a conventional conflict that could escalate to the nuclear level, the

United States played a pro-active role in walking both states back from the brink of war. Although the withdrawal of troops from offensive positions has reduced the prospects of imminent conflict, India and Pakistan's cold war continues unabated. India refuses to resume a dialogue with Pakistan until it takes decisive steps to end all "cross border infiltration" into Indian Kashmir. Insisting on the centrality of the Kashmir dispute for the resolution of India-Pakistan tensions, Pakistan continues to support the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir. In the absence of high-level and institutionalized contacts between India and Pakistan, the risk of a conventional conflict remains high. While the potential for conflict escalation to the nuclear level might appear low, the very fact that it cannot be ruled out underscores the importance of minimizing nuclear risks. Clearly, the resumption of an India-Pakistan dialogue is the first step towards crisis de-escalation.

Nuclear doctrines and deterrence stability

There was near unanimity among participants that tensions between India and Pakistan are at their highest since their last war in 1971. However, many believed that the current diplomatic standoff, defined by one participant as a mutually assured deadlock, would not result in armed conflict. This confidence was based on the belief that a stable nuclear deterrence is already in place. The discussion on deterrence stability focused on India and Pakistan's nuclear doctrines and controls, covering, among other issues, the advantages of doctrinal transparency versus opacity and first use over no-first use postures.

Nuclear optimists supported opacity on the grounds that declared thresholds and redlines undermine operational flexibility and increase nuclear risks during crises. Proponents of opacity also argued that transparency only works in the absence of conflict and with at least a semblance of communications between nuclear adversaries. Absent these preconditions, as in the case of India and Pakistan, transparency can be counterproductive. In any case, nuclear doctrines are often misleading and at variance with operational plans. By keeping deterrence vague and by avoiding explication of red lines, Pakistan can also avoid a nuclear arms race with India and keep its weapons un-deployed. This nuclear restraint, reflected in Pakistan's policy of minimum nuclear deterrence, has helped to buttress nuclear crisis stability in South Asia.

However, the impact of bilateral tensions and suspicions on India and Pakistan's nuclear directions were evident in the discussion on nuclear and conventional force structures. While one participant pointed out the links between India's conventional spending and Pakistan's nuclear directions, others believed that a nuclear triad in India would force Pakistan to follow suit. Disputing the argument made by a participant that

economic constraints would prevent Pakistani arms racing, others stressed that a nuclear arms race already exists. The Chinese factor would also make it near impossible for India and Pakistan to reach an agreement on what would constitute a minimum nuclear deterrent.

In fact, Pakistan's emphasis on opacity and its rejection of a no-first use doctrine reflects its concerns about conventional inferiority vis-à-vis India. Nuclear opacity and nuclear weapons capability are regarded as means of deterring conventional war. Senior officials have implied that Pakistan could resort to nuclear use in the event of an Indian attack, conventional or nuclear, on its territory. However, Pakistan refuses to officially define its nuclear threshold even as it rejects nuclear first use. While a nuclear no-first-use policy was a luxury for Pakistan, a participant pointed out, India would likely reverse its no-first-use posture during a military conflict. In any case, India has already revised that policy to cover other unconventional attacks by weapons of mass destruction on Indian troops within or outside Indian territory.

Critics of opacity warned that deterrence stability would elude South Asia in the absence of greater doctrinal transparency and clarity. A participant stressed that transparency is an important element of predictability. It is therefore an inherent element of policy if the primary objective of nuclear weapons capability is to deter conflict. Pakistan shunned a declared nuclear doctrine, implied one participant, since Pakistan military circles believed that nuclear weapons were indeed instruments of war fighting, to be used against high value targets during the course of conflict. A nuclear proponent who made the argument that Pakistan's nuclear doctrine did not rule out pre-emption in the event of even a conventional attack on its territory inadvertently supported this thesis.

Conventional confrontation and possible nuclear escalation

Since India and Pakistan's cold peace threatens to deteriorate into a hot war, it is important to assess the potential of a conventional conflict escalating to the nuclear level. Four major crises have occurred since India and Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons capability. These recurrent crises show, said one participant, that the assumptions on which nuclear deterrence is based in South Asia lack substance; that both sides have repeatedly resorted to irresponsible nuclear brinkmanship; and, depending on external actors, mainly the United States to pull them back from the nuclear brink, Indian and Pakistani leaders have been desensitized by these multiple crises to the dangers of future conflict. Moreover, in Pakistan's case, the utility of nuclear weapons goes further than deterrence since nuclear weapons capability is used to advance Pakistan's strategic goals in Kashmir.

Countering these arguments, other participants argued that the manner in which earlier crises were successfully contained is proof of the relative stability of nuclear deterrence in South Asia. The 1990 crisis, for instance, was resolved because Pakistan conveyed and India accepted as credible the threat of nuclear use. In 2002, war was prevented and India forced to withdraw its troops from offensive positions along the international border and the Line of Control in Kashmir because of Pakistan's coercive nuclear diplomacy. Another participant added that the 2002 crisis, the most severe between the two states since the 1971 war, was prevented because of four factors: Pakistan's nuclear weapons capability; international pressure on both India and Pakistan; Pakistani restraint; and India's successful coercive diplomacy that forced President Musharraf to ban a number of militant groups operating across the Line of Control. Dismissing the proposition that Pakistan's nuclear deterrent had prevented India from escalating the 2002 crisis, and linking crisis de-escalation instead to Indian restraint, another participant warned that enhanced Indian legitimacy in Jammu and Kashmir following the 2002 state elections, a buoyant economy, and the BJP government's aggressive mindset could collectively tempt India to up the ante for Pakistan.

Concerns were also voiced that the post-11 September international environment has adversely affected nuclear deterrence in South Asia, both in terms of the evolution of terrorism and the ways in which India reacts and mobilizes its forces. Regardless of divergent assessments of nuclear deterrence stability, there was consensus that India-Pakistan crises could keep on recurring because of the linkage between political disputes and military strategies. Divergent Indian and Pakistani policies towards Kashmir and attempts to challenge the status quo increase the risk of war. Nuclear capability is here to stay in South Asia, said a participant, but it is embedded in and must be detached from India and Pakistan's political relationship. If Pakistan continues with its efforts to compel India to negotiate on Kashmir through subconventional warfare, increasing costs might compel India to respond militarily. Indian and Pakistani attitudes towards nuclear weapons are maturing, noted another, but they don't have the luxury of a long maturation process to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used. A more optimistic participant believed that nuclear weapons capabilities might have made conflict resolution more difficult, but nuclear deterrence has facilitated conflict prevention.

Nuclear risks and risk reduction

Indian and Pakistani officials have repeatedly assured the international community that their nuclear assets are not threatened because of secure command and control systems and foolproof safeguards of fissile materials and warheads. While many participants expressed concerns about accidental or inadvertent use, they also believed that existing nuclear safeguards and Material Protection Control and Accounting (MPC and A) could adequately protect India and Pakistan's nuclear assets. Hence, they resisted suggestions that Pakistan and India adopt a broader, cooperative approach to threat reduction. Apart from cooperation in best practices, these suggestions included a bilateral India-Pakistan dialogue on nuclear risk reduction; utilizing IAEA practices in civilian facilities under full-scope safeguards and transferring that knowledge to military installations; learning from precedents, particularly in the Russian-US context; and benefiting from non-intrusive measures such as transfers of security technologies through turn-key kits, as in the case of the US-Russian relationship. US supplied kits are installed by Russia, eliminating the need for physical intrusion by the US government, companies and experts. Some exchanges of best safeguard practices are already underway with the US. These include track two activities such as visits to US facilities like the Cooperative Monitoring Center at Sandia National Laboratories.

Given Pakistan and India's opaque nuclear weapons programs and their status as nonnuclear weapons states within the NPT regime, not surprisingly the discussion on cooperative approaches to threat reduction included concerns about US intentions as well as opposition to physical intrusion. The US-Russian loose nukes initiative aims at securing Russia's nuclear assets, said a participant. Pakistan is not recognized as a nuclear weapons state and would therefore oppose such intrusive US involvement. Other participants pointed out that Pakistani stockpiles of enriched fissile material were too small to warrant such cooperation with the US, which was thus far limited to best practices. Insider threats and the diversion of nuclear materials were also discounted on the grounds of adequate safeguards and security. Participants were reminded that insider threats must be taken seriously by all nuclear-capable states. The value of lessons learnt from outside one's own experience and the benefits of cooperation in safeguarding stockpiles and warheads were also reiterated. Defense officials, said a participant, don't always have all the answers and hence the importance of high-level political and military exchanges to understand the gravity of these issues.

Some participants defended the robustness of Pakistani command and control. Since a National Command and Control authority was well in place, they argued, the dangers of accidental, unauthorized, or inadvertent use were minimal. However, even nuclear optimists admitted that false warning and panic launchings could pose a threat, particularly at time of crises. Deterrence stability will be ensured, said a participant, if both sides are reasonably sure that their nuclear assets are survivable; if they do not use them as instruments of coercion; and if they do not panic in case of a false alarm. The importance of non-deployment, knowledge of mutual capabilities and effective signaling of intentions, particularly during crises, were added to this list of nuclear

'dos'. Others, however, warned that poor intelligence and weak, insecure command and control structures and centralized command increased pressures for dispersal and delegation to commanders in the field, and hence heightened risks of unauthorized or inadvertent use. While there was unanimity about the importance of good intelligence to prevent war by miscalculation, a participant advocated a technical dialogue between India and Pakistan warning about the poor quality of intelligence.

Linkages between nuclear risks and informed nuclear decisionmaking were also explored. It is intellectual arrogance, said a participant, to assume that military and intelligence services fully comprehend the dynamics of crisis escalation. Nuclear adventurism would be forestalled if the political leadership and the public fully comprehended the implications of nuclear war. In both India and Pakistan, the public is poorly informed and political leaders are ill advised by the bureaucracies that control the nuclear weapons establishment. Apart from the need of greater public understanding of nuclear risks, governments must refrain from using the nuclear card to gain domestic legitimacy and to justify defense and foreign policy directions. Leaders must understand the importance of preventing misunderstandings that could result in nuclear escalation during crises and ensure that avenues of communication are kept open. There is also a need for a rigorous policy debate between the civil and military leadership on means of bolstering crisis stability. In Pakistan, said a participant, civilian leaders have thus far, despite official claims, been largely excluded from nuclear decision making by a military establishment that controls the country's nuclear assets. Above all, Indian and Pakistani officials must rethink the premise that there is little risk of crisis escalation since past conventional crises have been effectively contained. In the absence of doctrinal transparency, it would take just one misunderstanding for a future crisis to spin irrevocably out of control.

India and Pakistan were warned that their nuclear weapons do not ensure security since they have little grounds for confidence in their first strike capability; they were reminded of the nuclear risks that the United States and the Soviet Union confronted during the height of the Cold War, and that the US and Russia still face such risks despite technologically superior nuclear risk reduction mechanisms and procedures. The importance of pursuing the goal of nuclear disarmament through Article VI of the NPT was also emphasized in response to a comment that a South Asian nuclear rollback was not in the cards. An alternative proposal to the NPT regime was presented. Under the aegis of the UN Security Council, all nuclear weapons states would commit themselves to a time-bound process of nuclear disarmament; non-nuclear states would not be permitted to acquire nuclear weapons; failure to comply would result in inspections; and a failure to comply would be countered by UN Security Council authorized use of force.

Resuming an India-Pakistan dialogue

The rapidly deteriorating relationship between India and Pakistan underscores the importance of a resumed dialogue but neither state appears willing to compromise. Pakistan continues to insist on the centrality of the Kashmir dispute for the resolution of India-Pakistan tensions and is equally adamant in its support for anti-Indian Kashmiri groups, although it insists that its support is limited to political and diplomatic measures. Equally insistent that Kashmir's inclusion in the Indian Union is legitimate, and amply demonstrated by Kashmiri participation in Jammu and Kashmir's 2002 state elections, India accuses Pakistan of supporting cross-border terrorism in the disputed territory. While India refuses to resume a dialogue with Pakistan until all Pakistani-sponsored cross-border militancy ceases, Pakistan rejects Indian allegations as cynical attempts to exploit international concerns about terrorism in the post-11 September international environment.

The extent to which the bilateral relationship is marred by mutual mistrust, suspicion, and hostility is evident in the ways in which some participants viewed Indian policies towards Pakistan. Reading India's refusal to resume a diplomatic dialogue as the continuation of conflict through political and psychological means, a participant said that the BJP government's objectives were to undermine the Pakistani economy; to force Pakistan to accept Indian hegemony; and to gain and consolidate its control over Kashmir. Other participants believed that India had already successfully pressured Pakistan to make concessions, referring to President Musharraf's ban on several extremist organizations, as a result of military coercion and diplomatic pressure. The dangers of an Indian pre-emptive strike against Pakistan were also raised (author's note: soon after the Iraq war began on 19 March 2003, India's Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha said that India had a better case to initiate a pre-emptive strike against Pakistan than the United States had against Iraq).

Although most participants agreed that India and Pakistan would stand to gain from a resumed dialogue, not least because it would minimize the risks of conflict, the Kashmir issue was perceived as the most serious challenge to the normalization of relations. The issue, said a participant, was not one of initiating a dialogue but of strategic change, which India translates into an end to militancy within Kashmir and Pakistan construes as Indian willingness to enter into negotiations on the Kashmir dispute. If only procedural talks were held, then the process would prove as unproductive as prior dialogues such as Lahore (1999) and Agra (2001). While some participants believed that India was exploiting the issue of cross border terrorism to avoid negotiations, others warned of the political, diplomatic, and military costs for Pakistan if it failed to rethink its priorities in Kashmir. India, said a participant, was not only more optimistic about containing the militancy within Kashmir through

political and military means but was also the beneficiary of international support, while Pakistan was increasingly isolated. The international community, warned another participant, will not countenance militants who target civilians. Pakistan should thus restrict its support to Kashmiri political forces, best placed to mobilize the Kashmiri people and to assert political pressure on India.

The change in government in Islamabad was seen as both a constraint and an opportunity to the resumption of an India-Pakistan dialogue: a hindrance because of Indian aversion to continued military dominance in Pakistan and an opportunity because it was at the very least a political opening. Despite some skepticism about the utility of an official as opposed to a people-to-people approach, a number of concrete measures and mechanisms were identified to facilitate conditions for the resumption of official talks and to ensure their success. Three 'don'ts' were identified: don't wait for the ideal time to engage since that would only benefit spoilers; don't set preconditions for negotiations; don't accuse each other or else negotiations are bound to fail; and a possible fourth don't: don't leave negotiations to military or civil bureaucrats. Highlighting the role of spoilers, another participant warned that the military-industrial complex in both India and Pakistan had a vested interest in conflict and would thus oppose the normalization of relations.

Concluding thoughts

While differences were voiced over an agenda that would reflect the Lahore or the Agra processes, there was general agreement on the need for quiet, low profile official talks and for sufficient groundwork to precede a high level summit. However, a dissenting voice warned that only summit level talks between the political leadership would neutralize spoilers who, given the opportunity, would try to derail the process. There was also consensus that multi-tiered processes would prove most constructive, including track two activities, a government-to-government dialogue and the use of multilateral regional forums such as the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). A number of participants believed that influential international actors, in particular the United States but also Russia and China, could play a meaningful role, not necessarily as mediators but as facilitators.

A wish list of useful initiatives included the following:

- Restoration of normal diplomatic links at the level of High Commissioner;
- Resumed communications links, including rail, road and air links;
- Implementation of existing Confidence Building Measures;
- Revival of trade and commerce:

- Adoption of a composite agenda, based on the Lahore/and or Agra summits, that would include the Kashmir dispute and nuclear risk reduction measures;
- Resumption of political to political contacts;
- Ceasefire and monitoring of the Line of Control;
- Pakistan's adherence to its public pledges of providing only political support to Kashmiris and an end of support for militancy;
- Indian reduction of military forces and acceptance of human rights monitors within Kashmir.

As expected, the greatest divergence of views concerned measures and mechanisms regarding the Kashmir issue. There were differences on mechanisms for monitoring the Ceasefire Line (from Pakistan's international to India's bilateral approach) and of blame (India's emphasis on Pakistani-sponsored cross-border terrorism and Pakistan's on India's forcible occupation of Jammu and Kashmir). These are only some of the hurdles that hinder the resumption of an India-Pakistan dialogue and a sustainable peace. Advocating a middle path, some participants emphasized the need for reciprocity, asking Indian reciprocity for Pakistan's steps, no matter how limited, in curbing cross-border incursions, and Pakistani reciprocity to India's troop demobilization and removal of restrictions on the use of airspace. A failure to compromise, they warned, would only result in tactical gains but strategic losses for both states. Undoubtedly, the stakes will remain unbearably high so long as there is a risk of an armed conflict between the two nuclear-capable adversaries.

Final Participant List



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Mr. Robert S. McNamara, former U.S. Secretary of Defense; former President of the World Bank; former President, Ford Motor Company

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