

30 August 2012

Deterrence at Risk in South Asia

Because of the threats posed by non-state actors and third party interventions, traditional nuclear deterrence policies cannot work in South Asia's complex security environment. A number of policy adjustments are required, argue Nicolas Blarel and Hannes Ebert, if India and Pakistan are going to manage their tense relations better.

By Nicholas Blarel and Hannes Ebert for ISN

On August 16, the [Pakistani air force base at Minhas was attacked](#) by what the authorities claimed to be Islamic militants from the tribal areas of North Waziristan. What made this attack so different is that Minhas is alleged to store components of [Pakistan's nuclear stockpile](#), which is estimated to include 90-110 warheads. Yet while there is no conclusive evidence that the attack was specifically targeting these weapons, it adds further substance to [recent speculation that Islamabad is losing control of its nuclear arsenal](#) to militant non-state actors. Indeed, as [Pakistan's nuclear program continues to expand](#) this [increasingly credible scenario](#) points to the limits of utilizing traditional theoretical approaches to analyze South Asia's nuclear security dynamics.

Academic studies of nuclear proliferation and deterrence have, to date, focused upon bipolar confrontation and large-scale wars while neglecting nuclear deterrence in regional contexts. The South Asian security environment, for instance, presents a much more complex security environment than a simple dyadic confrontation between India and Pakistan. First, it involves a series of previously overlooked non-state actors which have increasingly impacted upon the strategic calculations of New Delhi and Islamabad. Moreover, external actors like the United States and China exert indirect but increasing influence over both states' nuclear doctrines.

Escalatory potential of non-state actors

The emergence of new actors in South Asia whose organizational structure, motivations and strategies differ sharply from those of states has been a neglected factor in existing approaches to deterrence and proliferation. There has, for instance, been a long history of Pakistani-sponsored militancy in the Kashmir region. Feeling threatened by India's conventional military superiority, Pakistan has armed, trained and given sanctuaries to organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and used them as tools of asymmetric warfare to tie down large numbers of Indian armed forces in Kashmir. The nuclearization of the subcontinent has further encouraged the Pakistani military to use these unconventional means.

In the South Asian context, there are two potential nuclear threats emanating from these non-state

actors. The first possibility is for militant groups in Pakistan to gain direct access to nuclear weapons. Many analysts remain concerned that [a Pakistani nuclear weapon could fall into the hands of militants](#) as a result of either a serious deterioration of Pakistan's political situation or another attack similar to the one witnessed on August 16. However, while the domestic situation in Pakistan remains volatile, this concern has often been exaggerated. Conscious of such risks, the U.S. has been [secretly helping the Pakistani army to guard its nuclear arsenal](#).

The second and most immediate threat is the role of non-state groups in instigating major diplomatic crises with escalatory potential, as demonstrated by the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Since these groups have gradually [moved away from Pakistani sponsorship](#) by obtaining funding from international networks, they are undeterred by India's nuclear arsenal. While the militant campaign may not be directly part of any official Pakistani strategy, it [leads India to react in order to preserve the credibility of its nuclear deterrent](#). One solution has been for India to threaten to punish Pakistan directly, rather than the militants themselves, notably through its ["Cold Start" doctrine](#). These strategies, however, do not solve the long-term problem of Pakistan-based militancy and could even aggravate tensions.

Pivotal deterrence, trilateral compellence, and the Asian 'super' complex

Nuclear deterrence in South Asia is also influenced by the actions of extra-regional nuclear powers that hold an interest in managing Indo-Pakistani rivalries. The most important stakeholders are China and the United States. Under American supervision, all previous [nuclear crises](#) between India and Pakistan were brought to a conciliatory outcome, whereas they invoked [strong reactions](#) from China. Indeed, the U.S. and Chinese responses to the crises pose three challenges to "classical" deterrence models and policies.

Firstly, they reveal the emergence of triangular strategic relations in nuclear affairs. Traditional Cold War deterrence, based on a simplified dyadic opposition of unitary and rational actors and concepts like mutual assured destruction, overlook this new and decisive dimension. Instead, South Asia demonstrates that extra-regional powers' interventions in crises often took the shape of ["pivotal deterrence"](#) - a strategy in which a third-party takes on a "pivotal" role between adversaries, using its power and flexibility to make them fear the costs of nuclear escalation by manipulating threats and promises to prevent war. In contrast to mediation, "pivotal deterrence" does not rely on diplomatic cooperation with the adversaries and can include the use of force.

During recent crises, the U.S. was compelled to play this "pivotal role" as it pursued a [balancing act](#) of maintaining its strategic alliance with Pakistan while deepening ties with India. However, Washington also faced the double-challenge of deep-rooted Pakistani mistrust toward the U.S. (which is perceived as a [greater threat to its nuclear arsenal than India](#)) and Indian skepticism towards any third party involvement. Its gradual tilt towards India - which reached its peak with the signing of the [2008 US-India nuclear agreement](#) - and the refusal to grant Pakistan a similar deal exacerbated this challenge. As a result of its recent [shift in strategic focus towards Asia](#), Washington should expect to be regularly drawn into this challenging pivotal role.

China's contribution to South Asia's nuclear security is often understood as being in opposition to the United States' role as regional stabilizer. In June 2010, for example, Beijing struck a [high-profile nuclear deal](#) with Islamabad that was widely perceived as a counterweight to the U.S.-India agreement. Similar to [past transfers](#) of nuclear materials and technology, the deal was primarily motivated by a [willingness to balance India in the subcontinent](#). However, China's proximity to and growing presence in South Asia raise its interest in de-escalating nuclear crises in the region - [a goal that it shares with the U.S.](#)

Secondly, India and Pakistan have learned from this experience of external interventions and

gradually replaced dyadic deterrence with [“trilateral compellence”](#) strategies as their dominant nuclear postures. Within this dynamic, a compellent state triggers a crisis with the trilateral objective of challenging its adversary *and* simultaneously pulling in third-party intervention for de-escalation - with the nuclear arsenal serving as a quasi-blackmailing pressurizing medium. During the [Kargil crisis](#) (1999), for example, Islamabad anticipated external involvement into its nuclear calculations, thereby manipulating the “nuclear threat” to compel India to change its behavior and the U.S. to support Pakistan’s strategic objectives. Just two years later, India also practiced “trilateral compellence” when it garnered greater U.S. involvement in de-escalation through mass military mobilization during [Operation Parakram](#). The mere possibility of external intervention thus deeply shaped the rivals’ nuclear doctrines and behavior.

Finally, an additional layer of external states have also become entangled in the nuclear security dynamics of South Asia, with Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia all playing a pivotal role in Indo-Pakistani tensions. [Saudi Arabia](#), for example, has reportedly [funded Pakistan’s nuclear program](#) and [cushioned international sanctions](#) as result of nuclear tests. The Kingdom also allegedly entered into a covert [agreement on nuclear cooperation](#) with Pakistan that would allow it to purchase nuclear warheads upon request. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has also looked to its Sunni ally (and Chinese [missile transfers](#)) as a [counter](#) to possible threats posed by Shia Iran and Israel in case of deteriorating relations with the U.S.

By contrast, [Russia](#) has historically assisted India’s nuclear and strategic programs and regularly raises [concerns](#) over the status of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal. And in 1998 Japan reconsidered its commitment to non-proliferation after being taken by surprise by the alleged delivery of nuclear material to North Korea by the A. Q. Khan network. Accordingly, these inter-regional linkages are also influential upon nuclear stability in South Asia and further underline the importance of understanding the phenomenon in the context of the broader [geopolitical reconfiguration](#) across Asia.

Nuclear stability in a complex environment

Managing [nuclear multipolarity](#) in South Asia has proven to be a complicated task. The entanglement of militant non-state actors and extra-regional great powers into India’s and Pakistan’s strategic calculations creates an even grimmer outlook and threatens to undermine the potential stabilizing effects of nuclear deterrence. If we cannot deter nuclear militants or irrational adversaries, what alternative options remain for enabling peace and stability?

Existing multilateral control regimes need to adapt to the new globalized risks. Breaking up black markets, ensuring the security of nuclear material (as outlined in the [Proliferation Security Initiative](#)), and encouraging regular and institutionalized dialogue between nuclear rivals may provide opportunities to better address the challenges posed by a complex South Asian security dynamic. Indeed, ‘responsible’ actors also need to learn from similarly complex security environments - such as [Israel and its surrounding neighborhood](#). Positive incentives such as [sharing nuclear expertise and technology](#) should be used to [induce Pakistan into confronting militants](#) located within its territory. Without such incentives and diplomatic initiatives, the next regional crisis to erupt between South Asia’s nuclear powers could spiral into a new type of conflict.

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Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

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