

Abstract 16. A. Tellis – LNCV Workshop on South Asia,  
September 26, 2005  
Como, Italy

## Understanding the Challenges of Nuclear Stability in Southern Asia

Ashley J. Tellis., Senior Associate,  
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, US

### (I) INTRODUCTION

--Many views on the subject, but much loose talk as well: Many regional analysts argue that nuclear competition in South Asia is objectively a non-problem; often fabricated by the United States for political or non-proliferation reasons.

--“Instability” is often an amorphous term and becomes a codeword that drives political agendas.

--Need for greater precision in discussions with respect to terms and concepts

--Nuclear stability in Southern Asia is a complex problem:

--has many dimensions that are difficult to entangle;

--has many actors: India, Pakistan, China, possibly non-state actors in the future;

--has many drivers: grand strategy; military strategy; own capabilities and awareness of competitor’s capabilities; leadership capabilities.

### (II) WHAT IS THE CHALLENGES OF NUCLEAR STABILITY IN SOUTHERN ASIA? A FIRST CUT

--Two sets of issues: Are structurally infirm nuclear arsenals being developed in the region? Are destabilizing nuclear strategies being pursued in the region?

#### *Are Structurally Infirm Nuclear Arsenals Being Developed in the Region?*

--Nuclear arsenals continue to be expanded and modernized in all three South Asian states

--*India*: increased production of fissile materials compared to 1998, but no clarity on desired force size (discussions suggest benchmarking to British and French deterrents);

--steady progress towards a dyad plus of delivery systems, with R&D emphasis on 3,000 km Agni III;

- maturation of command and control systems consistent with a “force-in-being” rather than a “ready arsenal”;
- exploring thin BMD as insurance against deterrence failure.
- Pakistan*: consistently high levels of fissile material production to now include plutonium, despite Musharraf’s admission of Pakistan having crossed its “minimum deterrence” threshold;
- seeking triad of air-breathing systems, ballistic and cruise missiles (latter may be eventually sea based);
- emphasis on developing long-range solid-fuelled mobile missiles (Shaheen II) in sufficient numbers to comprehensively target the Indian landmass.
- China*: fissile materials production ostensibly ended, but unclear whether this applies to all weapons-relevant materials;
- large stockpile of HEU and WGP<sub>U</sub>;
- major modernization of delivery systems underway: SRBMs vis-à-vis Taiwan; CSS-5s for regional targeting; and CSS-9/DF-31, DF-31A and JL-2 for global targeting;
- significant modernization in survivability and command and control of nuclear forces;
- increased targeting of India relative to 1998.
- Much larger arsenals in all three states than were being discussed in 1998
- Apparent competition in South Asia thus pertains, prima facie, to nuclear weapons acquisition
- Raises domestic and foreign fears of arms races and arms race stability (refers to a condition where neither side feels compelled to *constantly* react to an opponent’s military acquisitions in order to preserve its security)
- Is there an arms race in South Asia? No, but...
  - All three countries moving towards larger than previously advertised arsenals capable of comprehensively targeting their competitors
  - Thus far, however, all South Asian states appear to be matching weapons to targets, not matching weapons to weapons
  - With the possible exception of China, no South Asian state has true counterforce capabilities
  - Nuclear doctrines in all three states still quite conservative
  - Complicated trade-offs between opacity and transparency: former encourages “worst casing” but could increase deterrence stability; latter increases predictability, but also could increase crisis instability
  - Opacity of regional arsenals makes “splendid first strikes” improbable, but growing arsenal sizes in all countries will provide options beyond countervalue targeting

### *Are Destabilizing Nuclear Strategies Being Pursued in the Region?*

- While arsenal expansion in all three countries has its disconcerting elements, real challenges may arise not from technical modernization per se but from the nuclear strategies
- Real competition pertains to how nuclear weapons are used to secure political ends
- Not an issue pertaining to weapons acquisition or actual use (in the first instance), but to exploitation of the political utility of nuclear weapons
- Sino-Indian dyad today quite stable where nuclear strategies are concerned: both states view nuclear weapons as useful primarily for deterrence
- Indo-Pakistani dyad is a different matter: Islamabad views its nuclear weapons as providing benefits beyond deterrence
- Persistence of political conflicts, Pakistan's conventional weakness, Islamabad's robust nuclear arsenal, and its higher propensity for risk-acceptance all combine to produce a willingness to engage in nuclear coercion vis-à-vis India
- The need to defeat nuclear coercion, then, opens the door to limited conventional conflicts that could in extremis "go nuclear"
- Deterrence instability could therefore exist ex post, even if deterrence stability otherwise obtains ex ante

### **(III) CONCLUSION**

- Continued expansion of nuclear arsenals could become destabilizing if one or more South Asian states develop damage-limiting capabilities over time
- Persistence of nuclear coercion remains the most pressing near-term strategic challenge in Southern Asia
- Political solutions regarding outstanding disputes remain the best means of ensuring nuclear stability over the long term