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## South Asia's nuclear gamble

By Shams uz Zaman

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Listening to tips on nuclear strategy from a Pakistani novice politician usually is an extremely disappointing experience. A few weeks ago, someone even claimed that "grass would stop growing in India if it goes to war with Pakistan". Such aggressive statements, if analyzed in tandem with former president Asif Ali Zardari's past unilateral offer to India of dropping the "first use" clause from Pakistan's nuclear doctrine, illustrates lack of political comprehension on the issue.

Interestingly, the situation in India is quite similar to that of Pakistan where, at times, even nuclear experts can fumble.

For example, Indian nuclear strategist Baharat Karnad, a few years ago in his book *India's Nuclear Policy*, wrote that "in any event, the Pakistani threat is serious without being credible", thus implying that due to India's geographical size and a limited number of Pakistani nuclear weapons, India would be able to prevail in a nuclear war. Such assertions reflect of an extremely dangerous mindset of a state's willingness to fight a nuclear war.

In international politics, states are considered rational actors with a primary purpose of surviving in compatible environments by calculating the cost or benefit of their intended actions. Therefore, thinking of fighting and triumphing in a nuclear war is not considered as rational in

terms of international norms. Paradoxically, nuclear weapons remain a vital component of ensuring credibility of nuclear deterrence. The non-use of nuclear weapons by the United States and the Soviet Union even after their respective defeats in Vietnam and Afghanistan just illustrates that nuclear weapons don't guarantee a military victory but rather only deter rational actors from committing acts of aggression or acting in prejudice to a state's perceived interests.

In retrospect, nuclear weapons are not weapons for fighting war but rather serve only a political purpose. Kenneth Waltz argued that these could only be used for deterrence purpose as their actual use entails annihilation, a cost considered too high by any state. It is generally believed that there would be no winners after a nuclear war as also highlighted by Herman Kahn that, after a nuclear war, the living would envy the dead. A study conducted by International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War in 2012 also warns that over a billion people around the world would conceivably starve to death due to the ecological cost of a nuclear war.

Unfortunately, a lack of academic work on nuclear issues in South Asia, and reliance on material published in the West, has introduced a few Cold War analogies like limited nuclear war or tactical nuclear weapons and others. This actually remains irrelevant to the South Asian perspective. Consequently, many policymakers visualize the South Asian strategic environment in a Cold War context.

India's refusal to negotiate on long outstanding issues like Kashmir and Siachin, while playing gimmicks across the Line of Control (LOC), demonstrates its inability to comprehend the post-1998 South Asian strategic environments. Recent revelations by an Indian official of the Indian establishment orchestrating attacks in New Delhi and Mumbai alongside Indian ex-Army chief, General (R) Vijay Kumar Singh's acknowledgement of supporting the terrorist groups in Balochistan (coupled with an extremely destabilizing "cold start proactive operations" strategy) further challenge Indian prudence.

Pakistan has its own stigma of the 1999 Kargil conflict, besides providing support to militant outfits in the troubled region of Kashmir. It has been criticized also for developing a nuclear response against low-level threats in an action-reaction syndrome to Indian proactive strategy; a response which could spiral out of control during an escalation and thus result in a nuclear exchange.

The overall rationality of the South Asian actors thus at times appears contentious despite that both have shown restraint in evolving crises either due to external pressures or prevailing balance of terror. Renewed tensions across the LOC and blame game practice offer a gloomy prognosis for the future if both states still refuse to settle their disputes through dialogue.

Pakistan currently is deeply embroiled in its internal economic and security problems thus is extremely unlikely to provoke India over a previously peaceful LOC. On the contrary, such an escalation suits India and provides an opportunity to further squeeze Pakistan in a bid to seek concessions on the issues related to terrorism and Kashmir. Such a tight situation for Pakistan also becomes conducive for the US "Asia Pivot" policy, which has brought Pakistan closer to the growing Russo-Chinese entente, thus exacerbating excitements in New Delhi and Washington.

Therefore, such controlled tensions in South Asia not only facilitate Indian politicians towards achieving their regional objectives but also justify the continuous US intervention in the region. But such gambles always retain a serious risk of spinning out of control thus destabilizing the whole region as has been witnessed in case of Iraqi invasion by the US forces.

To actually prove that these South Asian nuclear rivals are rational actors, India and Pakistan must devise a robust escalation-control mechanism and avoid imprudent posturing and gambles which run the risk of slipping out of control. Both states also need to meaningfully initiate a dialogue on settling the contentious issues including Kashmir with definitive timelines.

India needs to come out the state of denial by recognizing the contentious position of Kashmir issue in the light of UN resolutions. Adopting a policy of oppression and injustice in Kashmir while expecting peace as an outcome, will always remain a delusion for Indian policy makers. Pakistan also needs to retain flexibility while negotiating this long-outstanding issue. Kashmir must be resolved which otherwise could incite a nuclear war in South Asia with no victors but only "living begging for death". Kashmir's status of being integral part or disputed region would become meaningless in such a pessimistic scenario.