

SUMMARY OF TALK BY DR. MICHAEL KREPON ON
“STABILITY-INSTABILITY PARADOX IN SOUTH ASIA”

Dr. Michael Krepon, Founder President of the Henry L. Stimson Centre, a non-partisan think tank focusing on international security issues, spoke on the “Stability-Instability Paradox in South Asia”. Mr. M.K. Narayanan, Vice President of the Centre for Security Analysis made the opening remarks while Dr. Jaya Shreedhar welcomed the gathering. The meeting was presided over by Dr. Richard Haynes, Consul General of the US Consulate in Chennai.

Dr. Krepon first welcomed the establishment of the CSA and congratulated its founders. He then went on to the question, “Do nuclear weapons deter bad actions by bad actors?” which is a fundamental question for deterrence strategists. In spite of all the research that has gone into deterrence, the answer is, “We do not know”.

It is true that nuclear weapons were not used during the cold war and it is quite possible that deterrence worked. But there are other possible explanations such as the responsible leadership on both sides would have avoided another world war even if nuclear weapons were not there.

In fact, there were close calls and accidents during the cold war and still things did not go out of control. Perhaps luck and providence played a role apart from responsible leadership. The point, however, is that we do not know if deterrence works. Deterrence theorists have tried to explain why nuclear weapons are not used by nuclear adversaries against each other using the “Stability-Instability Paradox”?. The explanation of the paradox goes like this:

When there are two adversaries with nuclear weapons, the presence of these weapons will actually increase tensions and frictions between them. This is because both of them will think that there is an insurance against unintended escalation that could result in crossing the nuclear threshold. Within that threshold, however, there was freedom to punish the other.

For example, the USSR punished the US when the latter extended itself in Vietnam. The US paid back when the USSR extended itself in Afghanistan. This is the instability part.

The other part – stability rests on the awareness of the consequences of the nuclear war. Therefore, the adversaries will take steps to ensure that the nuclear threshold is not crossed.

Presently, the Stability-Instability Paradox is being tested in the South Asian Region. Many theorists had earlier argued that the “Stability-Instability Paradox” born out of different circumstances in the cold war, was not applicable to South Asia. There was optimism that India and Pakistan will move towards normalization of relations as the presence of nuclear weapons made any use of force impossible.

This optimism has failed. There have been many crisis in the Indo-Pak relations after May, 1998 proving that the instability has come into place. The question, however, is whether the other half namely stability, will apply notwithstanding Kashmir, terrorism, mobilization and so on.

Deterrence pessimists look at South Asia and see the following conditions:

1. Conventional military balance is changing in favour of India. India has more economic capacity to procure weapons and also has more sources. Pakistan's options are limited and it is relying more on China. India's surveillance capabilities, missile defense technologies are fitting the conventional balance in India's favour. The conventional imbalance will lead to less stability on the nuclear side.
2. Both India and Pakistan do not know what the other side has. In the absence of inspections and resultant knowledge gap of each other's capabilities, miscalculations are possible.
3. India and Pakistan know each other's conventional postures quite well. They can understand the meaning of the moves the other side's conventional forces make. But there is little understanding of each other's nuclear postures. For example, one side does not know why a missile formation is being moved on the other side. The bad information gaps can be critical in crisis situations. Bad intelligence could become catastrophic.
4. In the long run there could be stability on the nuclear front also as the nuclear parity will be lost and the balance will favour India. In that case there would be conventional as well as nuclear instability.
5. Redlines are inherently ambiguous. Nuclear escalation is a complex game and we do not know when we cross the nuclear threshold. Even redlines that appear to be clear in theory are not clear on the battlefield. A conventional attack on the other's territory not knowing that nuclear assets are stationed there could become a crossing of the redline. An act of nuclear terrorism by some group may or may not be operating under instructions from the other side could be a redline. Therefore, there is a lack of clarity on the issue of nuclear threshold.
6. In the early stages of the nuclear programme, there are two kinds of vulnerabilities. One is that the adversary knows where the other side's nuclear assets are. It is hard to hide nuclear assets and delivery systems. In such a situation, Pakistan will not believe in India's 'no first use' doctrine due to its fear of losing its nuclear assets. The second vulnerability is in terms of decapitation of political leadership. Pakistan cannot destroy all of India's nuclear assets in a preemptive attack owing to India's strategic depth. However, it can target and eliminate India's civilian leadership. It is not clear if India is prepared for this eventuality and has developed an insurance policy against this.

There are 10 key elements from Western nuclear experience for nuclear risk reduction that are applicable to South Asia. They are:

1. Do not change or try to change the territorial status quo in sensitive areas by the use of force or intimidation.
2. Avoid nuclear boasting
3. Avoid dangerous military practices
4. Put in place special reinforcing measures for nuclear weapons such as their movement, operations etc.
5. Negotiate and implement nuclear risk reduction measures and confidence building measures (CBMs)
6. Agree on verification arrangements and intensive monitoring. This is because one cannot trust the other's rhetoric and proof will be required.
7. Establish reliable means of communication between political leaders and military leaders of both sides. Talk to each other all the time through regular summits etc.
8. Establish reliable command and control as well as superior intelligence capabilities.
9. Keep working hard on all these measures and keep improving.
10. Hope for good luck, because even if one works hard on other points things could go wrong.

The question is how many of these commandments are in place between India and Pakistan?.

It took a lot of time for USA and USSR to put in place nuclear risk reduction measures, but then there was no territorial dispute between them and neither of them indulged in the use of terrorism against the other.

© Pakistan is opposed to the status quo in Kashmir. Both India and Pakistan have indulged in dangerous military practices. There is no government to government communication between the two sides.

The USA with its preoccupations elsewhere, is not in a position to play a major role in pushing India and Pakistan towards a dialogue in the foreseeable future.

Pakistan is not ready for a serious engagement with India. It has not figured out what a pragmatic solution to Kashmir could be.

Overall, the circumstances that surround Indo-Pak nuclear relations are pessimistic. Every war that has occurred between India and Pakistan has come as a surprise to either to India or to Pakistan. This speaks about the lack of understanding about each other. Neither does India have a good number of Pakistan experts nor does Pakistan have India experts. There are real gaps in knowledge about each other.

If official dialogue were to resume between India and Pakistan, would there be progress on nuclear risk reduction? This would mainly require policy change on Pakistan's side. Pakistan has defined progress as progress towards its preferred outcome on Kashmir. This 'linkage strategy' has to change or Pakistan's Kashmir policy has to change.

Ofcourse, there is also the argument of the deterrence optimists that deterrence will prevail between India and Pakistan. The argument is simple but powerful and rests on the following premises:

1. Crisis have occurred between both the countries in the past but the nuclear threshold has not been breached. National leadership on both sides are keenly aware of the consequences of a nuclear war and have been very responsible.
2. National economics militates against nuclear war on both sides. Particularly, India has a robust economic agenda of growth which will act as a preventive mechanism.
3. There will be third party intervention in the case of a nuclear crisis. The US will intervene in a big way even if it is preoccupied with other issues.

It can be concluded that nuclear deterrence is going to be severely tested in South Asia. One half of the 'Stability-Instability Paradox', namely instability is in place. The question is whether the other half, namely, stability will come about.

It is possible that India and Pakistan will do what other have done. It will certainly be easier to achieve stability if Pakistan changes its Kashmir policy. But even if it does not it has to be done. There are some risk reduction measures that can be taken unilaterally such as improving command and control and intelligence. But most of the steps require both the parties to do them. Nuclear risk reduction and nuclear stability can be achieved and has to be achieved as there is no choice about it.

After his presentation, Dr. Krepon responded to wide ranging questions from the audience on the nuclear issue. Some of his important comments are give below:

To the question whether China was not the main reason for India's nuclear programme, Dr. Krepon pointed out that though China was clearly a factor in India's nuclear policy, the problem mainly concerned Pakistan in the foreseeable future. There was CBMs and nuclear risk reduction measures.

Dr. M.R. Srinivasan argued that it was Pakistan that had indulged in nuclear brinkmanship and that only a strong second strike capability by India that assured Pakistan unacceptable damage proved to be the basis for nuclear deterrence between the two countries. Dr. Krepon agreed that Pakistan indulged in greater brinkmanship but pointed out that this added to the instability. Brinkmanship on the part of Pakistan and reasonableness on the part of India could not be sustained. There were two other elements that added to instability. One is the presence of the Jihadi factor which was not the case between the USA and USSR during the cold war. The second concerned the respective nuclear doctrines of India and Pakistan. While India's doctrine is that of 'massive retaliation', Pakistan's undeclared doctrine is that of 'massive strikes'. This again adds to instability. Both the USA and USSR had massive retaliation as their doctrines during the cold war.

Mr. M.K. Narayanan, Vice President of CSA wondered whether the advantages of keeping the nuclear programme under the control of a small and predominantly civilian community would be lost if more authority is transferred to armed forces through the creation of the Armed Forces Nuclear Command. Dr. Krepon's response was that this was something that had happened in the US also and that the possibility of decapitation, the need for supreme civilian control and the acceptance of civilian control by military offices have to be kept in mind while answering that question.

Mr. B. Raman raised the issue of nuclear terrorism and the presence of terrorist actors on the Pakistani side. He raised the issue of the US role in preventing nuclear material from falling into the hands of the terrorist organizations. Dr. Krepon pointed out that the complexity of nuclear terrorism and to the fact that there is the possibility of nuclear material falling into the hands of terrorists from poorly safeguarded nuclear facilities. The US can share its knowledge and the lessons it has learnt and can offer assistance in screening, monitoring and other 'Cooperative Threat Reduction Programmes'.

Dr. Malviya argued that the US policy towards India and Pakistan over Kashmir was "evenhanded" and had to change. Dr. Krepon responded by saying that Pakistan's Kashmir policy was a failure in the sense that it did not materially alter the ground reality. However, in terms of what it has made India pay, it can be termed as a success. There was a case for a more proactive role by the US not in the sense that it can provide any solution but in the sense that it can offer guidelines and facilitate the process. However, India was not inclined to accept any third party role. If India wanted to see the violence come to an end in Kashmir it needed to find jobs for the youths there and accelerate development.

Ms. Visa Ravindran of the CSA proposed the vote of thanks.