Two Pots Down The Nuclear Stream

Rabia Akhtar, Kansas State University
India, Pakistan and the Nuclear Race: The Two Pots Down the Nuclear Stream

Rabia Akhtar
Fulbright Scholar & PhD Candidate, Kansas State University
E-mail: rabia@ksu.edu

Aesopian fables and their moral parallels in our everyday life are amusing. But anyone who believes that slow and steady wins the race, has never really won a race. Perhaps India and Pakistan as tortoise and hare respectively are not trying to 'win' the 'nuclear race' as alluded by Michael Krepon, but remain 'The Two Pots' Aesop talks about. The earthenware pot tries its best to keep a safe distance from the brass pot despite reassurances given by the latter of good intentions; and as they float down the stream, the earthenware pot says to the brass pot, "But I may come in contact with you, if I come too close; and whether I hit you, or you hit me, I shall suffer for it."

Pakistan is clearly the earthenware pot and must prepare for any eventuality, since it is forced to keep company with the strong brass pot - India - by default, as they travel down the nuclear stream. The brass pot continues to modernise its nuclear arsenal by acquiring submarine launched ballistic missiles for credible second-strike capability, introducing ballistic missile defence in the region, and continued production of weapon-grade fissile materials at a 'steady pace', all the while proclaiming that its deterrence is not directed towards Pakistan. Unfortunately while all these strategic developments taking place in the region coupled with the massive reorganisation of the Indian military formalising the Long Term Integrated Perspective Plan 2012-2027 (LTIPP) do make us appreciate that the Indian military is preparing to fight two-front wars, it leaves absolutely no room for imagination or comfort of the Pakistanis that they remain India's most troubled front. This modernisation is bound to push the earthenware pot to find means to secure its own deterrence capabilities and seek alliances, formal or informal, against any intended or unintended damage by the brass pot. Indeed, as Dr. Chandran observes in his article, there is a bigger bronze pot - China - in the nuclear stream as well and I believe that it might gain influence and become popular in the neighbourhood amongst smaller and weaker pots as a result of brass pot's increasingly offensive capabilities.

The dilemma then for the two pots is to continue down the nuclear stream without coming into contact with one another, all the while maintaining a safe distance. The earthenware pot knows the dangers of coming into contact with the brass pot, and therefore has been proposing confidence and security building measures long before overt nuclearisation, many of which have been rejected out rightly by India. Pakistan has also been extraordinarily transparent unlike India about the measures it has taken to secure its nuclear weapons against internal and external destabilisation, but instead of being appreciated by the 'pot' community, it has been ridiculed with ifs and buts about its 'competency' to manage a highly stable nuclear command and control system.

The earthenware pot understands and acknowledges that the asymmetry with the brass pot is beyond yawning; therefore, there is no attempt at trying to achieve 'parity'. All that it merely wants is 'equilibrium' at all costs so that it keeps buoyant. Why is it so difficult to understand and accept that Pakistan does not have any ambitions to flaunt its nuclear prowess in or beyond the region? Its deterrence posture remains 'minimum' yet credible, where minimum numbers of nuclear weapons are required to effectively counter the threat. It is unfortunate that ambiguity enshrined in the Indian NFU (read massive retaliation - pun intended) proclamation makes it difficult for Pakistan to finalise how many nuclear weapons justify that 'minimum' requirement for credible stable deterrence.

Do these two pots have control over their destiny? India is seven times larger than Pakistan and was the one who introduced nuclear weapons in the region with its nuclear test in 1974. India should therefore take the lead and actually exhibit 'the Gandhian restraint' in proposing measures to reduce nuclear dangers in South Asia, and undoubtedly, Pakistan will follow suit. India can take the lead by capping its fissile material production; declaring its fissile material stockpiles; volunteering for signing the FMCT unilaterally if it truly wants to champion the cause of disarmament; and by encouraging...
Pakistan’s entry into the NSG as a measure to keep a check on Pakistan’s export control regime, to name a few. But, if India is indeed the tortoise that Krepon believes it is, then true progress will only be made when it will stick its neck out. If it fails to take the lead and create an environment where Pakistan is compelled to follow, then it must know that the rules of the game have changed. The hare knows that if it takes the straight path, it will win. The hare knows it cannot afford to take a nap or be distracted.

To follow the rest of the debate, click:
- PR Chari, IPCS Commentary #3879
- Professor R. Rajaraman, IPCS Audio Commentary
- Vice Admiral (Retd.) Vijay Shankar, IPCS Commentary #3881
- D. Suba Chandran, IPCS Commentary #3882
- Rabia Akhtar, IPCS Commentary #3892
- Original Commentary by Michael Krepon, International Herald Tribune, 4 April 2013