Pakistan and the Nuclear Dilemma in South Asia

November 19, 2015

On November 19, 2015, the Arms Control Association and The Lugar Center hosted a lunch briefing to discuss Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program and options for U.S. policy to reduce the risks posed by the program. Some questions posed to the panel to begin the discussion included: What is the status of Pakistani and Indian nuclear arsenals and delivery systems? Why is Pakistan hesitant to accept limits on its nuclear weapons capabilities and fissile material production? What policy options should the United States pursue to reduce the risk posed by Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program and the potential use of nuclear weapons in South Asia?

Hans Kristensen, director of the Federation of American Scientists’ Nuclear Information Project, began the discussion by summarizing the status of Pakistan and India’s nuclear forces. Pakistan is now unofficially the 6th largest nuclear power. The rate at which Pakistan’s nuclear stockpile increases will likely be based on two factors: how many nuclear-capable launchers Islamabad plans to deploy, and how much the Indian nuclear stockpile grows. In regards to India, Kristensen noted that India’s nuclear posture is generally more focused on China than it is Pakistan. While like Pakistan India initially relied heavily on fighter-bombers as its preferred means of nuclear delivery, India has progressed in developing both long-range land-based ballistic missiles as well as a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine deterrent.

Michael Krepon, co-founder of the Stimson Center, began his remarks with the observation that the South Asian nuclear issue is an active triangular competition between China, India, and Pakistan, and should be viewed in this context. Unlike in India, where nuclear weapons are controlled by elected political leaders who see them as a political tool, Pakistan’s program is controlled by the military, which views nuclear weapons as militarily useful tools that provide both security and status. Krepon noted that the U.S. ability to convince Pakistan to constrain its nuclear weapons capabilities is fairly limited. Pakistan is quick to balk at any U.S. proposal on limiting Islamabad’s nuclear program that does not include suggested limits on India’s program. These are proposals Pakistan considers “discriminatory” and therefore a non-starter. Krepon noted that a potentially more effective way to encourage Pakistan to limit their nuclear programs would be to encourage an Indian-Pakistani dialogue. Currently India only wants to talk to Pakistan about terrorism, but the United States can encourage India to see the benefit in engaging Pakistan in issues of trade, Kashmir, and nuclear weapons.
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Additional Resources:


Source: Arms Control Association