

General

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) organised a round-table discussion on “Nuclear Stability in Asia: Trends and Nuclear Risks for the Subcontinent” on March 10, 2011 at the CLAWS campus. The round-table was attended by a select gathering from the strategic community with Dr Rodney W Jones, President, Policy Architects International, Washington D.C., leading the discussion.

Rodney W Jones

Strategic stability is a broad area of investigation. Nuclear stability is a subset of strategic stability between nuclear-armed adversaries pertaining to whether the risks of their use of nuclear arms in a conflict are low rather than high and the weapons themselves appear to be under tight security and control. The focus in South Asia more so since 1998 has been on how exactly conflicts would unfold in the region even if intentions seem fine and there exists a great deal of maturity in the respective leadership. In today's given context that preferred condition can best be described as somewhat precarious, so that a worsening of the political scenario within Pakistan is bound to raise concerns over the capacity of Pakistan's leadership as well as of the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. That said, the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons is better off in the military hands that they are in today. But, simultaneously it also needs to be mentioned that there is no certainty that the political leadership can withstand much more escalation in the domestic crisis or head off an untoward fragile futuristic incident such as the LeT launching a terrorist attack to provoke war with India or hasten the disintegration of Pakistan's domestic scene. Pakistan is under immense internal pressure with no clear statesmanship in the country that has a grasp of which way to proceed to put it on a sound path. The question, thus, arises, whether Pakistan is approaching a tipping point that could deprive it of the options necessary to achieve a moderate future?

The military and technical factors that contribute towards nuclear instability include vulnerability of a state to nuclear first strike at leadership (possible decapitation), and sufficient accuracy of State A's conventional weapons to rouse a temptation to use them in a disarming strike. The perceived vulnerability of nuclear weapons of State B to State A's capability to launch a disarming first strike by conventional means, in turn, may push A to go first (“use them or lose them”). The possibility of an accidental detonation of nuclear weapons could easily be misread by the other side as the beginning of a nuclear attack. Besides, flaws in nuclear command and control, tactical nuclear weapons, and missile defense further add complications that undermine confidence in the stability between two sides' nuclear deterrent postures, and more so if there are three or more nuclear-capable neighbors in the mix.

The political factors that add up to building nuclear instability include intensity of hostility between adversaries, particularly when one or more nuclear adversary states seek to alter the 'status quo' in what could be described as a revolutionary aim. The presence or absence of Allies (nuclear or major military allies vs. isolation) also contributes to nuclear instability. Internal political instability in State A or B owing to military takeovers and/or separatist movements, misperceptions by A or B of the other's intentions in a crisis and intelligence failure (e.g., on whether nukes have arrived to arm missiles and whether the local operators have been delegated the decision to fire nuclear-tipped missiles in self-defence, such as in the Cuban missile crisis) add to nuclear instability. Size and technical differences can give rise to low credibility of deterrence posture—leading to deterrence instability. Intense hostility and domestic instability can accentuate crisis instability where the states do not trust each other and misread the other. The other angles on nuclear instability include crisis instability, arms race instability, continued proliferation and multiplication of nuclear powers, and complex alignments such as the India-China, Pakistan-India triangular situation with the possibility of Iran getting added to this picture and a nuclear North Korea to the scene in East Asia.

In contrast to the nuclear deterrent stability thought to have been achieved between the superpowers in the Cold War, the nuclear scenario in South Asia portrays contiguous nuclear states (cheek to jowl), short distances and flight times, little or no warning, compressed decision time, conventional imbalance and Pakistan's lack of strategic depth. The fact that India and Pakistan have been cut from same cloth, signifies that they only know each other too well with Kashmir as the flashpoint. Besides, extremism and sub-conventional warfare can provoke a conventional response and a chain of escalation.

In so far as China and the nuclear triangle are concerned, China holds the nuclear and conventional edge against India, and more significantly, supports Pakistan. China has unresolved borders with India and borders Pakistan while claiming a NFU posture. In the past, China has had deeper anxieties about the US and Russia than India's emerging nuclear arsenal, but this picture could shift to some degree if existing and new disputes between China and India raise temperatures to high levels. Given that China is building up military infrastructure in Tibet, and despite the fact that media reports beginning more than three decades ago of China stationing nuclear weapons in Tibet were groundless, the deployment of nuclear-capable missiles in Tibet is a prospect that cannot be dismissed today as implausible.

Discussion

The discussion was initiated by Dr Manpreet Sethi who asserted that India understands the need for strategic stability. The US focuses upon fostering strategic stability in South Asia; however, there is a strong belief within India that Pakistan wants to focus on the

continuing possibility of political/strategic instability in the region, primarily because it suits their cause. Islamabad has chosen to maximize risks and continue to prop up instability particularly on the Kashmir issue so as to keep the situation unsettled. The desire for stability is high in the case of India, but not so in Pakistan's case. India has acquired nuclear weapons for nuclear deterrence and not for conventional deterrence. For Pakistan, the role of nuclear weapons is to stop/counter India's conventional superiority—and that is where the paradox lies. This stability/instability paradox becomes the central point of discussion on the subject. The question arising therefore is whether every crisis will make Pakistan run for the nuclear trigger, or shall conflict resolution with India finally end Pakistan's hostility?

In wake of constant queries on whether these are propped up threat perceptions, the view within the Obama administration appears to be that if the Kashmir dispute is resolved, the prospects for stability would rise many notches higher owing to the toning down of crisis scenarios. Nevertheless, at the moment, the Obama administration is not exerting much energy on the Kashmir issue for resolution to happen.

It needs to be understood that Pakistan's apprehension of India or fixation with it is unlikely to go away even if the Kashmir dispute is settled. As far as India is concerned, there is space for conventional conflict well below the nuclear threshold. However, while the risks are well understood, there can be no guarantee that during a future conventional war there would be no escalation of the conflict to the nuclear dimension.

(Report prepared by Dr Monika Chansoria, Senior Fellow, CLAWS)