A South Asian Blueprint for Nuclear Risk Reduction

By

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The recent drone attack on the Chernobyl nuclear power plant reignited the critical debate about the security of nuclear infrastructure in active conflict zones. It also underscored the need for a robust international framework to safeguard nuclear facilities. Such targeting of nuclear facilities, deliberate or inadvertent, poses a significant risk and sets a precarious precedent for rival states to follow.

Nuclear incidents could lead to catastrophic radioactive contamination and a global emergency. In this regard, the South Asian model for the India-Pakistan Non-Attack Agreement is a milestone achievement in nuclear risk reduction. It was a breakthrough agreement that prevented two arch-rivals from attacking each other's nuclear sites despite several intense standoffs. It played a crucial role in ensuring nuclear facilities remain off-limits by preventing catastrophic escalations and reinforcing stability.

Contemporary conflicts are increasingly defined by disruptive and cutting-edge technologies, such as drone and cyber attacks that introduce a new dimension to conflict and exposed nuclear infrastructure to unprecedented vulnerabilities. It is thus time for P-5 states and the IAEA to formulate an international non-attack agreement to ensure nuclear restraint. The world cannot afford another nuclear disaster due to the negligence of the international community and the absence of a proper enforcement mechanism.

After the nuclearization of South Asia in 1974, India conducted its first nuclear test, Smiling Buddha. Pakistan sensed a pre-emptive strike against its nuclear research labs. The rivalry got more intense when India hedged against blowing up Pakistan's Kahuta Nuclear Research Laboratories. In return, Pakistan assured India that any attack on Kahuta would evoke a retaliatory strike on its Bhabha Atomic Nuclear Plant.

To avert such future scenarios, both states agreed to sign the bilateral accord. Since doing so, and despite several conflicts like the Kargil conflict (1999), the 2001–2002 military standoff, and the Pulwama-Balakot crisis (2019), neither state has targeted the other's nuclear facilities. Therefore, the India-Pakistan Non-Attack Agreement's successful implementation in a highly volatile region, where nuclear-armed neighbors are eyeball-to-eyeball, sets a precedent that serves as a model for other states to follow.

The provisions of the India-Pakistan Non-Attack Agreement, require that both states refrain from "undertaking, encouraging, or participating in any action aimed at causing the destruction or damage to any nuclear installation or facility in the other country." This is a model for a global nuclear security non-attack commitment. The agreement clearly defines nuclear installations to include research reactors, uranium enrichment plants, reprocessing facilities, and storage sites for radioactive material.

The second provision of the agreement is the Classification of Protected Sites. The Annual Exchange of Nuclear Facility List is the most important clause. Under this clause India and Pakistan exchange lists of their nuclear facilities every January 1, ensuring transparency, avoiding miscalculations, and implementing risk mitigation. This agreement

sets the ground rules that even hostile states can uphold nuclear restraint, and the international community must take a lesson from this model to formulate an international nuclear non-attack agreement.

Moreover, the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 is a stark reminder of the devastating consequences of nuclear incidents, with radiation leaks contaminating large areas and causing long-term ecological and health crises. While commenting on an attack, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that a drone hit the concrete shelter, sparking a fire that caused significant damage, but radiation remained under control. Both Ukrainian and Russian officials released their respective statements, denying the responsibility for the drone strike.

The pertinent question here is not who is responsible, but rather the safety and security of nuclear facilities during conflict and the need for militaries to exercise restraint. The war might end one day, but the hazards of nuclear radiation persist far longer. Meanwhile, existing international laws provide some protections for nuclear sites, but they lack enforceable mechanisms to deter attacks. The Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I (1977) classify nuclear power plants as civilian objects that should not be targeted. However, these clauses are not binding under all circumstances, leaving loopholes for states to exploit during wartime.

Furthermore, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguard protocols primarily focus on nonproliferation and the safety of nuclear materials, rather than averting military strikes on nuclear sites. Here the absence of clear, legally binding enforcement mechanisms in international law means that states can act with impunity while targeting nuclear sites in conflict zones. Hence, the Chernobyl drone attack demonstrates the urgency for a comprehensive and enforceable global agreement.

The new international nuclear non-attack agreement should essentially address the weaknesses in existing laws. The P5 (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US) and the IAEA must spearhead a legally binding comprehensive treaty prohibiting any form of attack on nuclear infrastructure. This new agreement should explicitly include these several nuclear restraints. Starting from the military restrictions that should prohibit all military operations in the vicinity of designated nuclear sites. This includes ground forces, aerial strikes, reconnaissance missions, and drone activities near nuclear installations.

Further states must ensure annual transparency measures to prevent miscalculations. Each party must be required to exchange lists of their nuclear facilities annually, similar to the India-Pakistan model.

Most importantly, there must be severe consequences if any state violates the agreement by conducting a strike, covert operation, or cyberattack on nuclear facilities. Such a state must face severe economic sanctions, diplomatic consequences, and potential designation as a rogue state. Finally, there must be a prohibition on cyber and non-kinetic attacks.

The UN Security Council and leading nuclear powers, the P5 states, should take the responsibility of drafting and enforcing the agreement. These nations must set aside geopolitical rivalries and recognize that the threat of nuclear facility attacks endanger global stability. Additionally, the IAEA must play a more proactive role in integrating nuclear facility protection into global conflict prevention strategies.

The Chernobyl drone strike and the volatile situation in Zaporizhzhia is a wake-up call, a warning that nuclear security cannot be taken for granted in modern warfare. As conflicts become increasingly complex, nuclear sites will remain vulnerable unless strong, enforceable international agreements are put in place. The world cannot afford to wait for another disaster before taking decisive action.

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