Nuclear stalemate in South Asia

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fter South Asia’s 1998 nuclear tests, the Clinton administration established five “benchmarks” by which to gauge nuclear stability in South Asia. But Washington’s relationships with India and Pakistan have suffered, and progress on these objectives has been disappointing.

Export controls. The most positive news from South Asia is that neither India nor Pakistan appears to be directly aiding the proliferation of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles beyond their borders. Although neither has joined international conventions that would codify this commitment (such as the Missile Technology Control Regime), both have in place strict regulations that limit the sale of sensitive technology. Pakistan’s fragile economy and shortage of hard currency could undermine this restraint.

Fissile material. Washington has urged India and Pakistan to cease production of nuclear-weapons usable material and to enter into international negotiations for a formal cutoff treaty, but both countries’ stocks continue to grow. Experts estimate that India possesses enough plutonium for up to 90 nuclear weapons, while Pakistan holds enough enriched uranium for up to 48 weapons. Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh says a moratorium on fissile material production is something India “cannot accept.”

Dialogue. Clinton’s last-minute decision to include Pakistan on his itinerary (dismissed by India as a “brief stop-over”) reflects his determination to bring India and Pakistan to the negotiating table to resolve South Asia’s linchpin issue: Kashmir. Discussions in Lahore one year ago yielded a joint declaration of confidence-building measures “aimed at the avoidance of conflict.” But last summer’s clashes in Kashmir, in addition to the killings this week, demonstrated that the divided territory remains a dangerous – and potentially nuclear – flashpoint. Indian officials worry at the very suggestion of international mediation, and Clinton explicitly refuses to pressure New Delhi otherwise.

Nuclear test ban. Until October 1999, India and Pakistan were on track to sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The US Senate derailed this momentum by refusing to ratify the treaty. Nonetheless, both countries have declared a voluntary moratorium on further testing. India’s Atomic Energy Commission believes that India gained enough scientific data from its 1998 tests to be confident about its deterrent, while Pakistan is unlikely to risk further international sanctions by testing unilaterally.

Even if Clinton persuades India – and, by consequence, Pakistan – to sign the test ban treaty during his visit, the US failure to ratify it will likely preclude ratification by India and Pakistan as well.

Strategic restraint. These failures are worrisome developments, but none is so disturbing as India’s plan to deploy operational nuclear warheads. India and Pakistan currently retain a latent or “nonweaponized” nuclear capability. But if the draft nuclear doctrine released by India last August becomes official policy, then nuclear deployment is, as Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes has declared, “inevitable.” Pakistani Foreign Minister S. A. Khan assures us that “if India operationalizes its nuclear weapons, Pakistan will be obliged to follow suit.”

Nuclear deployment would significantly accelerate the slow-motion arms race that has been taking place in South Asia for over two decades and would threaten the region’s fragile stability. Nuclear weapons kept in safe storage cannot be accidentally launched, nor do they terrify neighbors with the possibility of a “bolt from the blue” surprise attack. Keeping South Asia’s nuclear weapons safely off the tips of ballistic missiles is of grave importance.

In short, the US report card in South Asia is dismal. Moreover, Clinton’s visit has not achieved major breakthroughs on any of the five “benchmark” issues. Nevertheless, these shortcomings should not obscure the value of rebuilding political and military ties with India and Pakistan.

Reversing the chill in US relations with South Asia will help secure Indian support on economic and strategic issues as well as Pakistan’s cooperation to combat terrorism and restore democracy. At the same time, Clinton’s visit will help give the US leverage to manage crises on the subcontinent. The Pentagon learned this lesson first-hand during last July’s flare-up in Kashmir, when an absence of military-to-military ties inhibited efforts to send the commander-in-chief of the US Central Command to Pakistan to defuse the crisis.

During the 1990s, the United States made demands of India and Pakistan without first gaining their confidence. As a result, US nonproliferation goals have been rebuked. Clinton’s visit is a badly needed step toward building the cooperation and trust necessary to harness the region’s nuclear dangers. This task is a decade overdue.

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Clinton is unlikely to achieve any breakthroughs.