

# South Asia and the Nuclear Future

*Rethinking the Causes and Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation*

Conference Report by Todd S. Sechser

On June 4 and 5, 2004, the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at Stanford University hosted a workshop on the question of nuclear weapons and stability in South Asia. The workshop, which brought together approximately 75 scholars, military officers, civilian policy-makers, scientists, and journalists, was co-sponsored by CISAC and the U.S. Army War College.

## **Key Insights:**

- U.S. policy toward the nuclearization of India and Pakistan has shifted from sanctions and rollback to reluctant acceptance of their nuclear status. The U.S. now seeks to ensure that India and Pakistan become responsible nuclear powers and is emphasizing cooperative measures to prevent war, secure weapons and material from terrorist theft, and stop the further spread of nuclear weapons.
- Analyses of Indian and Pakistani nuclear behavior must consider the domestic political motivations of key decision-makers and not just national security interests.
- Nuclear weapons in South Asia have both precipitated one limited war (Kargil 1999) and prevented another (the 2001-02 crisis). The lessons learned from these events in New Delhi and Islamabad may be dissimilar.
- India and Pakistan might be willing to cooperate with the broader nuclear nonproliferation regime even if they cannot join the NPT as nuclear-weapons states. Such a step could be essential in bolstering efforts to prevent illicit nuclear assistance to new proliferating nations.
- The strategic effects of a potential Indian missile defense deployment are highly uncertain.
- The U.S., India, and Pakistan have mutual interests in preventing nuclear terrorism, which could lead to deeper cooperation among the three countries.

In the six years since India and Pakistan confirmed their membership in the nuclear club through a competitive round of test explosions, the two nations have fought a bloody conflict in Kargil (1999), experienced a major military crisis (2001-02), and taken steps to clarify their nuclear doctrines. Moreover, since the 1998 tests Pakistan has experienced a military coup (1999) and uncovered a ring of illicit nuclear commerce within its own nuclear program (2004), while India has survived a terrorist attack against its parliament (2001) and a change of ruling parties (2004). This workshop sought to identify the key lessons of this eventful period for scholars and policy-makers.

Three basic questions motivated the workshop. First, what can the experiences of India and Pakistan teach us about the causes of nuclear proliferation? Second, what effect have nuclear weapons had on Indo-Pakistani behavior? Finally, what future direction can we expect the South Asia nuclear relationship to take? To encourage frank discussion, individual comments from the panels remain off the record. A summary of the workshop's major issues of contention follows below.

## **Domestic Politics and the Causes of Nuclear Proliferation**

The first topic considered the drivers of Indian and Pakistani nuclear behavior. Although security motivations undoubtedly influenced each state's decisions to research, develop, and test nuclear weapons, it is likely that domestic political incentives played a critical role in New Delhi's and Islamabad's nuclear policies.

Indeed, one participant argued that India's 1998 tests were a direct consequence of a series of domestic factors, including the ruling BJP's desire to ward off hardliners,

heighten its future re-election prospects, bolster its position among coalition government allies, and be seen as a "promise-keeping" party.

While the tests left the opposition parties in disarray and garnered deferential and generous media coverage, they did not prevent the BJP from paying the political price of a stagnant economy shortly afterward. In fact, some participants noted that while the tests at first presented the opposition Congress Party with the difficult choice of either supporting its rival or appearing unpatriotic, they may have aided the opposition by ending the debate about testing and shifting the political focus to "the price of onions."

The discussion of Pakistan centered largely around the influence of extremist Islamic parties such as the Jama'at-i Islami in Pakistan's nuclear behavior. On one hand, it is clear that the Jama'at strongly favors hawkish nuclear policies, and the party lobbied loudly for a Pakistani response to India's nuclear tests in 1998. Moreover, the Jama'at views Pakistan's nuclear arsenal as not merely a national security instrument but a force to serve the broader Muslim community worldwide. On the other hand, there is little evidence to suggest that the Jama'at, while the strongest Islamic party in Pakistan, holds any meaningful sway over Pakistani politics. Indeed, some conference participants took the view that the party's small number of parliamentary seats reflected low public support and suggested that the party did not influence Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's decision to match India's nuclear tests in 1999.

In any case, uncertainties plague our understanding of Islamist positions on key nuclear questions. For example, it is unclear whether the Jama'at is committed to sharing nuclear weapons with other Muslim countries or simply defending them, or whether it deems only Islamic countries

worthy of nuclear assistance. Finally, what is the position of the Islamic extremist parties on Pakistan's doctrine of nuclear use? Some in the Jama'at may favor the use of nuclear weapons to respond to a massive Indian conventional strike, but others appear to favor nuclear use only as an in-kind response. These uncertainties make it difficult to predict exactly how Pakistan's nuclear policies would change if the Jama'at or a similar party gained control of the government in Islamabad. Undoubtedly, however, Pakistan's nuclear behavior would be more aggressive than is the case today.

## **The Consequences of Nuclear Weapons**

The 1999 war in Kargil marked the first time two nuclear powers fought a war directly against one another, killing over 1,000 soldiers in the conflict. What are the implications of Kargil for stability between India and Pakistan, and how can deterrence be bolstered between the two states?

One view interprets the Kargil war as an illustration of the "stability-instability paradox" – the idea that nuclear weapons, while deterring outright nuclear war, may in fact enable low-intensity conflict to thrive. Because neither India nor Pakistan believe that the other will likely escalate to nuclear use in response to low-level conventional skirmishes, both feel free to conduct minor attacks. India's satisfaction with the status quo in Kashmir may preclude it from launching these types of strikes in the future, but Pakistan's greater discontent may motivate it to exploit the spectrum of low-intensity conflict made available by nuclear weapons.

It is not clear, however, that Pakistani leaders continue to hold this view of the Kargil affair. Indeed, it is quite possible that the overpowering Indian conventional

response to the insurgents persuaded Pakistani elites that India could not be cowed into accepting low-intensity revisions of the status quo. Although the Musharraf government will not admit that the Kargil adventure was a mistake, it has certainly been more careful since 1999.

Debate also centered around the question of India's lessons from the crisis that followed the deadly attack on its parliament in late 2001. India adopted a strategy of coercive diplomacy during this crisis, making a variety of demands and threatening to use force if they were not met. But the fact that India backed down when some of these demands were not met suggests that nuclear weapons may have deterred the use of military force rather than aided India's strategy of compellence.

Two counterarguments to this claim were made. First, while India and Pakistan indeed did not go to war in 2002, they came very close – so close that an accident, miscalculation, or small piece of misinformation might have touched off a disastrous conflict. Moreover, in the future, a vulnerable Indian regime might be forced to choose between carrying out a dangerous threat or committing political suicide by backing down. The BJP was able to withstand the price of capitulating, but future regimes might not be (or might not think they are).

Second, some argued that American intervention was responsible for preventing war, not nuclear deterrence. After being bailed out of the Kargil crisis by the United States, Pakistani leaders may have come to believe that they can count on the American escape hatch in future crises. Yet it also could be the case that the war frightened them into abandoning the view that escalation could be attempted without consequence. Indeed, one conference participant suggested provocatively that even if one side were to use a battlefield

nuclear weapon in a future conflict, the United States might be better off if it did not intervene to end the war immediately.

How might the destabilizing effects of nuclear weapons in South Asia be mitigated? One participant argued that an Indian missile defense system would lessen India's fears of being victimized by a nuclear first-strike. Pakistan's fear of an Indian attack would then reduce Islamabad's willingness to use conventional or subconventional forces in Kashmir. Moreover, this speaker argued that India could deter Pakistani "misbehavior" by threatening a first-strike.

But many participants objected strongly to this reasoning, contending that the argument vastly overestimated the effectiveness both of missile defense itself and the reassurance that it would provide to India. Moreover, Pakistan would be almost certain to acquire a matching system, potentially offsetting its deterrent value while also creating dangerous first-strike incentives for India in the pre-deployment period. The participants concluded that deployment of Indian missile defense would produce highly uncertain effects on strategic stability on the subcontinent.

## **Nonproliferation and Arms Control**

Finally, the workshop turned to the question of nonproliferation in South Asia, with panelists considering advantages, drawbacks, prospects, and strategies for extending the international nonproliferation regime to India and Pakistan.

All agreed that the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is facing a serious crisis. The withdrawal of North Korea from the treaty, questionable nuclear activities by Iran, and recent revelations of nuclear smuggling by the Pakistani scientist A.Q. Khan have undermined the integrity of the

nonproliferation regime. In addition, the U.S. refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) has frozen that treaty before it could enter into force, as a number of non-nuclear states have argued that the U.S. must ratify the CTBT as a symbol of its NPT commitment to work in good faith toward disarmament.

Disagreement emerged, however, on the question of possible Pakistani and Indian accession to the NPT and CTBT. One panelist suggested that the two states might be willing to sign the NPT if the regime permitted them to join as legal nuclear-weapon states, perhaps in a one-time admittance of such members. In exchange, India and Pakistan could agree to improved transparency of their programs, strict controls on the export of nuclear technology, and restrictions on the size of their arsenals.

A similar proposal envisions an Additional Protocol, or "five plus three" arrangement that would give partial NPT membership to India, Pakistan, and Israel in return for their observance of some of the obligations borne by the treaty's nuclear-weapon states.

Some participants worried, however, that these proposals missed the primary dangers confronted by the NPT. First, although India and Pakistan could agree in principle to control the transfer of nuclear technology to outside parties, the A.Q. Khan saga illustrates that the Pakistani government may not have the ability to enforce such strict regulations. Second, it is no longer clear what incentives the NPT bargain offers to non-nuclear states. The attraction of civilian nuclear technology once filled this role, but it has not proven to be the low-cost energy source it had been thought to be. Additional security guarantees may be needed to assure non-nuclear states that the NPT is in their interest. Third, the perceived failure of the treaty's five nuclear-weapon states to make substantial progress toward

disarmament, as required by Article VI of the NPT, has undermined the confidence of some states that the treaty is not detrimental to their security.

Does size of the American nuclear arsenal impact proliferation decisions by other states? Some participants advanced the argument that proliferation decisions are based on regional security calculations, not evaluations of U.S. adherence to an ambiguous legal obligation. But others noted that the U.S. refusal to ratify the CTBT has often been cited in Pakistan as a reason not to join other arms control arrangements. Moreover, to the extent that the U.S. is in fact a global power, its nuclear status may play directly into the regional security calculations of potential nuclear powers.

One participant built on this thread by asking how India and Pakistan might react to a clause of the NPT that set a time limit for nuclear disarmament but also included India and Pakistan in that obligation. The workshop agreed that neither state would be likely to accept such a proposal.

## **Uncertainties Behind; Possibilities Ahead**

Two on-the-record talks rounded out the conference. In the first, David E. Sanger, White House correspondent for the *New York Times*, reviewed our current understanding of the A.Q. Khan nuclear smuggling network and its implications. Mr. Sanger noted that while Libya's cooperation with Western investigators has revealed crucial information about the network, the most important details remain unknown. We know that Khan's nuclear commerce ring provided North Korea,

Libya, and Iran with crucial materials, and that intelligence shortcomings in the West – aided by strategic decisions that minimized U.S. scrutiny of Pakistani nuclear activities – allowed the network to expand largely unnoticed. But we do not know the actual number of nations that received nuclear weapons designs, the full quantity and type of weapons that were exported, or even whether the network has truly been broken. Perhaps most important, we still do not know whether Gen. Musharraf and the Pakistani military knowingly aided Dr. Khan in his efforts to peddle nuclear technology across the globe. Some suspect that Gen. Musharraf was complicit in an effort to share the “Islamic bomb,” but others suspect that central oversight of the Pakistani nuclear program was too weak to catch Dr. Khan. Either possibility carries dangerous implications.

The second on-the-record address was given by Dr. Mitchell B. Reiss, Director of Policy Planning at the U.S. Department of State. Dr. Reiss took a forward-looking approach, detailing efforts by the Bush Administration to enlist India and Pakistan in nonproliferation efforts. Specifically, Dr. Reiss discussed two possibilities: first, the integration of India and Pakistan into the Proliferation Security Initiative, an effort designed to intercept illicit shipments of nuclear material; and second, placing civilian nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards. He concluded by imploring the two nations to be mindful that “great power carries great responsibility,” and expressed hope that India and Pakistan would assist the international community in encouraging North Korea, Iran, and other potential proliferators to adhere to their international nonproliferation obligations.