Undermining S Asian nuke deterrence — II (Pakistan Observer)

Shams uz Zaman, Mr.
The exact size of intended Indian nuclear arsenal remains ambiguous however some Indian strategists have suggested astounding figures of maintaining a triad between 400 to 1000 nuclear warheads. These targets, if true, remain unattainable in near future if India solely relies on its domestic Uranium production capabilities. Some reports suggest that by 2006, Indian nuclear program had come under immense strain due to Uranium shortage and had Indo-US deal not come through, it might not have been possible to operate all the nuclear reactors in India.

Annual Natural Uranium consumption for civil and military purpose in India was reaching up to 475 tons while the production was below 300 tons. Although this shortage was overcome by utilizing old stocks of nuclear fuel but it directly affected the Indian plans to expand their nuclear weapons inventory. This precarious situation has dramatically changed since India negotiated multiple nuclear deals with western countries including Australia. These deals permit India to purchase enough fuel for its safeguarded reactors for power generation while utilizing its domestic reserves of Uranium for production of fissile material. The new 500 MWe Fast Breeder Reactor, expected to be completed by 2013, would further enhance Indian fissile material production capability by three times. As a result Indian ambition of maintaining stockpile of several hundred nuclear warheads would be achievable in much earlier timeframe than previously assumed.

Some scholars in Pakistan argue that Pakistan doesn’t need to increase the size of its nuclear arsenals because even as less as five nuclear warheads would suffice to be a credible deterrence against India. This is a weak argument in deterrence theory, as the concept of nuclear deterrence is not a notion of abstract numbers frozen in perpetuity but rather is a dynamic theory pivoting around adversary’s nuclear capabilities and strategic thinking. Since the overt nuclearization of South Asia, Indian military planners have reinvigorated the concept of limited warfare under a nuclear umbrella, a concept that is likely to be put to test if the nuclear asymmetries grow between India and Pakistan. A nuclear triad of several hundred warheads along with a rudimentary missile defence capability would give India a false sense of assurance that Pakistan would be self-deterred by the retaliatory cost if it dared to cross the nuclear threshold against an Indian conventional aggression. In retrospect, a limited conflict between the two countries would become more plausible with high possibility of spinning into a full scale war. Pakistan therefore, would be tempted to expand its nuclear inventory to maintain the nuclear equilibrium in the region besides further lowering its perceived nuclear thresholds, especially once it faces a perilous western border. Adding of short range nuclear capable missile ‘Nasr’ by Pakistan in its nuclear inventory is indicative of this phenomenon.
There is no doubt that these measures could have incurable economic consequences for Pakistan and may result in a fatal blow to its dwindling economy. Some western media reports suggest that Pakistan may already be ahead of India in the nuclear number game. It is not clear if these reports are based on some credible sources or are merely aimed at giving a psychological assurance to Pakistan that its nuclear deterrence is not at stake as a result of nuclear co-operation between India and other western countries. With non-state actors operating loose, both within India and Pakistan, South Asia risks a sudden escalatory scenario with a plausible march towards a “Nuclear Armageddon” under the auspice of United States and other western states offering nuclear assistance to India.

In such a case, besides the cost for Pakistan, which is obvious, not only dream of ‘shinning India’ would crumble but the global economic consequences would also be unbearable. Earlier the India and other western states recognize risks of undermining South Asian nuclear deterrence to bring a fundamental change in this policy; the better it would be for the peace and security of the region and rest of the world.—Concluded.

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