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Working Group 5 Report: “Regional Working Group – South Asia”

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The discussions in working group 5 were organized under three themes: (1) India-Pakistan relations and regional security; (2) Confidence building and strategic stability; and (3) Afghan conflict and regional dimensions. The participants in the group involved Pakistani and Indian scholars and former officials. A number of other interested individuals were also involved in the conversation. The working group proceedings commenced with the explicit notion of looking into the future and generating policy recommendations. There was no concerted effort to generate consensus; rather the free exchange of views and the airing of legitimate differences were encouraged.

The discussion began with a brief contextual background on myriad problems of south Asia. The participants agreed that South Asia is a third world region housing one third of humanity- afflicted by poverty and related socio-economic problems. The immense defense budgets and military infrastructures come at the cost of the development of the impoverished populations of the region.

India-Pakistan Relations and Regional Security

It was agreed that there is a need to address Kashmir and terrorism, which indeed are, the central problems in the region. However, all India-Pakistan diplomatic talks seem to face roadblocks when it comes to discussing these issues. It was also felt by the group that it might be easier to move forward on less contentious issues that are perhaps easier to square away. Such issues include the Siachen Glacier demilitarization, Sir Creek negotiations, granting of the MFN status and future cooperation on the Indus water basin. By tackling these other issues first a constituency for peace could be built in both countries.

People to people contacts have not borne fruit in the past but *broader* cultural, economic and academic exchanges should still be continued and extended.

Viewing the evolving security situation, the current prospects for dialogue are bleak and all the more crucial. There is a general mindset in South Asia of insensitivity to the other parties' concerns and interests, mutual finger pointing and dictating relative individual terms.

Media in both the countries need to be more careful as they contribute to derailing of the peace process by adding fuel to fire.

In the current scenario it was pointed out that the widening military and economic gap between India and Pakistan will prevent these two parties from coming to the table on equal terms.

The discussion then pivoted to the role and interests of both nations in Afghanistan. It was generally agreed that instability in Afghanistan has significant ramifications for Pakistan. Pakistan hosts a large number of Afghan citizens at significant economic cost to itself. There is a need for immediate efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. There are multiple factors and contradictions in the current policies of all parties that are contributing to further deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan. There is a lack of strategic vision for Afghanistan where actors end up acting at counter-purposes to each other and sometimes even their own policies are inherently contradictory.

One participant suggested that the role of China should be welcomed as a mediator as it had credibility with the Taliban, even more so than Pakistan.

It was suggested that India and Pakistan apart from their bilateral issues should also have a dialogue on their role and interests in Afghanistan geared towards bringing stability to the war-torn country. One participant noted that India has been traditionally concerned about the improvement in Af-Pak relations, but there is currently a more nuanced understanding of the Pakistani security interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan in New Delhi. This might lead to meaningful dialogue between India and Pakistan on Afghanistan.

Nuclear Security and Risk Reduction:

Existing nuclear energy programs were discussed and projected expansion of the programs with a special emphasis on safety and security was analyzed.

The pace of production of fissile materials in both countries was also broached. At least one participant suggested that there was no race in expansion of fissile material stockpile and that decisions were being made logically with a special attention to the security needs.

There was an extended discussion about the current nature of the nuclear postures in south Asia. It is generally perceived though not declared by the respective governments that India and Pakistan pursue a posture of recessed deterrence and maintain their weapons in de-mated forms. India and Pakistan could therefore unilaterally or bilaterally declare that they are pursuing a recessed deterrence posture. This led to a discussion about the lexicon of the Cold war having connotations/implications for South Asia, having technical challenges about qualifying what constitutes recessed deterrence with implications for the level of readiness and verification. However it was agreed that there is diplomatic value of unilateral declarations and trust building. A balance between secrecy and transparency has to be maintained to enhance confidence.

There was a strong view that one measure to build confidence in South Asia would be to mainstream Pakistan in the international nuclear order.

There is a general concern on the development of the battlefield nuclear weapons, because they involve a risk for a potential crisis to escalate into a nuclear exchange in South Asia. However it was pointed out by some participants that this issue needs broader discussion because it is linked to other problems about conventional asymmetries and nuclear modernization.

It was also opined that South Asia must learn from the experiences of the cold war on the subject of tactical nuclear weapons. Exercises and wargames based on the usage of TNWs during the Cold war era always resulted in a catastrophe.

Bilateral and Regional Confidence Building Measures:

Participants argued that there exists a number of CBMs between India and Pakistan. But these two states either fail to implement them fully or they are the first causality of any new crisis. However, the Lahore declaration of 1999 still provides a good framework for the two countries to base their future dialogues on.

The existence of CBMs during periods of relative thaw become an excuse for not proceeding from CBMs to conflict resolution. The impetus for dialogue comes normally from states outside the region and in the absence of an imminent crisis these states fail to engage in conflict resolution. India and Pakistan should look for the kind of CBMs that would lead the region to a breakthrough than just an excuse for not proceeding on peace.

Policy Recommendations:

Viewing the deteriorating security situation of India-Pakistan relations and of Afghanistan, immediate resumption of bilateral Indo-Pak dialogue based on a mutually agreed framework, including all issues, is needed.

Economic and trade cooperation should be actively pursued. Pakistan should provide India access to Afghanistan and Central Asia via Pakistan. This will result in creating an Indian stake in Pakistan's security and create an environment for conflict resolution.

The visa regime should be liberalized in letter and spirit without discrimination. This will act as a silver bullet in helping improve mutual perceptions and reduce animosity.

Both countries should take up the issue of terrorism at bilateral as well as regional level. Also serious dialogue on terrorism could be undertaken at the level of intelligence agencies which will help initiate a dialogue that will lead to practical, long-term and effective solutions.

A permanent mechanism/body needs to be established to discuss terrorism especially including development of protocols under which cooperation to prevent escalation in a crisis may take place.

Both countries should continue with their posture of recessed deterrence and de-mated weapons. They should jointly assess the possibility of formalizing these postures and a possibility of developing verification measures.

Central command and control, and same level of security should always be ensured for all kinds, yields and ranges of nuclear weapons in South Asia.

The international community should work with Pakistan to mainstream it in the international nuclear order in non-discriminatory way.

The issue of water management, environmental degradation and climate change needs immediate attention, as per article 7 of the Indus water treaty or outside of it.

Irresponsible statements (on any issue) from either side have contributed to threat perceptions of both countries coupled with the hawkish stance of the media that adds fuel to fire. Responsible behavior by all involved here is crucial to avoid tensions and crisis escalation.