



NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION INITIATIVES BETWEEN INDIA-PAKISTAN: AN ANALYSIS OF RAJIV GANDHI YEARS, 1984-1989

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ABSTRACT:

The article looks at the origin of cooperative nuclear risk reduction efforts between India and Pakistan. India took an offensive approach towards Pakistan in the wake of latter's developing nuclear capabilities during 1980s. India was alleged for preparing a pre-emptive attack during the later years of Indira Gandhi's rule. Later, Rajiv Gandhi also attempted to bring an offensive pressure on Pakistan by undertaking Brasstacks- a huge military exercise, in 1986-1987. However, despite of those intense postures, India-Pakistan managed to balance their nuclear relations by adopting nuclear confidence building and risk reduction measures. India-Pakistan signed an agreement to not to attack each other's nuclear installations and also pledged to exchange information about the location of their nuclear facilities in 1988. This article examines various factors and developments during Rajiv Gandhi years that led to bringing such nuclear understanding between India and Pakistan. This understanding about nuclear confidence building imperatives which was arrived at the beginning of India-Pakistan nuclear relations can be served as a role model for not only India-Pakistan but for other new nuclear weapon states such as Iran and North Korea too.

KEYWORDS : risk reduction , India-Pakistan managed , various factors and developments.

INTRODUCTION

Nuclear Risk Reduction has its origin in the Cold War. After 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis during the Cold War, United States and former Soviet Union brought a new approach of nuclear confidence building and risk reduction in their relationship. These two countries remained nuclear antagonists for three more decades, however, nuclear risk reduction became a topmost priority for their leaders thereafter. In 1980s India and Pakistan were emerging as new nuclear antagonists although both of these states did not have overt nuclear capability. The possibility of Indian pre-emptive attack and consequent nuclear clash produced unprecedented tension and anxiety not only in their bilateral relationship but also created a great concern among other states around the world.

Nuclear Risk Reduction was then introduced as a response to the rising tensions and anxieties during Rajiv Gandhi years, 1984-1989. A significant development of this period was the adoption and institutionalization of an 'agreement of non attack' between India and Pakistan. Under this agreement, both India and Pakistan agreed to not to attack each other's nuclear facilities and also pledged to exchange the information about location of their nuclear installations. This initiative was a significant achievement for India and Pakistan. It not only helped in mitigating the threat of any imminent pre-emptive attack and stabilized the nuclear relations of India-Pakistan for almost a decade up until these countries exploded nuclear weapons in 1998, but also left a legacy for India and Pakistan to take such initiatives if any nuclear crises arise in future.

This paper analyses various factors and developments that facilitated the adoption of this initiative. The rationale of the study is to discern nuclear confidence building and risk reduction techniques that were evolved from Indian side to balance overt nuclear deterrence with nuclear risk reduction.

INDIA-PAK NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION INITIATIVES (1984-1989)

The initial efforts to establish Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures between India and Pakistan originated after India-Pakistan relations took a nuclear overtone in mid 1980s. In October 1984, there were persistent reports in US media that India was preparing for a pre-emptive attack on Pakistan's nuclear weapon production facilities. George Perkovich in his monumental work 'India's Nuclear Bomb' mentions: "In October 1984, reports appears in the US media allege that US intelligence has briefed Congress that Indian military advisors are asking Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for permission to attack Pakistan's uranium enrichment facility at Kahuta... The intelligence is apparently based on the inability of US intelligence sources to locate two Jaguar squadrons based at Ambala, Punjab. This leads to speculation that the squadrons could have been relocated in preparation for a possible pre-emptive strike on Pakistan. In return, on 10 October 1984, the US Ambassador to Pakistan Dean Hinton publicly warns New Delhi that the United States will be "responsive" if India attacks Pakistan." [1]

However, India denied all these charges. A senior Indian Air Force officer later discloses that the Jaguars were hidden in the woods adjacent to the airfield in Ambala as part of a passive air defense drill [2].

A few Indian scholars on the other hand confirms the possibility of a pre-emptive attack by India. Bharat Karnad for instance, strongly infers that Indian military officers were seriously contemplating to conduct a pre-emptive attack in Pakistan taking help from Israel. He writes:

"Israel reportedly broaches India on plans to strike Pakistan's uranium enrichment plant at Kahuta. According to the Israeli proposal, the strike against Kahuta would be conducted using Israeli combat aircraft, with logistical help from India. As a first step, Israeli warplanes would use the Indian Air Force (IAF) base in Jamnagar close to the Kutch coast, from where they would fly off to refuel at a satellite airfield somewhere in northern India. In the final stage, the planes would fly on the lee side of the Himalayas to avoid early radar detection before penetrating Pakistani airspace, thus giving the Pakistani Air Force (PAF) little time to react. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi initially agrees to the plan. But she later vetoes it after being warned of the potential for negative reactions from the United States [3]".

In the same month of October 1984, Indira Gandhi gets assassinated and her young son Rajiv Gandhi replaces her as Prime Minister of India. While Indira Gandhi had more stern attitude towards Pakistan and its nuclear program, Rajiv Gandhi takes another course to build a balanced nuclear understanding with Pakistan. Soon after taking charge as Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi meets President Zia of Pakistan in the United States to initiate a process of Indo-Pak nuclear confidence building measures. He briefs the Indian parliament about his meeting with President Zia on Jan 22, 1985 stating "meeting was very cordial...I was very hopeful. I am still very hopeful (of positive relationship with Pakistan) [4]".

Pakistan responded positively to Indian initiative for starting a dialogue on nuclear confidence building. However, Pakistan also attempts to bring India under a nuclear non proliferation and disarmament agreement at the same time. In an address to the Pakistan National Assembly, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Zain Noorani expressed Pakistan's intent to join India in a binding international agreement to renounce nuclear weapons and stated: "We firmly hold the view that a non-nuclear regime in South Asia will be in the best interest of all countries in the region" [5]. In October 1985, while addressing the United Nations General Assembly, Pakistani President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq reaffirms that Pakistan is ready to enter "any agreement or arrangement with India on the basis of sovereignty and reciprocity to keep our area free of nuclear weapons [6]".

On the aegis of UN General Assembly, both Indian and Pakistani leaders held bilateral talks to deal with heightened nuclear speculations. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi called the latest meeting with Pakistani President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq "very definitely" productive and stated that bilateral talks would

soon begin on improving border security, economic cooperation and "technical" exchanges on nuclear issues [7]. Subsequently, President Zia of Pakistan paid a historic visit to India on the invitation of Rajiv Gandhi in December 1985.

During this summit level meeting, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Pakistani President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq announced innovative initiatives that would help both the countries to arrive at sensitivity and understanding about nuclear matters. Both the leaders jointly announced to "not to attack each other's nuclear plants [8]". They also agreed to "expand trade and economic ties, resume talks on a peace treaty, reduce border tensions, and investigate each others' allegations of cross-border subversion [9]". President Zia while expressing the significance of these talk stated: "The most important aspect [of the talks] is that we have decided not to attack each other's nuclear facilities [10]". Rajiv Gandhi called this announcement as "a first step in establishing confidence in each other [11]".

These announcements however, could not be institutionalized into an agreement as India-Pakistan were again fist-fighting over their nuclear programs. Both India and Pakistan accused each other's non-peaceful nuclear programs as the hindrance to the normalization of their relations. Subsequently, in 1986-87 India and Pakistan were embroiled in one of biggest military standoff called Brasstacks. Brasstacks was a large military exercise along the western border with Pakistan to test its ability to conduct mobile armored warfare. The exercise was divided into four phases from May 1986 to March 1987 [12]. Pakistan responded to this offensive exercise with her own military alarm.

In these circumstances, Pakistani Prime Minister Mohammad Khan Junejo suggested to renew bilateral talks on nuclear confidence building in July 1987. During a press conference in Japan, he offered to allow India to inspect the Kahuta uranium enrichment plant near Rawalpindi in exchange for reciprocal inspections by Pakistan of an Indian nuclear facility[13]. However, India rejected this proposal. Indian Minister of State for External Affairs K. Natwar Singh stated in parliament that Pakistan's proposal for mutual inspection of each other's nuclear facilities is "neither practicable nor workable [14]".

In September 1987, Pakistan urged India to accept its proposal to declare South Asia a nuclear-weapon-free zone [15]. On 24 September 1987, in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Pakistani Prime Minister Mohammad Khan Junejo proposed that Pakistan and India should jointly accept a nuclear-free zone and regional test ban treaty in South Asia. He stated: "Pakistan is prepared to go further and subscribe to a comprehensive test ban in a global, regional, or bilateral context. The conclusion of a bilateral test ban agreement between Pakistan and India would serve to assure each other, and the world, that neither country has any intention of pursuing the nuclear weapons option.[16]". India again rejected the idea of nuclear test ban. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi stated, "We [India] feel it will not stop their nuclear program. We don't think... we will be able to achieve a freezing of their nuclear weapons program just by inspections [17]".

After the death of Pakistani President Zia and the establishment of democratic rule under Benazir Bhutto, India and Pakistan resumed the negotiations to bring a mutual nuclear understanding in 1988. Rajiv Gandhi visited Pakistan to attend fourth South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit, which was the first visit by an Indian Prime minister to Pakistan in preceding 28 years. On 31 December 1988 during the summit, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Pakistani Prime Minister Bhutto signed the proposed 'No attack agreement'.

NO ATTACK AGREEMENT

No attack agreement was considered as a historic achievement for Indo-Pak relations. The dialogue on agreement as a nuclear risk reduction measure was rolling since Gandhi-Zia meeting of Dec 1985 and culminated into a signed and authorized agreement in 1988. After signing this agreement, Pakistani PM Bhutto remarked, "A momentum for peace has begun. I think that in both of our countries there is a groundswell for peace. An extremely important step has been taken toward improving relations between India and Pakistan [18]". The agreement required both sides to refrain from directly attacking, encouraging,

or participating in any action aimed at destroying or damaging any nuclear facility. These facilities included nuclear power and research reactors and fuel fabrication, uranium enrichment, isotope separation and reprocessing facilities, as well as any other facilities containing radioactive material. It also required the annual exchange of lists detailing the locations of all nuclear related facilities in each country [19].

FACTORS LEADING TO NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION

It is clear from the above discussion that evolution of nuclear risk reduction initiatives coincides with various roller coaster developments during the initial years of India-Pakistan nuclear relationship. Therefore, unlike western experience of nuclear risk reduction measures, which emerged after the precipitation of serious nuclear threat during Cuban Missile Crisis, the evolution of the nuclear risk reduction measures between India and Pakistan cannot be attributed as a responsive outcome of any serious threat of nuclear war. These initiatives however, was a byproduct of various factors discussed in this section.

Latent threat of Pre-emptive Attack: Although India and Pakistan had not taken any nuclear test and were not nuclear weapon states at that time, yet the presence of latent nuclear capabilities of both India and Pakistan was forcing both the sides to foresee the possibilities of nuclear threat. India had already shown the presence of nuclear material through peaceful explosion in 1974. In 1980s the details of Pakistani nuclear program were also persistently emerging. In Feb 1984, Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan publicly declared that Pakistan had acquired the capability to enrich uranium, which means that it could produce a nuclear bomb at short notice [20]. This created large discomfort among the Indian military and political circle. India was alleged for preparing to stop Pakistan from building nuclear weapon by planning a strike at nuclear facilities on the enrichment facility at Kahuta along the lines of the one conducted by the Israelis against the reactor at Osiraq in 1981. It is thus, clear that 1984-85 crises which preceded the first effort towards establishing NRRMS between India and Pakistan was not a nuclear conflict, nonetheless the nuclear factors were implicit. P.R.Chari notes that: "the involvement of nuclear installations in the Indo-Pak crises of 1984-85 does not qualify these events as nuclear crises [21]". It cannot be considered as full blown nuclear crisis in spite of being related to nuclear facilities and installations, as at that time both India and Pakistan were not nuclear weapon states.

However, the contribution of the nuclear overtones attached to India-Pakistan bilateral relationship during this time proved a significant factor in making their leaders brainstorm over the possibility and outcome of such a crisis, leading them to reach an understanding to prevent such a scenario in future.

Tacit Nuclear Weapon Programs: Another factor contributing to the evolution of nuclear risk reduction initiatives between India and Pakistan was their hidden nuclear programs. There was widespread speculations of their tacit nuclear programs in 1980s. Pakistan was apparently competing with India in the field of nuclear energy after India's Peaceful Nuclear Explosion in 1974. By 1980s as mentioned above, Pakistani scientists were claiming to have enough capability to build a nuclear weapon. These developments produced an environment of mutual suspicion between these two countries. Given these circumstances, nuclear risk reduction was significant to reduce the suspicion about each other's capabilities.

Nuclear safety and Disarmament pressure: During 1980s India and Pakistan were under a tremendous pressure to become a signatory to non-proliferation treaties. India and Pakistan's fragile bilateral relations were instrumental in further convincing the world community to take every possible effort to dissuade these two countries to adopt nuclear weapon. Not only the threat of nuclear attack but also the safety of nuclear material and installations was a matter of growing concern. Therefore, it was essential for India and Pakistan to assure mutual understanding and trust before introducing a new element in the entire security dimension of the region.

High costs of nuclear deterrent: In 1980s, India and Pakistan might have nuclear capabilities, but they did not have enough resources to build an effective nuclear deterrent. "In October 1985, [Rajiv Gandhi] formed a small committee of experts and tasks them with outlining the architecture and costs of a potential nuclear deterrent... In November 1985, the committee... is advised by an economic advisor that the high cost

of a nuclear deterrent will have an adverse impact on the Indian economy [22]". Therefore, confidence building was a best approach to minimize nuclear risks and to prepare both the countries for taking up nuclear burden.

Middle Way to Nuclear Armament and Disarmament: Nuclear risk reduction initiatives were also introduced by India and Pakistan to adopt a middle way to manage their nuclear options. 1980s was a time when both India and Pakistan were neither committed to build nuclear weapon nor to pledge for nuclear disarmament. Therefore, nuclear risk reduction was a practical way to deal with ambiguity resulting from their unclear nuclear option. It was neither the disarmament nor the deterrence way. Rajiv Gandhi was an ambitious prime minister and endorsed the concept of 'nuclear free world'. But he could not support it practically for India as Pakistan was steering intensive nuclear program. Therefore, nuclear risk reduction was the appropriate substitute of disarmament as well as deterrence, a method to hold the nuclear capability as well as to ensure the nuclear safety.

Conflict Management approach of Rajiv Gandhi: India witnessed a fresh approach towards conflict management during Rajiv Gandhi years. Unlike real politik approach of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi preferred confidence building route to deal with nuclear situation. He took initiatives to negotiate with Pakistani president Zia-ul-Haq and Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto to institutionalize 'no attack agreement'. However, he was criticized for his cooperative and friendly move towards Pakistan. The debate was held in response to an offensive statement made by a Pakistani minister soon after the visit of Zia to India and the announcement of agreement not to attack nuclear facilities. Rajiv Gandhi was alleged for ignoring the security concerns of India by offering cooperative hands, as Pakistan was termed as facilitator of India's internal problems, especially related with Punjab and Kashmir along with other charges of arms proliferation and raising Kashmir issue at UN. In response to this criticism, he stated: "We maintain that only bilateralism can be the basis of discussions and solutions of all problems between India and Pakistan.....There is some achievement that has been made but still we have to go a long way to evolve a framework of cooperation. With Pakistan we emphasizing. Let us try to build confidence among the people and among the countries. The confidence building measures are very important.....our emphasis is on CBMs [23]". Hence, the adoption of nuclear risk reduction initiatives was also a result of his optimistic and practical approach.

CONCLUSION

An important lesson can be drawn for emerging nuclear states such as Iran and North Korea from this analysis. These states have been undergoing the similar circumstances as that of India-Pakistan in the beginning of their nuclear equations. The threat of pre-emptive attack, rumors of tacit nuclear programs, high cost of nuclear deterrence, nuclear safety and disarmament pressure and also the countries' being in middle of deterrence and disarmament option are the apparent characteristics of their situation too. These countries thus need the conflict management approach as adopted by India-Pakistan. Devising nuclear risk reduction initiatives can be a viable and effective method to manage the conflicts that these states are witnessing with their neighbor countries or the United States. Iran has already reached an understanding with the United States about its nuclear undertakings. However, US-North Korea still has to find a nuclear risk reduction way out from the nuclear standoff they are going through in the present times.

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