

**MOEED YUSUF**

E-mail: myusuf@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.3834

**ASHLEY PANDYA**

E-mail: ashley.pandya@gmail.com

## The Quest for Nuclear Disarmament in South Asia: A Reality Check

### Summary

- Pakistan and India are defying the global trend toward reduction in nuclear arsenals.
- Both countries are expanding their arsenals and are unlikely to jump on the disarmament bandwagon.
- There are several reasons for this grim prognosis: both have active conflicts and recurring crises; Pakistan's nuclear deterrent is tied to India's conventional strength and thus it will not consider nuclear disarmament until New Delhi reduces its conventional arsenal; neither India, nor Pakistan will be comfortable with their nuclear strength in the near future; their official stances on global non-proliferation initiatives complicate matters; and the world has failed to do its bit to lure these two states to the non-proliferation regime.
- Indian and Pakistani concerns about the current global non-proliferation protocols need to be addressed.
- Equally important, efforts should be made to enhance strategic stability in South Asia; crisis prevention and crisis management protocols are critical in this regard.

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### Pakistan and India: Defying the Global Nuclear Trend

Ever since the famous 'Gang of Four' voiced their desire to achieve Global Zero<sup>1</sup>—a world free of nuclear weapons—the disarmament drive has gathered momentum. While experts remain cautious about expecting too much in the short run, most agree that the newfound emphasis on this issue will intensify pressure on nuclear weapon states to reconsider their positions and reduce their nuclear arsenals.

South Asia stands out as the lone exception, as India and Pakistan continue to expand their arsenals. Reversal is unlikely; nuclear disarmament seems impractical and unrealistic. In fact, the world would do well just to encourage these two countries to maintain a stable strategic equation that keeps them and the entire region from the brink of a catastrophe.

Since first testing nuclear weapons in 1998, India and Pakistan have built up modest arsenals. While estimates vary greatly, Pakistan today is believed to have 70-90 warheads compared to India's 60-80.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, both possess a variety of nuclear capable missile batteries. Most worrisome is the fact that both parties remain outside the mainstream discussion on global non-proliferation: neither is a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and neither has signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Further, while both are members of the United Nations

Conference on Disarmament, their role has not always been constructive. Pakistan, for instance, is blamed for stalling the ongoing negotiations on a global Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT) while India maintains that it will only join if the treaty is universal.

## Why India and Pakistan Will Not Disarm

There are a number of reasons for our pessimism regarding the possibility of disarmament in South Asia. To begin with, Pakistan and India are the only two nuclear-armed states where outstanding disputes remain active and heightened tensions are the norm. Since nuclearization in 1998, the two have experienced one limited confrontation and at least two near-war crises. Limited wars against each other are considered permissible even under the nuclear umbrella. Pakistan initiated a limited war in Kargil in 1999 and India has since developed a Pakistan-specific war doctrine—the ‘Cold Start’—specifically so that its military forces can mobilize and attack Pakistan without crossing its nuclear red lines. Not to forget, Pakistan remains deeply discontent with the status quo in Kashmir, the principal bone of contention between the two countries and thus is interested in altering it. In the past, Pakistan has used proxies to wage its fight against India. To add to the conundrum, anti-India non-state militants have carved out their own space and have demonstrated the ability to trigger crises on their own. In this environment, the nuclear capability is seen as a necessary deterrent against an adversary’s full-fledged hostility. Especially for Pakistan, the conventionally weaker party, nuclear weapons provide the ultimate guarantee to deter Indian aggression even if it is in response to Pakistani or militant provocation.

The difficulty in the South Asian case is compounded by Pakistan’s explicit linkage of deterrence to India’s conventional military strength. Pakistan does not espouse a ‘No First Use’ policy when it comes to employing nuclear weapons and it is adamant that any talk of nuclear arms reduction and disarmament will have to be linked to the differential between Pakistani and Indian conventional capabilities. Being the weaker party, Pakistan’s choice is rational in terms of making its deterrent threat credible; it can threaten to use nuclear weapons early on in a crisis, thus raising the costs of any aggressive behavior by India. Yet, from a disarmament perspective, this is bad news. For disarmament to become a serious option, both sides will have to agree to reverse their nuclear trends and India will also have to consider conventional arms reductions to satisfy Pakistan. This is implausible given New Delhi’s global ambitions and its constant referral to China as the principal military concern in years to come.

Furthermore, neither India nor Pakistan is confident about its present nuclear capabilities. In fact, both are far from a level of nuclear strength that is likely to satisfy their perceived requirements and overall ambitions. Indeed, their future plans point to a steep growth trajectory. Both are still thinking in terms of ‘numbers’ of nuclear warheads, missiles, and amount of fissile material; this points to a danger that they may fall into a tit-for-tat rivalry. Both are set to pursue a sea-based deterrent as the ultimate guarantor of an assured second strike capability. India is also seeking a Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) shield in the not-so-distant future. Such high-end purchases will force Pakistan to expand its offensive capability further; the overall effect will be increased strategic instability in South Asia. In essence, we are looking at well over a decade before these two powers will be satisfied with their respective nuclear capabilities.

India and Pakistan’s official stances on nuclear arms control and disarmament provide no hope either. Pakistan has persisted with its India-specific argument, contending that New Delhi will have to take the lead on all major global arms control and disarmament measures. India’s position has simply been to deflect the onus of responsibility on the five major nuclear powers. Moreover, New Delhi maintains that its force modernization is targeted toward China, not as much toward

Pakistan. The implication is that India can expand its conventional and nuclear capabilities far beyond its requirements to deter or challenge Pakistan simply by changing its object of reference. However, for Pakistan, India's capabilities matter regardless of its stated intentions, and thus it feels obliged to respond to India's upgrades by its own expansion or through more aggressive force postures and doctrines.

The international community, especially the recognized nuclear weapon states, has also contributed to the intensification of India and Pakistan's nuclear rivalry. The persistence of a discriminatory global nuclear regime and the lack of sincerity toward disarmament among the major powers have allowed the two sides to deflect international pressure with ease. Moreover, 12 years have elapsed since these two countries first tested nuclear weapons but the world has yet to pay any serious attention to the need to formally integrate them into the global non-proliferation regime. They enjoy the military and diplomatic benefits of being nuclear armed states, and yet they are not constrained by non-proliferation obligations like the rest of the NPT members.

Policies that have discriminated between these two countries have also proved counterproductive. The most recent example is the Indo-U.S. civil nuclear deal whose India-specific exceptions have antagonized Pakistan and prompted it to actively seek similar arrangements for itself. It has also reinforced Pakistan's desire to enhance its fissile material stockpile to counter the expanded Indian capacity—the Indo-U.S. deal frees up India's indigenous uranium by providing fuel guarantees—for fissile material production.

## Prospects for Nuclear Disarmament in South Asia

The international community must remain realistic in terms of what can be achieved in nuclear South Asia. The goal of nuclear disarmament is certainly a worthy one; Pakistan and India should not be exempt from the normative pressure. However, there should also be an equivalent, if not greater, emphasis on crisis prevention and management. This approach will keep the disarmament debate alive within the region while reducing the chances for crises to spiral out of control.

### Arms Control and Disarmament

- The global drive toward nuclear disarmament must progress substantially before serious pressure can be brought to bear on India and Pakistan. Otherwise, given their active conflicts, South Asian states can make a much better case for holding on to nuclear weapons than any of the other nuclear states. The fates of U.S., Chinese, Indian and Pakistani programs are linked by a vertical chain. A top-down movement toward disarmament is the most probable way to realize a nuclear free South Asia.
- In the meantime, there is an urgent need to pull the two sides formally into the legal non-proliferation ambit through a multilateral arrangement. The NPT + 2 (or +3 if Israel, the other non-NPT state, is included) formula has been floating around for some time and seems the most plausible option. It would essentially create an exception for India and Pakistan to be officially recognized as nuclear weapon states while bringing them under the legal regime—even though the NPT in its present form does not allow for this.<sup>3</sup>

U.S. ratification is critical for positive movement on the CTBT.<sup>4</sup> If the U.S. ratifies, India will be under tremendous pressure to do so as well. Pakistan's stance remains tied to India's and thus Islamabad can be expected to follow suit. As for the FMCT, Pakistan's reservations about the fissile material cut-off ought to be addressed so that negotiations can move forward.

## Crisis Prevention and Management

- Outstanding bilateral disputes lie at the heart of potential instability in the Indo-Pak relationship. Recurring crises—the principal worry in terms of nuclear instability—are in one way or another being linked to Pakistan's or non-state actors' discontent with the status quo in Kashmir. Resolution of this dispute is the only silver bullet among the various recipes available to ensure nuclear détente. While the U.S. has limited leverage when it comes to pressing for a speedy resolution, it must continue to advocate for an uninterrupted dialogue between India and Pakistan.
- India and Pakistan must not play into the hands of non-state militant actors looking to disrupt peace. Both sides need to realize that no matter how difficult it may be for governments to show restraint in the wake of a crisis-triggering event, both sides must prove that the Indo-Pak reconciliation process is uninterrupted and insulated from such provocations.
- Terrorism perpetrated from Pakistani soil will test India's patience, and as risky as it may be in the face of a guaranteed Pakistani counter-response, an Indian military action cannot be ruled out permanently. Islamabad must show resolve in tackling militants and apprehending perpetrators. The joint anti-terror mechanism set up by both sides provides a formal channel for cooperation on this front; it should be properly operationalized.
- The presence of limited war doctrines and the belief that space for a limited confrontation exists under the nuclear umbrella is highly destabilizing. Even if limited adventurism is possible, it carries high risk of swift escalation and its consequences are unpredictable. Therefore, the plans for limited aggression must be abandoned and any crisis ought to be resolved through mutual cooperation and dialogue.
- In terms of posturing, South Asian crises would become much less threatening if India and Pakistan were to agree not to mate nuclear warheads with their delivery systems. This would greatly reduce the chances of an inadvertent, accidental, or hasty launch.<sup>5</sup>

## Role of International Community

- The international community must not undermine the goal of nuclear non-proliferation and strategic stability in South Asia by employing shortsighted policies. Actions that discriminate between the two sides are bound to be counterproductive. Moreover, neither India nor Pakistan should be provided access to advanced technologies like BMD which threaten to further upset the strategic calculus. Even excessive conventional arms sales may not bode well for this rivalry in the future. The non-proliferation enclave must view India and Pakistan through a singular lens: any move counterproductive to overall strategic stability and global non-proliferation must be avoided irrespective of the political and commercial compulsions.

## Conclusion

India and Pakistan are set to defy the 'Global Zero' drive for as long as they can. They will continue to expand their respective arsenals in the foreseeable future. Nuclear disarmament in this region will likely follow the rest of the world. For now, India, Pakistan, and the international community must focus on incremental steps to bring these two states into the global non-proliferation regime while working to enhance strategic stability in the region, thereby reducing the chances of a nuclear catastrophe.

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The content of this Peace Brief benefitted from views expressed at two recent USIP public events on South Asian nuclear weapons. On April 14, 2010, USIP hosted a seminar on "Atomic Pakistan: Building a Nuclear Arsenal in a Dismantling World" that specifically debated Pakistan's nuclear weapons strategy and its position on 'Global Zero.' The second event, "South Asia in the Age of Nuclear Weapons and Space Security," focused on the South Asian nuclear, missile and space rivalry and was held on May 11, 2010. Moeed W. Yusuf is the South Asia adviser at USIP's Center for Conflict Prevention and Analysis and is responsible for managing the Institute's Pakistan program. Ashley Pandya is a program assistant with the Center for Conflict Prevention and Analysis.

## Endnotes

1. The real impetus to the present nuclear disarmament drive was provided by four influential American personalities, former Secretary of State George Shultz, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former Senator Sam Nunn (now commonly referred to as the 'Gang of Four') who announced their support for "a world free of nuclear weapons" in a *Wall Street Journal* article in January 2007.
2. Federation of American Scientists. "Status of World Nuclear Forces." <http://www.fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/nuclearweapons/nukestatus.html>.
3. The recent Indo-U.S. civilian nuclear deal does obligate India to adhere to the Nuclear Suppliers' Group rules. However, this is a country-specific arrangement outside the NPT and does not include Pakistan.
4. The CTBT was opened for signature in 1996 after three years of multilateral negotiations. The U.S., which had championed the CTBT's cause to that point let down the non-proliferation community when its Senate failed to ratify the Treaty in October 1999. The CTBT is now back in the limelight as President Obama hopes to convince the U.S. Senate to reverse its earlier position.
5. Pakistan has previously offered 'non-deployed deterrence' to India. Given that India has a 'No First Use' policy, it can afford to maintain non-deployed forces without undermining the credibility of its deterrent.



UNITED STATES  
INSTITUTE OF PEACE

1200 17th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
202.457.1700

[www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)

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