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South Asia Crisis: Effects on the Middle East

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Summary

The May 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan have raised concerns that these countries, particularly Pakistan, might transfer nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction technology to Iran or other Middle Eastern states. Iran has developed military ties to both India and Pakistan, and has tried to acquire advanced technology from Pakistan, but political and other differences have limited these relationships. There is little evidence that other Middle Eastern countries have tried to acquire weapons of mass destruction technology from India or Pakistan. This paper will not be updated.

Introduction

Many observers fear that the May 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan are likely to cause a broader arms race in the neighboring Middle East. There is particular concern that Iran or Arab states in the Middle East will cultivate Pakistan, the first Islamic state to detonate a nuclear device, as a nuclear supplier to help them counter Israel's purported nuclear capability. Iran has been cited by U.S. officials as actively attempting to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and it has pursued conventional military and WMD relationships with both India and Pakistan. However, Iran's technology relationships with India and Pakistan have been on a small scale as compared to Iran's primary WMD technology suppliers Russia, China, and North Korea.

Although the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has said Iraq's nuclear program has been ended, the United States and other countries suspect Iraq might try to revive its nuclear program in the future, although it is not certain it would turn toward Pakistan or India to do so. Saudi Arabia is not generally considered a nuclear proliferation threat, but it and some of the other Persian Gulf monarchies have close relations with Pakistan and could, in the event of a Middle Eastern arms race, look to Pakistan for advanced weapons technology.

Although public reaction does not necessarily indicate future intentions, statements by Iran and other Middle Eastern countries on the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests have been cautious. On June 1, Iran's Foreign Minister said the Pakistani tests would make Muslims feel more confident in the face of Israel's perceived nuclear capability. However, the Foreign Ministry also said that Iran wanted both to end their arms race and join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). (Iran is a party to that treaty.) Saudi Arabia said the nuclear tests undermine regional stability but it partly blamed the tests on a double standard in which the world community ignores Israel's nuclear capability. Media in other Arab countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), criticized the United States for imposing sanctions on Pakistan and India but not on Israel, although Israel did not test a nuclear weapon.

Iran's Relations With Pakistan and India

Pakistan. Iran and Pakistan have some strategic interests in common, but relations have fluctuated. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Robin Raphel testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in September 1995 that Iran and Pakistan share a common border and are wary neighbors, not strategic allies. Iran and Pakistan are both Muslim states, although Iran follows the Shiite sect of Islam, whereas Pakistan is predominantly Sunni Muslim but with an important Shiite elite. Pakistan's Embassy in Washington hosts Iran's interests section here.

Iran and Pakistan both seek access to markets in Central Asia and influence in Afghanistan. Along with Turkey, the two countries formed a regional cooperation organization in 1964, revived it in 1985 after it had lapsed, and expanded it in 1992 by incorporating into it several of the Muslim states of the former Soviet Union. Both countries, along with Turkey, Britain, and the United States, were members of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), a U.S. effort to prevent the spread of Communism into the Middle East and South Asia. (CENTO collapsed after the fall of the Shah in 1979.) During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89), Iran and Pakistan supported different anti-Soviet *mujahedin* (Islamic warriors) factions, although in a common effort to oust Soviet forces. Iran's primary concern in Afghanistan has been to protect Shiite Muslim groups and Persian-speaking peoples on Iran's eastern border. Pakistan was the primary conduit for U.S. assistance to the Sunni Muslim Afghan mujahedin during the war. Iran and Pakistan, along with other Muslim countries, provided material support to the Muslims in Bosnia at the height of the inter-ethnic war in the former Yugoslavia.

More recently, Iran and Pakistan have been at odds in Afghanistan, particularly since the Sunni Muslim Taliban movement captured the Persian-speaking areas near Iran (Herat Province) in September 1995. Since then, Iran has provided material support to Shiite Muslim and Tajik and Uzbek minority forces fighting against the Taliban movement, which controls two thirds of Afghanistan, including the capital Kabul.¹ In February 1997, Pakistani gunmen attacked the Iranian cultural center in Multan, Pakistan, and in September of that year, other Pakistani assassins killed five Iranian air force technicians in Rawalpindi.

¹ Steele, Jonathon. "America Includes Talks On Ending War in Afghanistan." *Washington Times*, December 15, 1997. For further information, see CRS Report 98-106 F, *Afghanistan: Current Issues and U.S. Policy Concerns*, February 10, 1998, by Kenneth Katzman.

In part because of the potential for Pakistani-Iranian rivalry, Iran's efforts to acquire strategic capabilities and technology from Pakistan have had mixed success. When Iran restarted its nuclear program in 1984 (it suspended the program in 1979 after the fall of the Shah), Iran reportedly sought Pakistani help but was rebuffed.² However, in 1987, following a visit to Iran by A.Q.Khan (considered the father of Pakistan's nuclear program), Pakistan signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with Iran and 39 Iranian scientists went to train in Pakistan.³ The training in Pakistan represented an Iranian attempt to rebuild its core of nuclear scientists, many of whom had left Iran following the 1979 Islamic revolution. Western fears grew in 1991 when Pakistan's then Chief of Staff Mirza Aslam Beg publicly called for further nuclear cooperation with Iran. However, in July 1995, U.S. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said the United States was unaware of any official nuclear cooperation that resulted from Beg's pronouncement, although the United States could not rule out covert or unofficial nuclear contacts between Pakistan and Iran.

Even if Iran succeeds in obtaining nuclear assistance from Pakistan, it is not clear that Iran's nuclear weapons efforts would accelerate significantly. Iran has been receiving nuclear technology from Russia and, to a lesser extent, from China, but U.S. officials have stated that Iran is still about seven to ten years away from a nuclear weapons capability.

No evidence has come to light indicating that Pakistan and Iran are cooperating to develop ballistic missile technology. However, both sought the M-11 missile from China (Pakistan reportedly received the missile, Iran did not), and both are developing medium range missiles based on the North Korean Nodong missile design. Pakistan's Nodong-based Ghauri missile, flight tested by Pakistan in April 1998, has a reported range of 930 miles.⁴ Iran's Shahab-3 missile program, which is receiving assistance from Russian entities, is believed to be about 18 months from flight testing, also is based on the Nodong design and is expected to have a range of about 800 miles.⁵ If relations with Pakistan improve, Iran could turn toward Pakistan for technical assistance, especially if the United States succeeds in its efforts to persuade Russia to prevent its entities (firms and universities) from aiding Iran's Shahab program.⁶

Iran and Pakistan have had limited conventional military-to-military ties. In November 1991, the Commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard said that the Guard enjoys a "strategic relationship" with Muslim countries like Pakistan. He and his subordinates made several visits to Pakistan during the 1980s, and Pakistan apparently helped the Guard improve its tactics during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). In February

² "Iran's Weapons of Mass Destruction." *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Special Report No. 6. 1995, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p.12, and Ritchelson, Philip. "Iranian Military Resurgence: Scope, Motivations, and Implications for Regional Security." *Armed Forces and Society*. Vol. 21, No. 4, Summer 1995, pp. 573-592.

⁴ Anderson, John Ward. "Pakistan Claims It has New Missile." *Washington Post*, June 2, 1998.

⁵ "Israel: Iran Could Build Nodong in Two Years." *Jane's Defence Weekly*, April 30, 1997.

⁶ For further information on Russian assistance to Iran's missile program, see CRS Report 98-299, *Russian Missile Technology and Nuclear Reactor Transfers to Iran*.

1994, Iran and Pakistan held ten days of joint naval exercises, which included joint submarine operations. Another account suggests that Pakistan transferred an undetermined number of midget submarines to Iran in the early 1990s.⁷

India. Iranian officials have repeatedly talked of forging a strategic relationship with India, but no such relationship has yet emerged. Military contacts have been at a relatively low level and confined to specific issues. In 1993, facing a declared Clinton Administration policy of isolating Iran, then President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani said that India (and China) were Iran's natural partners in a potential coalition to blunt American international hegemony.⁸ In April 1995, then President Rafsanjani visited New Delhi, partially upstaging a visit by U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin. However, in part because Iran has always viewed Muslim Pakistan as a more natural ally than Hindu India, no strategic relationship between India and Iran emerged from the Rafsanjani visit. In addition, Iran has become increasingly dependent on China for technology and weapons, and closer relations with India — a rival of China — could have complicated Iran's ties to China.

The Rafsanjani visit resulted in only minor pledges of military cooperation. During the visit, India reportedly agreed to help Iran maintain the three Kilo-class submarines it was receiving from Russia. In 1994, India's navy, which fields eight Kilos, helped Iran overcome some problems with the batteries in the first two Kilos it received.⁹ India reportedly also agreed to Iranian requests to help upgrade Iran's communications equipment and maintain combat aircraft and ground armor acquired from Russia.¹⁰ However, India has not been identified as a supplier to Iran of additional T-72 tanks, which Iran requested and which India manufactures under Russian license.

India has apparently provided some WMD technology to Iran, but not on a large scale and apparently not in the nuclear field. Then State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said in April 1995 that there were no indications that India had a nuclear relationship with Iran. No reports have surfaced since to contradict that statement, although in February 1996, Russia, China, Iran, and India set up a research foundation to adapt nuclear power for commercial uses. One press report in early 1995 said that Indian companies (Tata Consulting, Transpek, and Rallis India) were helping Iran complete a chemical weapons complex, using some German technology.¹¹ The press report was confirmed to some extent by a June 1997 unclassified Central Intelligence Agency report on worldwide proliferation. According to the report, prepared biannually under

⁷ Eisenstadt, Michael. "Dual Bomb Blasts in South Asia: Implications for the Middle East." *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policywatch #318. June 1, 1998.

⁸ "Iran Talks of Bid For New Alliances." *New York Times*, September 26, 1993. P.9.

⁹ "Iran Cultivates Ties With India in Military, Business Ventures." *Washington Times*, June 21, 1995.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Dettner, Jamie. "Tehran Building Deadly Gas Plant." *Washington Times*, January 30, 1995.

congressional mandate and covering the period July-December 1996, “Iran obtained the bulk of its chemical weapons from China and India.”¹²

Saudi Arabia

In contrast to Iran, Saudi Arabia has not been identified as a major proliferation threat in any U.S. government or outside reports on proliferation, and it is a close ally of the United States. In 1987, Saudi Arabia acquired a number of CSS-2 ballistic missiles (1,750 mile range) from China, but it is not believed to have a chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons program. However, Saudi fears of the potential threats from Iran and Iraq could lead Saudi Arabia to seek WMD capabilities if Iran’s WMD programs accelerate or Iraq is able to fully erode the U.N. weapons inspections regime Iraq has been under since the Gulf war.

If Saudi Arabia were to seek to acquire WMD, Pakistan could be a natural partner. The two countries enjoy good relations and have a history of security ties. Pakistani officers have long served as advisors in the Saudi military, and, until the early 1990s, Pakistanis formed one Saudi brigade.¹³ Some observers believe Pakistani troops helped Saudi Arabia recapture the Grand Mosque in Mecca when it was seized by Islamic fundamentalist dissidents in November 1979. These longstanding ties to Saudi Arabia could make Pakistan forthcoming with technology that other suppliers — because of U.S. pressure or international censure — might deny. The two countries have also cooperated on important foreign policy initiatives, although doing so is not necessarily an indicator of future WMD technology cooperation. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia supported hardline Islamic fundamentalist factions during the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and both now recognize the puritan Islamic Taliban movement as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. (The only other country to extend such recognition is the United Arab Emirates.)

Other Middle Eastern Countries

The Pakistani nuclear test, in particular, has raised concern that other Middle Eastern proliferants might try to approach Pakistan for nuclear technology. U.S. concerns center on Iraq, which, at the time of the 1991 Gulf war, was about one year away from achieving its own nuclear weapons capability, according to estimates from U.N. weapons inspectors in Iraq. U.N. Security Council resolutions after the war required the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to dismantle Iraq’s nuclear program, and IAEA reported to the Security Council in April 1998 that it had largely completed that mission.¹⁴ Cease-fire resolutions do not permit Iraq to develop or renew nuclear technology relationships with other countries. However, the IAEA said in early May 1998 that it was investigating an

¹² *The Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions: July - December 1996*. Director of Central Intelligence, June 1997.

¹³ Eisenstadt, “Dual Bomb Blasts in South Asia: Implications for the Middle East.”

¹⁴ For further information on the cease-fire requirements imposed on Iraq, and the status of Iraqi compliance, see CRS Issue Brief IB92117, *Iraqi Compliance With Cease-fire Agreements*, by Kenneth Katzman.

internal Iraqi document implying that Pakistan might have offered Iraq contact with Pakistani nuclear scientists.¹⁵ Pakistan has denied it made such an offer to Iraq.

Two other Arab countries that concern the United States are Libya and Syria, both of which are included on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism and have sought to thwart some U.S. policy objectives in the Middle East. However, neither has close ties to either Pakistan or India. According to the Defense Department's November 1997 proliferation report, Syria, despite the widespread belief that Israel has nuclear weapons, has not pursued development of nuclear weapons and is not likely to do so because of financial and technical constraints. It is a party to the NPT. The same DOD report identifies Libya as a nuclear aspirant, but says that, despite a 25-year effort to acquire a nuclear weapon, its nuclear program remains in the "embryonic" stage. Libya also is a party to the NPT.

Israel, not a party to the NPT, is considered a nuclear power even though it has not conducted a test in Israel. It is developing close defense ties to India, but Israeli officials have sought to reassure Pakistan that their burgeoning relationship is not directed against it. Israel and India reportedly have cooperated covertly in nuclear and missile technology for over two decades, and Israel is believed to be seeking from India space and missile technology, in which India is more advanced than is Israel.¹⁶

Conclusion

The majority of expert opinion suggests that the South Asian arms race will not immediately or easily spill over into the Middle East. WMD relations between Pakistan and India and the Middle East have been intermittent and relatively low-level. Israel is unlikely to confirm its own nuclear capability by conducting a nuclear test. Both Pakistan and India have said they would not spread nuclear technology to other countries. Pakistan does not appear to view its nuclear test in an "Islamic" context, apart from the element of pride in being the first Islamic country to detonate a nuclear weapon. However, some Middle Eastern countries, such as Iran, might seek to exploit their existing relations with Pakistan or India to try to acquire WMD capabilities if an arms race in the Middle East accelerates. Pakistan might be vulnerable to such overtures if its economy suffers significantly from U.S. sanctions. The United States is likely to stress restraint in technology transfer to the Middle East as it attempts to calm the crisis caused by the Indian and Pakistani tests, and will probably try to exercise greater vigilance in existing U.S. efforts to prevent WMD proliferation in the Middle East, particularly with regard to Iran. The Pakistani and Indian tests could, for example, make the United States demand a higher standard of evidence from the IAEA that Iraq has, as the IAEA has said, ended its nuclear program.

¹⁵ "IAEA Probes Possible Pakistan Nuclear Help to Iraq." *Reuters*, May 5, 1998

¹⁶ Chellany, Brahma. "Israel, India Cooperate on Defense Issues." *Washington Times*, June 2, 1998.