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Policy memo

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2013 was a year of change for Iran – most significantly, Hasan Rouhani, an Iranian ‘moderate’ assumed the presidency and an interim nuclear deal for a comprehensive future agreement between Iran and the P5+1 was reached at Geneva. This atmosphere of rapprochement is an opportune moment for the region to capitalize on, especially with regard to confidence-building measures (CBMs) with Iran. This paper will look at the challenges faced in the South Asian experience of CBMs, and make relevant recommendations for adoption in West Asia.

In the application and implementation of CBMs, replication needs further consideration because of specific regional differences - there are common security concerns and aspirations, local concerns that are only pertinent to sub-regions, and also an overlap between the two – making the situation and problems extremely complex. To examine the relevance of South Asian CBMs to a West Asian context runs the risk of using a one-size-fits-all formula for a variegated landscape. However, since CBMs between Iran and the region and not on a State-by-State basis has been identified as the theme for this paper; the South Asian challenges will be examined on a case-by-case basis to eschew a universal paradigm.

Of central importance is the presence of political will. Iran’s overtures towards the international community, particularly Israel, and Rouhani’s departure from Ahmedinejad’s belligerent rhetoric makes the regional environment especially

conducive for the easing of tensions. The new leadership has, for instance, pointedly denounced crimes against humanity, referring also to the Holocaust – a far cry from Ahmedinejad’s denial of it as Zionist myth-making. Whatever the motivation for the change in perspective, these postures must be understood in the right context, and acknowledged. However, there has been no sign of this from Israel, whose prime minister has yet to modify his position on the Iranian nuclear deal, having previously called it a ‘historic mistake’. Before formal CBMs can make any headway, the political leaderships will have to first establish an interest in making gestures/statements that reflect a strong will to improve bilateral/multilateral ties. This can be achieved by downplaying hostile rhetoric and acknowledging the steps taken by Iran, instead of criticizing it for not making more substantial gestures.

While institutionalized distrust is endemic to both South Asia and West Asia, the difference is that in the latter case, there has been no concerted effort in emphasizing CBMs for regional/sub-regional cooperation, with very few exceptions. Instead of identifying areas for constructive engagement, the focus has been on highlighting differences. The experience of CBMs in South Asia is therefore instructive, both for its limited successes and as cautionary tales.

Many military and non-military CBMs are in place between India and Pakistan, but the lack of strict implementation in some cases has led many observers to question their ability to truly build confidence. This is for a variety of reasons. First among these is the criticism of the gap between rhetoric and reality that has not been bridged sufficiently. CBMs are a means to an end and not an end unto themselves. The thinking must be in terms of what is rational and achievable, and not lofty, idealistic goals that only serve the purpose of rhetoric. Michael Krepon, who has worked extensively on CBMs in South Asia, has referred to the ‘C’ of CBMs as ‘competition’ to stress the reasons that may motivate States to undertake these exercises and attempt to out-do each other: to forcefully signal intent, mollify domestic and international audiences and so on. Dramatic and sudden conciliatory moves instead of studied

gradualism or a step-by-step process most often serve to build on a negative spirit of competition already in existence, and do much harm to the actual idea of CBMs itself. Take the Agra Summit of 2001 between Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf as a case in point. Quite apart from institutionalized distrust, there was an observed lack of preparation for the Summit and considerable resistance at home – the entire exercise ended with a lot of hype and not much substance.

To overcome these challenges, it is important to first develop a domestic constituency that favours CBMs. History demonstrates that one is only as strong as the weakest link in the chain, and positive bilateral measures are often upset by internal dissenting voices. Awareness of the utility of CBMs must be created within States, and proponents of CBMs must be able and prepared to defend them. Effort must also be dedicated to streamline common agendas. A zero-sum game that privileges controversial core issues is unlikely to yield positive results – this calls for a de-linking of incremental, perhaps even comparatively insignificant, steps, from contentious ones.

Criticism of CBMs in South Asia has also been levelled against what is seen as an over-emphasis on military over non-military CBMs. The argument is that non-military CBMs (or atmospheric measures, a term coined by Michael Krepon) may create the necessary atmosphere of trust to commence more significant formal CBMs. Krepon argues that atmospheric measures ‘have not typically facilitated formal measures, and both types of CBMs have not prevented severe crises’ in South Asia (Michael Krepon, ‘Beyond Atmospheric’, Dawn, 19 August 2012). This is supported by the argument in South Asia against the non-inclusion of core issues, which asks whether CBMs can be meaningful if primary concerns (such as Kashmir) are not dealt with. Vajpayee visit to the Minar-e-Pakistan in Lahore, constructed in honour of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was all very well as a symbolic gesture, but eventually, it came to naught. In this regard, Krepon also acknowledges that non-military CBMs

require far less political capital than military CBMs. In a region where CBMs are most conspicuous by their absence, informal gestures (release of prisoners, economic measures, humanitarian aid relief) can be first steps to test the waters. After all, establishing trust and implementing CBMs is cyclical in nature – one is a pre-requisite for the other.

Learning from the South Asian experience, criticism can also be expected of status quoism, whereby more resources, geopolitical advantages and differences in geographical size may create suspicions of a State's intent in pursuing CBMs i.e. to mitigate opposition/criticism by other States and maintain one's own pre-disposition. This is damaging to trust, and smaller, less secure States may then not be as keen to undertake exercises in confidence-building. This is an inescapable pitfall, and action-backed assurances (linked to eventual agreements) for sowing trust may be sought to overcome it.

Observations have revealed that although States have employed CBMs, there has also been a concomitant pursuit of counter-interests that is damaging to confidence-building exercises, pointing to the political double standards. India and Pakistan have a joint anti-terror institutional mechanism. However, doubts about its purported aim remain, given the role of allegedly State-sponsored non-State actors in cross-border terrorism. In this case, much depends on the make-up of the institutions in control – civilian and/or military – and whether they are working at cross-purposes.

An important factor for consideration is the presence of external players, of both a collusive and a direct nature. While India-Pakistan CBMs are bilateral in nature, from India's perspective, the role of China in Pakistani affairs complicates matters. In West Asia, a similar scenario can be envisaged. Iran is going to hold on to its right to enrich uranium, and despite its present limitations, there are fears that it may set-off a domino nuclearization effect in the region over the long-term. Most recently, there were allegations of Pakistani-Saudi Arabian nuclear collaboration. In addition we

have the presence of US military bases in the region. The presence of so many variables in what should strictly be a regional equation holds great potential to upset matters. They can either be legitimate grounds to stall confidence-building exercises or even in their absence, as justification for the withdrawal of a State that is not interested in further pursuing CBMs but cannot risk the ire of the international community.

There is also the danger, in South Asia, as previously stated, of paying disproportionate attention to India-Pakistan military CBMs. The issues of Kashmir and nuclearization tend to overwhelm other concerns. This also affects the attention paid to CBMs with other States of South Asia – India and Pakistan are, after all, not representative of the entire region. West Asia is also likely to face similar problems.

The following CBMs relevant to South Asia could prove useful in the West Asian context:

Non-Military CBMs:

Bus, rail and air links

Humanitarian aid

Release of prisoners

Joint anti-terror institutional mechanism

Track II exchanges in neutral territory

Joint Economic Commissions and Joint Business Councils

High-level political visits/exchanges

Cultural exchanges

Trade

Military CBMs:

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Agreement on Advance Notification of Military Exercises, Maneuvers and Troop Movements
Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities

Agreement on Prevention of Airspace Violations and for Permitting Overflights and Landings by Military Aircraft

Agreement on Advance Notification of Ballistic Missile Tests

Director General Military Operations (DGMO) hotlines (and between other entities eg. Foreign Ministers, Heads of Coastguards).

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