



India-Pakistan: Dealing With the Real Danger

by Ralph A. Cossa

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's bold speech and even bolder action clamping down on Pakistani-based Kashmiri terrorists, and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's acknowledgment of this significant (if still insufficient) step forward has significantly reduced the prospects of war between South Asia's two nuclear powers. Continuing U.S. diplomatic pressure, including the impending trip by Secretary of State Colin Powell to the region, should help to further defuse the immediate crisis.

But those worrying about a deliberate nuclear war between these two historic rivals are missing the real danger. Even if India decides to launch surgical strikes against terrorist camps in Pakistan, and even if Pakistan retaliates (and China rattles its sabers in support), the odds are extremely high that neither leader would resort to the use of his limited nuclear arsenal: Vajpayee because he doesn't have to and Musharraf because it represents his major ace in the hole, to be saved until national survival is truly at risk.

Nor is there much danger of Musharraf playing his "China card." While Beijing continues to express its steadfast support for its long-time partner, Prime Minister Zhu Rongji's visit to New Delhi demonstrates China's desire not to take sides in this current dispute. Besides, China's last attempt to "teach a lesson" to one of its neighbors for attacking one of its friends - its brief but bloody invasion into northern Vietnam in 1979 - will likely cause it to think twice before reacting against a much more capable foe, especially if India's objectives are limited to terrorist targets.

All of this is not to dismiss either the likelihood or seriousness of a new Indo-Pakistani clash. It would be extremely destabilizing and deadly and have the added consequence, as many are quick to point out, of detracting from the U.S.-led war against Washington's terrorists of choice, Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. But the real danger is not a deliberate escalation to nuclear weapons if the two states were to once again go to war; the real threat is the growing international acceptance of India and Pakistan as ex officio members of the nuclear weapons club and what this means as they both proceed down the nuclear weapons path.

The politically expedient lifting of the remaining sanctions imposed by the U.S. after India and Pakistan came out of the nuclear closet with their 1998 tests made sense, given both their general ineffectiveness (few others supported this U.S. effort) and the need to have both states (and especially Pakistan) firmly in the U.S. anti-terrorist camp. Besides, it would be virtually impossible today to pressure or otherwise convince either country to put its nuclear genie back in the bottle.

But, going back to "business as usual" - as India arrogantly but rightly predicted Washington (and others) would do when confronting the initial international uproar after its 1998 tests - neglects the real dangers that lie ahead if either country takes the next logical (or, in my view, illogical) step: the operational field deployment of its nuclear weapons. If either side deploys nuclear warhead-equipped missiles in the field (and India seems determined to pursue this course), the other will almost automatically follow suit. This will greatly increase the danger of inadvertent or unauthorized use, while encouraging both pre-emptive strikes and a "use or lose" philosophy that would "justify" a nuclear response to a conventional attack (or perhaps even threat of imminent attack) against the other's field-deployed sites. And, while one assumes that both sides' nuclear warheads are tightly guarded today, deploying them to the field makes them that much more vulnerable to seizure by terrorists or even by renegade national forces.

In truth, the U.S. is today talking about going beyond "business as usual" to establish a deeper military-to-military relationship with India, to include the initiation of arms sales, something Washington has resisted doing in the past. Yet there is little talk of strings being attached to this increased cooperation. At a minimum, Washington should seek - indeed demand - assurances (privately, if not publicly) that India will refrain from field deployment of its nuclear weapons as a quid pro quo for any enhanced mil-mil cooperation.

Even more effective would be a coordinated message to New Delhi and Islamabad from the four major regional powers - the U.S., Russia, China, and Japan - that "business as usual" will cease if either field deploys its nuclear weapons; that such a dangerous, destabilizing action would result in an immediate halt in all four nations' economic and (where applicable) military support. Unilateral sanctions after the fact have proven to be ineffective, but a carefully coordinated multilateral reminder of the costs involved in future destabilizing actions just might preclude both from taking the next step.

What better way for the U.S., Russia, and China to demonstrate their commitment to a nuclear weapons-free world than by drawing a definitive line in the sand against field deployment and its potentially disastrous consequences on the Indian subcontinent?

The time to act is now, while deployment plans are still on the drawing board in India and Pakistan and while the U.S., Japan, and others are stepping up economic support to South Asia and the carrot of U.S. arms sales is still dangling in front of New Delhi. This topic should be put on Powell's agenda when he visits South Asia.

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