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RUSSIA'S GREAT GAME IN A NUCLEAR SOUTH ASIA

Joseph F. Pilat and Terence T. Taylor*

Lost in the noise of Pakistan's nuclear weapon tests in the western Baluchistan desert on 28 and 30 May was a surprising diplomatic move by Russia. On 23 May, Russia became the first state to express its willingness to recognize India as a nuclear-weapon state, provided that India commits itself to the international nonproliferation regime. Russia's Ambassador to India, Albert Chernyshev, stated in the days after the Indian but before the Pakistani nuclear tests that "India proclaimed itself a nuclear weapons power. We now hope that India will behave as a nuclear weapons power by acting responsibly. Every nuclear weapons state has some rights. But for getting recognition it must have some obligations. Once it is ready to show these obligations by joining the nonproliferation regime, its recognition as a nuclear weapons power will follow."

It is difficult to criticize any call for responsible action, but the meaning of the Russian envoy's remarks raised questions about Russia's long-term interests in South Asia and its commitment to nonproliferation. These questions were given an even sharper point when, in his statement only ten days after India's latest tests, Ambassador Chernyshev's called India a "strategic partner" of Russia and stated his belief that President Yeltsin would probably sign a formal treaty during his visit to India in December.

Although Russia joined the chorus of states criticizing the Indian tests, its language was not shrill and there was no expectation that it would take punitive or other actions against India. Russia's unexpected interest in recognizing India as a nuclear power had been preceded by its criticism of sanctions instituted by the United States, Japan and others as "counterproductive." This view was expressed and found resonance at the meeting of the Group of Eight (G-8) in Birmingham only days after the Indian tests, which failed to take any concrete steps against India.

Despite the reluctance of the leading economic powers and Russia to impose coordinated sanctions, responses to the Indian tests have been forthcoming. Indian military cooperation with the West is likely to dwindle and its relations with its regional rivals, Pakistan and China, have deteriorated dramatically. Russia will try to exploit this situation and restore the relationship it had with India during the Cold War, which had deteriorated in the early 1990s. Just as China offered assistance and reassurance to Pakistan (albeit not a nuclear guarantee) to counter India, Russia and India may see each other as strategic counters to a long-term China threat. This is the real message behind the strategic partnership with India, which after China is Russia's largest arms customer.

Clearly, the lack of a concerted international response to India's tests is not solely or even primarily the responsibility of Russia. India anticipated a critical reaction to its tests, but conducted them anyway in the belief it could withstand any economic sanctions or other measures and gain political benefit. Russia's diplomatic overture was undoubtedly reassuring. On the other hand, Pakistan must have been deeply concerned by Russia's diplomacy. It would have reinforced Pakistan's perceptions of the inaction of the G-8, which Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif cited as a reason its tests were "inevitable."

Whatever Russia's original calculations on the benefits of open support for a nuclear India, its "Great Game" may not have taken the prospect of Pakistan's tests fully into account. These tests appear to have changed the security equation for Russia. As tensions in South Asia escalate, Pakistan is under a state of emergency and the next moves by India and Pakistan may plunge South Asia into a Cold War with global reverberations.

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In South Asia today, the stakes are very high. India's and Pakistan's tests in this dangerous and unpredictable time raise fundamental questions about regional and global security and stability that could threaten Russia as well as India and Pakistan. The tests cast doubt on the prospects for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and may give pause to states contemplating nuclear and other arms reductions, again placing particular stresses on a Russia that requires significant, formal reductions in nuclear arms by both the United States and itself if it is to maintain strategic parity. The South Asian tests may also have signalled a new era in nuclear proliferation. Or, at the very least, a return to one that appeared to have ended. India, Pakistan, Israel, Argentina, Brazil, and South Africa were the primary targets of international nonproliferation policies over the last two decades. Nonproliferation efforts have focused more recently on states such as Iraq and North Korea, as some of the threshold or holdout states have ended their programs or disarmed and others, including India and Pakistan, seemed to be largely committed to the status quo and stable. The recent tests have changed this picture and could decrease international peace and security as they revive longstanding concerns that South Asia is the world's most dangerous nuclear flashpoint.

Russia's Great Game in South Asia in pursuit of short-term economic and other interests appears to be a serious obstacle on the path to dealing effectively with the South Asian nuclear crisis. Grave damage to security, stability and nonproliferation has already resulted from India's and Pakistan's actions, but the situation does not have to spiral out of control. It is imperative that the international community respond appropriately to this challenge. We are at a crossroads and Russia's actions will be critical. Will it be willing to go beyond the narrow economic and political calculations reflected in its diplomatic posturing, and take actions that will serve its long-term interests by bridging differences with other great powers in order to demonstrate to India that it has not chosen the right path. If Russia decides it can gain from India's current, perilous path and blocks or otherwise frustrates appropriate responses, the nuclear danger on the subcontinent will escalate and the global regimes to promote nonproliferation and to ban testing will be seriously, perhaps fatally, weakened with unpredictable regional and global effects.