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Should Pakistan Sign CTBT?

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Should Pakistan sign the CTBT?

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After South Asian nuclearization in 1998, the P-5 and the international community strongly condemned nuclear testing by both India and Pakistan and urged both states to immediately sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). In an initial reaction to the pressures thus generated on Pakistan, the then Foreign Secretary Shamshad Ahmed was quoted as claiming that Pakistan "would not be coerced into signing CTBT in disregard to its vital security interests." However, in an attempt to deal with the political backlash of nuclear testing in the form of sanctions by the international community, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif while addressing the 53rd session of the United Nations General Assembly stated that, "Pakistan has consistently supported the conclusion of a CTBT for over 30 years...In a nuclearized South Asia, CTBT would have relevance if Pakistan and India are both parties to the Treaty. However, Pakistan's adherence to the Treaty will take place only in conditions free from coercion or pressure."

However, the CTBT drafted for signature in 1996 was rejected by US Senate in 1999. In a speech the then US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, summed up the concerns of many states adequately when she said, "If we do not accept the rules we insist that others follow, others will not follow them either. The result will be a steady weakening of nuclear controls." The US Senate’s rejection of the CTBT brought much shame to the US which until then was the biggest proponent of arms control and disarmament. The rejection created divergent views on the credibility of the treaty itself, thus making it relatively easier for states like Pakistan to take a firm position. Following the US Senate’s failure to ratify CTBT, an interesting editorial appeared in Asia Times which reinforced views on the path to be followed, urging both India and Pakistan not to sign the CTBT and continue with the development of credible nuclear deterrents and nuclear command and control structures reiterating that "this will add rather than detract from stability and security on the sub-continent. And there would be nothing whatsoever wrong with both countries testing their arsenals and delivery systems in the future in the framework of timely notification."

Pakistan's position on the CTBT remains very clear that Pakistan will not be the first to resume testing in the region since it was not the one to start it in the first place. This notwithstanding, the dynamics in South Asia at play today are different from those a decade earlier when both India and Pakistan were new nuclear states. With the signing of the Indo-US nuclear deal, the determinants and prospects of Pakistan’s signing the CTBT have become more difficult on four broad levels. First, India has made it absolutely clear that it wants to retain the option of nuclear testing. This alone leaves no room for further speculation that Pakistan's signing of CTBT would be detrimental to its national interest. Post Indo-US nuclear deal, the Indian stance on CTBT was reiterated quite categorically when it was stated that, "New Delhi would not sign the CTBT even it was ratified by other countries."

Second, the recent launch of Indian nuclear submarine Arihant serves as a significant indicator of how Pakistan should respond to regional and international arms control and disarmament arrangements. The Arihant will be armed with ballistic missiles thus having the potential to provide India with the second strike credibility that it requires for the credibility of its nuclear deterrent. Although India has time and again stated that its second strike capability will not be Pak-centric, Pakistan cannot be content with mere rhetoric, it needs to look beyond semantics.

Third, the Indian Cold Start doctrine has a negative impact on strategic stability in South Asia because it aims to sabotage the credibility of Pakistan’s nuclear deterrence under the cover of a conventional doctrine. Fourth, coupled with an offensive conventional military doctrine, Indian ambitions for the acquisition of a missile defense shield push Pakistan towards a recurring security dilemma. Thus it is useful and meaningful for Pakistan to maintain a pragmatic Indo-centric position on CTBT instead of just trying to be the good guy.

Pakistan should to be ready for any eventuality in the region given its strategic dynamics with India and also because of the presence of extra regional forces which make South Asia highly vulnerable and any arms control agreement inoperable. Therefore Pakistan should retain the option of testing of its nuclear arsenal to maintain and enhance the credibility of its
deterrence.

Given the current scenario, Pakistan should also realize that ten years later it will be completing the second decade of nuclearization, the world might still be idealizing complete nuclear disarmament and might still be negotiating arms control arrangements like the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). Therefore it is time to discard the symbolic significance of signing the CTBT for the comfort of the international community and analyze the practicality of it. For Pakistan, it would be suicidal to sign the CTBT, the compulsions of its immediate strategic environment suggest as much.