



OPINION

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Nuclear signals in South Asia

Arun Vishwanathan

India, Pakistan, and China have been dancing a nuclear tango of late, taking steps that have serious implications for the entire region.

Pakistan has worked assiduously to expand its fissile material stockpile while threatening to lower its nuclear threshold, claiming that its short-range missile, [Nasr/Hatf-IX](#), is nuclear capable. These Pakistani moves are apparently meant as a counter to India's Cold Start Doctrine, a plan for launching a conventional military attack on very short notice, even though New Delhi has denied its very existence. China, meanwhile, has continued to modernize its missile forces while fostering strategic ambiguity about its no-first-use nuclear policy. And in response to Pakistani and Chinese signals, India has publicly emphasized the survivability of its nuclear missiles, the extension of their range, and the deployment of a nuclear submarine, suggesting a powerful second-strike nuclear capability.

A nuclear signaling game can be beneficial to both the sender and receiver of messages; if the signals are properly understood, they can reduce the likelihood of nuclear conflict by suggesting, ahead of time, just how unwelcome the results of military aggression would be. Poorly executed signals, however, can be misunderstood, heightening tensions and increasing the possibility of escalation during a conflict. The current round of South Asian signaling seems to be of the latter variety.

Pakistan's weak signal. Whether an adversary perceives a signal as strong or weak is crucial to success in the nuclear signaling game. Despite widespread international consternation following Pakistan's claims about a supposed nuclear capability for the Nasr missile, New Delhi has gone its diplomatic way, pretty much as usual. This lack of reaction is largely due to several doubts about Pakistan's claim. First, a warhead that could fit into such a small, short-range missile system would likely have to be a plutonium-based, linear-implosion device. During its 1998 nuclear tests, however, Pakistan did not detonate a plutonium device. Second, given the low quality of Pakistan's natural uranium ore, there are also doubts whether it can produce enough fissile

material to simultaneously stockpile uranium- and plutonium-based weapons. Last, and most important, [Indian nuclear doctrine](#) does not distinguish between tactical and strategic nuclear weapons. India continues to adhere to a no-first-use policy, but its nuclear doctrine clearly assures that it will engage in massive retaliation against any nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces, anywhere.

In sum, India doubts Pakistan's claim that its short-range Nasr is nuclear capable and, even if it were, India does not see a nuclear-capable Nasr as greatly changing the nuclear equation between the countries. Therefore, even though it has tested low-yield nuclear weapons, possesses the capability to miniaturize its nuclear warheads, and has a reliable delivery platform, India has not found it necessary to respond directly to the Pakistani threat.

Even so, Islamabad should re-consider its gambit, which illustrates well how nuclear signaling can go off course. That's to say, Pakistani strategists should ask themselves this question: Is Pakistan's deterrent capability strengthened or weakened by an unpersuasive claim that the Nasr is nuclear capable and ready for tactical use? Though not to their liking, the answer is the latter, and surely, a weak deterrent cannot be in Pakistan's national interest. In particular, a capability that is perceived to be a bluff is unlikely to deter India from launching a conventional military attack on short or no notice.

The signals out of Beijing and New Delhi. India and China share a disputed border where simmering tension periodically heats up, as seen in the [recent stand-off](#) in Ladakh. And of late, China has sent signals of its own, continuing [modernization of its delivery platforms](#) by migrating from liquid-fueled to solid-fueled missiles. Beijing has also been working to add [multiple-warhead capability to its missiles](#), as the July 2012 test of its DF-41 intercontinental ballistic missile illustrates. Complicating this matter further is a defense white paper that the Chinese government [published](#) in April, raising questions as to whether China continues to follow a no-first-use nuclear weapons policy. Given the lack of a clear reference to the no-first use policy in the document, there has been a debate as to whether or not China has changed its nuclear policy away from that of a no-first-use. A doubt has thus been planted. Whether that doubt will be of benefit to China in a crisis situation, however, remains an open question.

Until recently, India had maintained a studied silence in the nuclear realm, but of late New Delhi has come up with its own set of counters to signals emanating from Islamabad and Beijing. The first move took the form of a [speech](#) and a newspaper [op-ed](#) by Shyam Saran, chairman of the Indian National Security Advisory Board. Saran highlighted steps taken by New Delhi—including establishment of a triad (nuclear weapons delivered by aircraft, missiles, and submarines)—that ensure the reliability, quality, and survivability of India's nuclear weapons. In the speech, Saran also said that Pakistan was making a mistake in threatening use of theater nuclear weapons to counter a conventional Indian military thrust. Because India does not distinguish between different types of nuclear weapons, Saran noted, any use of nuclear weapons against India would draw a nuclear response.

New Delhi's second move became clear in June, soon after Avinash Chander took over as the chief of India's Defence Research and Development Organisation, which designs and manufactures India's ballistic and cruise missiles. During his interactions with the media, Chander has departed from a tradition of nuclear secrecy, dropping several hints that pointed to Indian efforts to increase the survivability of its nuclear deterrent, without actually giving away how far India had progressed in these efforts. The [ability](#) to fire missiles from canisters mounted on mobile launcher trucks is part of such a strategy, as are efforts to develop technologies to carry [multiple warheads](#) on one missile. Chander has publicly confirmed India's interest in developing both capabilities.

During a recent interview, Chander also mentioned his mandate to bring down the response time of an [Indian second strike](#) to a few minutes. That interview seemed timed to coincide with the visit of Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony to China. A hard-line People's Liberation Army retired major general, Lou Yuan, quickly [responded](#), advising New Delhi not to provoke "new problems and increase military deployments at the border area and stir up new trouble." It is unclear whether this response is reflective of the Chinese government's overall view, but it does point up the tension—and the signaling—between Beijing and New Delhi.

The nuclear future in South Asia. No matter how unbelievable it may seem, Pakistan's suggestion that it might pre-delegate authority for use of a nuclear-tipped Nasr to battlefield commanders greatly increases tension with India and the chances of nuclear conflict. The unresolved border dispute between India and China and Beijing's possible role in an Indo-Pak conflict continue to keep Sino-Indian relations tense. Indian missiles with longer range and the Indian nuclear submarine *Arihant* will bring within reach targets across China. This expansion of the Indian nuclear deterrent could add stability to the Sino-Indian relationship—or simply increase tensions.

India, Pakistan, and China need to engage if they are to understand the vocabulary and thinking that underpin one another's nuclear strategies. India will hold elections in 2014. Pakistan has just gone through a democratic transfer of power. China has a new set of leaders in place after its decadal leadership transition. It will be interesting to see whether and how the nuclear signaling game in South Asia changes, once new leadership is in place in all three countries.

Arun [Vishwanathan](#) is an assistant professor in the [International Strategic and Security Studies Programme](#), National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. He was previously assistant director in the National Security Council Secretariat of the Indian government. His recent book (co-edited with Rajaram Nagappa) is *Troubling Tehran: Reflections on Geopolitics*.