Nuclear Risk-Reduction Centers

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The underlying sources of tension between India and Pakistan remain unresolved. A severe crisis could lead to military conflict, and any conflict has the potential to escalate.\(^1\) With the nuclearization of South Asia, the prospect of such escalation assumes horrific significance, since conflict remains unpredictable and may not necessarily remain at the conventional level. The concepts of “limited war” and “preemption” are fraught with danger and may not be applicable in South Asia.

The Kashmir dispute remains the *raison d’être* for hostility between India and Pakistan. Having fought three conventional wars and one limited war in the past, the level of animosity remains high. Bilateral efforts, in the form of various confidence-building measures (CBMs) and nuclear risk reduction measures (NRRMs), have not ushered in a lasting peace to South Asia. These measures have failed due to the absence of trust, strong political will to resolve the Kashmir dispute, and dispute resolution mechanisms, monitoring, and enforcement. The presence of nuclear weapons makes a military solution to the Kashmir dispute unlikely. The longer India and Pakistan remain estranged, the more distrust builds and the more both sides expect the worst from each other. Conditions for stable deterrence are absent, and an accident or miscalculation during a crisis has become increasingly possible. As both nations struggle to adapt to the “stability–instability paradox,”\(^2\) should they be left alone at the nuclear brink?

There is ample evidence of the need for concrete arrangements to build trust and prevent misperceptions. In addition to steps to resolve the Kashmir dispute—without which confidence-building or nuclear risk reduction measures are unlikely to succeed—it is imperative for India and Pakistan to establish nuclear risk reduction centers (NRRCs).

NRRCs should be dedicated for official communication and the rapid exchange of relevant information. They can be used as a central message center for all CBM and NRRM notifications. The proper utilization of NRRCs could prevent unintended signals from leading to a crisis or inadvertent nuclear escalation. The centers may also facilitate the identification, negotiation, and implementation of additional institutional and procedural arrangements, as well as technical measures intended to reduce nuclear risks.
NRRCs could provide the means of instantaneous communication among technical experts in the event of a tragic incident or unusual event. While taking concurrent measures for conflict resolution at the political level, both countries could immediately negotiate measures to establish NRRCs, which would symbolize the commitment of the two governments to responsible nuclear stewardship. NRRCs may not only help consolidate measures for the implementation of existing CBMs and NRRMs, they may also help build the trust and confidence that is essential to conflict resolution. Functioning under an already negotiated, preformatted system to exchange notifications, the NRRCs would not involve any kind of voice communication for crisis resolution, which might transmit misleading or unintended signals. By design, the NRRCs would not substitute for political or diplomatic means of communication.

The Need for Nuclear Threat-Reduction Centers

Existing confidence-building measures and nuclear risk reduction measures have failed to achieve their desired objectives because they lack verification and enforcement mechanisms, and because they are disconnected from dispute resolution. As Michael Krepon has observed, India and Pakistan have used CBMs more as “competition-building measures than as confidence-building measures.”5 “Most of the CBM proposals,” he argues, “have instead been designed to capture the political high ground, not to solve problems.”4 “The juridical status of CBMs as ‘politically binding’—rather than legally binding—documents helps afford India and Pakistan the latitude to skirt proper implementation.”5

During critical periods of heightened tensions between India and Pakistan, CBMs have been either ineffective or absent. Michael Krepon describes the three stages of the CBM process as “conflict avoidance measures, confidence building measures and strengthening the peace.”6 Pakistan and India have not yet moved beyond the first stage of the CBM process. Dr. Maleeha Lodhi notes

… CBMs cannot stand-alone and can only work in a broader context. The presumption of priority for CBMs is that underlying problems are not resolvable, and therefore, by freezing the status quo, CBMs can somehow reduce tension and avert the danger of war…. Meant to be a step towards conflict resolution, they can often be used as a substitute. They have frequently been pursued in South Asia under external prodding or pressure and at the expense of problem solving.7

Bilateral initiatives in the absence of conflict resolution are not effective in South Asia. Substantive dialogue on the resolution of Kashmir is necessary for progress to be achieved on other fronts.8 Until positive measures for conflict resolution and new initiatives for the prevention of escalation and nuclear risk reduction are negotiated and implemented, nuclear risk reduction in South Asia will remain elusive.