India's nuclear example
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U.S. President Barack Obama's nuclear-security summit this week raised speculation in the media once again about a South Asian arms race. There is understandably deep concern in many capitals about the apparent acceleration of Pakistan's production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, a potential source of leakage to terrorists. But the implication that India is also participating in some sort of unbridled nuclear-arms race needs to be treated with caution. In fact, in some ways New Delhi's nuclear-weapons posture could be the model to which President Obama's new policy of American nuclear restraint aspires.

India appears to be shaping—through choice as much as necessity—a minimum credible nuclear deterrent. Publicly available estimates of its arsenal size suggest that the second most populous nation in the world, located in a dangerous regional neighborhood and with two nuclear-armed neighbors, has only tens of nuclear warheads at its disposal, perhaps none of them thermonuclear. By comparison, the United States has about 2,700 deployed strategic warheads, and Russia has around 3,900. Both countries also have substantial tactical stockpiles—yet both are presenting their new treaty to reduce those figures to 1,550 apiece as a great leap for disarmament.

New Delhi has, by and large, a declared "no first use" nuclear-weapons policy. India qualified this policy in 2003 to reserve the right for India to strike back at chemical or biological attacks—a stance which the U.S. is now beginning to move away from. But India's nuclear doctrine remains overwhelmingly defensive and focused on deterrence.

Of all the nuclear-armed states, India has been the most active in promoting global agreement on no first use—including through bilateral and multilateral treaties—and on negative security assurances, or guarantees not to strike non-nuclear states. Even China, the most self-righteous doctrinal champion of no first use, has rejected India's overtures for a bilateral pact, not wishing to be seen to bestow any form of nuclear legitimacy on a power it likes to pretend is not a rival.

Questions remain about the effectiveness of New Delhi's deterrent, and its likely need to enhance, if not expand, the arsenal. Ultimately, a no-first-use policy can be credible only if it is accompanied by what security wonks like to call an "assured second-strike capability." In other words, India needs to be confident that enough of its assets would survive an enemy's first strike for New Delhi to be able to retaliate.

The best chance of assuring second-strike capability comes from a submarine-based deterrent, and that is exactly what New Delhi has slowly and unevenly been pursuing over the years. Progress is finally being made on this front, with sea trials of an indigenously produced nuclear-powered submarine—presumably with Russian help, indirect or otherwise—and advances toward developing a suitable missile, albeit with short range.

But India is, at the very least, years away from being able to use submarines to deter its two potential nuclear adversaries, Pakistan or China. Though many arms-control scholars might not like to acknowledge it, India's eventual success in fashioning such a strategic tool might just end up being a net benefit for strategic stability in Asia as China increases its power, reach and confidence.

In the meantime, Pakistan's efforts to expand its arsenal could be seen as a bid to gain not just parity but even nuclear superiority over India. This is especially troubling given the context of the Pakistani army's continued forbearance, if not support, for the use of Pakistan's territory as a base for terrorism against Indian targets, despite India's conventional military advantage.

So it is surprising how relaxed the Indian effort at expanding its nuclear capability continues to be. Of course, this could change, were New Delhi genuinely to see nuclear weapons as its top national defense priority—in other words, were India to adopt the Cold War superpowers' arms-race mentality.

Paradoxically, treating India as part of the proliferation problem, rather than part of the solution, may only encourage New Delhi down such a dire path. Closer U.S.-India strategic ties are needed partly as a way of giving India the sort of strategic confidence it needs to keep its arsenal small.

Some critics of the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal argue that it has helped drive nuclear competition between India and Pakistan, by "freeing up" for weapons purposes parts of India's small domestic atomic-energy infrastructure. After all, although the deal puts a growing majority of India's reactors under International Atomic Energy Agency monitoring, New Delhi has declined to allow such "safeguards" to be enacted for its experimental fast-breeder program and eight indigenous power reactors, though they are far from ideal for bomb making.

However, Pakistan's actual behavior and India's potential behavior are very different things. Treating them with artificial equivalence, in the old hyphenated way, is a sure way to alienate India from the U.S. nuclear arms control and security endeavors.

Of all the powers, India was the one most short-changed by the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The world can no longer afford to leave it out of the nonproliferation and nuclear security tent, which is why it was a relief that even though the media talked about it, a South Asian nuclear arms race remained off the official agenda in Washington this week.

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