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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **Chintamani Mahapatra**

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From the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center in Beijing, China, this is the China in the World Podcast hosted by Tong Zhao.

Zhao: You are listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World Podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China’s foreign policy, international role, and China’s relations with the world brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy located in Beijing. I am Tong Zhao, an associate at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. I will be your host today. I am very delighted to be joined by Chintamani Mahapatra, who is a professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University and the Chair of the Canada, U.S., and Latin American Studies Department at the School of International Studies. He specializes in U.S. foreign and national security policy, international security, Asian security, and among other issues, and has over 30 years of research and teaching experience. At the same time, he is very well connected to the policy community and has participated in various track-two diplomacy activities. So Professor Mahapatra, we are very honored to have you here today.

Mahapatra: Hello, thank you so much for hosting this.

Zhao: In fact, Professor Mahapatra is here at Carnegie–Tsinghua to give a talk on the nuclear dimensions of the U.S.-China-India triangular relationship. For those who could not come to this talk in person, we thought it would be helpful to review some of the key topics covered during the discussion through this podcast.

As the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Deal has far-reaching impact not only for U.S.-India relationship but also for interstate relationship in the region and China-South Asia relationship as well, after the U.S. and India made a breakthrough earlier this year in moving forward the implementation of the deal, some people are wondering, Can China and India cooperate on nuclear energy? In fact, some believe that after the India’s NSG exemption, China is also interested to benefit from India’s nuclear market. President Hu Jintao’s visit in 2006 offered India Civil Nuclear Agreement, and when President Xi Jinping visited India last year the two countries were committed in principle to carrying out bilateral nuclear energy cooperation in line with their respective international commitments. So what is your assessment of the prospects for China-India nuclear energy cooperation? What do you think will be the main obstacles?

Mahapatra: Thank you very much for this question. First of all, I would say that civil and nuclear cooperation between China and India would be productive and profitable for both the people of India and the people of China because the two countries have been old civilizations, rising powers, with great economies and both the countries demand more and more energy as their economic growth continues. Clean energy is extremely important for clean air in this particular region, and if China and India—both of them—have very extensive nuclear research and development programs for decades. If they can cooperate in generating nuclear energy, that would be not only beneficial for the two countries, but for the environmental issues of the whole region. Secondly, civil nuclear cooperation can be a win-win situation for China and India because this would be an extremely fruitful, confidence-building measure between the two countries. Mutual suspicion, which is slowly, slowly going off, can be further strengthened, and the trust level will be high if we cooperate on this particular area. Both China and India are dependent on energy import from Persian Gulf. If the energy mix of the countries can include the nuclear dimension as well, then I think it will be good. What are the obstacles? Actually, obstacles are probably in the realm of

understanding between the two. India's decision-making process is extremely complex because of the democratic system it has. And there are so many actors in the decision-making, unlike in China, once the government makes a decision—that becomes final. But in India, there are layers and layers of issues, and people who discuss, debate, argue, criticize, and then take the final decision. That takes time. But once the decision is made and the agreement is concluded, then I think there should not be any more obstacles in the future.

Zhao: Given that India has been largely accepted into the global nuclear energy club, do you think Pakistan's nuclear status should also be so-called normalized? Or to be specific, if India is granted formal membership in the Nuclear Supplier's Group, should Pakistan also be accepted into the NSG as well?

Mahapatra: There are two levels of answering this question. Number one level is the United States saw a certain merit in doing civil nuclear business with India. These are the following. Number one, India's nuclear program has been a civilian program from the 1950s. It has a very expansive nuclear program in India, and India has been generating nuclear energy not to a very high extent, but it has an R&D system, it has reactors, and it is doing well. In case of Pakistan, Pakistan's nuclear program has been by and large military only. They don't have a civil nuclear sector to build on. Secondly, India's record in promoting nonproliferation or preventing proliferation is accepted by the world. But Pakistan has been a suspect country. The A.Q. Khan network in Pakistan brought a very bad name because of their underhand dealing with North Korea, with Libya, and to a certain extent Iran. So there are people in the United States and other countries who are worried about Pakistan's nuclear status and that think even after rewarding Pakistan with a 1-to-3 agreement, there is no guarantee that Pakistan would behave properly and would not proliferate any further. The third problem is the United States scholars in recent times made a hypothetical proposition that if Pakistan is prepared to limit its nuclear weapons program and cap its program right now in the backdrop of the fastest growing nuclear arsenal program in the world, then the United States should consider a 1 to 3 agreement with Pakistan also. I think if Pakistan becomes a part of the group and cooperates with other countries it is a very welcome development. However, the concern is this: As of now, Pakistan does not want to stop its nuclear weapons program. In the Pakistan perception, India is a big threat. And they think that India's conventional capability is so large that they would have to accept the first-strike doctrine, and if India in the future, in the possible future, if there is a confrontation with India, then Pakistan should have the right to use nuclear weapons. Now it is not possible for the U.S. for China or for any other country to convince Pakistan right now to stop building more nuclear weapons. So, it is a proposition which is welcomed, but difficult.

Zhao: Now let's move onto nuclear weapons. Do you think India has achieved credible nuclear deterrence against China? If not, what criteria does India use for measuring if it has credible nuclear deterrence against China? Or in other words, what criteria does—or should—India use for measuring how many nuclear bombs are enough for India to deter China?

Mahapatra: A country like China and India are not in a nuclear arms race with each other. I would argue that even China is not at all in a nuclear arms race with the United States. China's position is simple, that it should not be asked to control its nuclear program until the Americans and the Russians bring down their nuclear arsenal to at least China's level. China's argument is

not the opposite that China would build as many weapons as the Americans have and then talk about arms control. So China has a very constructive suggestion on this particular issue. Like China, India also does not have any intention or any policy to start a nuclear arms race with China. In fact, China's nuclear arsenal is quite solid and it is quite capable. India, for its own survival and prosperity, is also trying to develop a deterrence capability. At the moment, one cannot compare the size of the Indian nuclear establishment with that of China. However, Indians believe that at the moment India's nuclear capability is enough to deter China from using any nuclear weapons against India because there is a belief in certain circles in India that China would not get involved in a nuclear exchange with India, because every part of China every people in China are important and Chinese government would never allow such a thing to happen. Even a country that is relatively less capable than China would be tempted to use nuclear weapons against the Chinese people. So I would argue that deterrence is already at work. However, when we talk about the minimum nuclear deterrence, the definition of "minimum" is never final. It all depends in the evolution of things. If a country against which the deterrence capability is in act, is it reducing its nuclear arsenal, then the definition of minimum for the other country will automatically go down and vice-versa. Minimum can be defined in terms of a satisfaction of the people that are experts in the nuclear field that, "yes, this capability is enough to prevent any aggression from any other adversary either in the neighborhood or from a distance." That is what "minimum" is all about.

Zhao: What always shows up in recent news headlines is India's emerging sea-based nuclear weapons capability. The first Indian nuclear ballistic submarine, the Arihant, is under sea trial right now. And very recently, India has conducted another test launch of its submarine-launched ballistic missile. Given the many land-based nuclear missiles that India is already building, why is India developing nuclear ballistic missile submarines, and how can this capability help India's deterrence against China and/or Pakistan?

Mahapatra: There are no permanent friends or permanent enemies in international politics. Although there is a tendency among scholars and the media particularly to always identify a country while talking about the nuclear capability or the missile capability, it is not proper. A country develops the nuclear capability and the delivery system to protect its territorial integrity from any adversary and they may be new adversarial. If the country is capable of developing a credible minimum nuclear deterrence, then in that case it has to be tried. Every country in the world is learning from the experience with the United States of America. And the USA has this strike capability: the bombers, the land-based missile system, as well as the post on the high seas. India has a very long coastline. India's trade depends on the sea trade. India is also dependent on energy import from outside again that passes through sea. So, in order to have a comprehensive capability and a credible deterrence, Indian experts think that we should have a capability at a trial level. That is what India has been trying for. At the moment, it is very preliminary. India has a long way to go. So, I would argue that whatever investment India is making, it is doing so within its capability, and India's defense expenditure is just three to four percent of the GDP, which is not very high. India does not intend to have any kind of naval arms race with any country, including China. Rather, the threat in the oceans are increasingly coming from the pirates and the terrorists, and Chinese and Indian naval cooperation would go a long way to protect the sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific waters.

Zhao: Let's compare a little bit between the U.S.-China and the China-India dynamics. The U.S. and China share a tacit understanding about containing nuclear arms race. In the Nuclear Posture Review and Ballistic Missile Defense Review conducted by the Obama Administration, the United States is committed to maintaining the so-called strategic stability relationship with China, and this has been very helpful for stabilizing the nuclear relationship between the U.S. and China. But I don't think such a shared understanding exists for China and India. How do you think China and India can build bilateral strategic stability and therefore avoid a nuclear confrontation?

Mahapatra: China and the United States have been in the game of dialoguing on national security and Asian security issues for a long long time now. China's military modernization, China's development of state of the art systems, including the ability to deny access to foreign navies, anti-access capabilities, and China is really expanding, so a time has come where the U.S., which has experienced uninterrupted movement of its military forces, including naval forces, the world over, has decided to engage in dialogue with China. Now this dialogue is at two levels. The suspicion is still there. China's anti-access and anti-denial capability have caused a certain amount of worries in the American military establishment, and Chinese government is getting increasingly concerned about the new concept of ARC battle of the United States, so in a way that is posturing, in a way that is messaging or signaling to each other, and in a way these are the ways that would ultimately lead to negotiations and to building a mutual trust. China and India have started cooperation in the different security issues only recently. It is a very welcomed development that the Indian army and the Chinese army have conducted joint army exercises. Indian navy and the Chinese navy have also done some joint exercises. Indian navy and Chinese navy have joined the Americans in the Pacific in the RIMPAC set of exercises. Chinese navy and Indian navy are together in fighting pirates in the Gulf of Eden. So these are all small scale but certain incremental steps by which China and India are now in both difference and security cooperation and dialoguing. In the future, I expect that this type of cooperation will be more in order to bring down the mistrust level and build further confidence.

Zhao: Another uncertain factor that undermines this potential trust building between China [and] India is the efforts by both China and India to develop missile defense technology. As we know, missile defense systems, especially those that can intercept strategic nuclear missiles, can seriously undermine nuclear balances. So, China and India, they are developing missile defense, even though the prospects for them to deploy such technology are still not very clear. But still I was interested in knowing what do you think is India's perception of the utility and impact of missile defense for China-India and India-Pakistan nuclear relationships?

Mahapatra: Missile defense technology is extremely expensive technology to invest in. The building of the system is more expensive. Maintaining them in the future will also incur a lot of expenditure. I think if the countries involved are trying for a deterrence capability so that there is no nuclear exchange, then in that case developing a missile defense technology will be nothing but arms race. And there is no end to it. That is one of the reasons that when the Bush administration talked about a National Missile Defense Shield, there were many critics within the United States who opposed it. And the Russians were rather angry. And China was upset because they thought that a similar system maybe would be given to Taiwan. But in my view, there should be an open dialogue not involving a bilateral level of discussion alone, but multilateral on missile defense issues. Even if the U.S. is able to develop the missile defense technology it is not going to be

confined to the continental United States. It would depend on the availability of the facilities in Europe, for instance, which the Americans are negotiating with Poland and a few other countries, sparking a lot of debate and discussion and opposition from Russia. So this very fact that missile defense is going to make the missiles of other countries incapable is actually a very scary scenario where there would be no limit to arms race. So, personally, I would suggest that instead of building missile defense technology it is better to have arms control negotiations and limit the number of missiles that countries have. That would lead to more stability than expensive missile defense. The same money can be invested on constructing activities.

Zhao: So let's now move from the scary scenarios to some of the positive elements of the nuclear relationships. Despite the fierce competition and rivalry between India and Pakistan, I think there is one great achievement, which is the two countries managed to reach and maintain the Nuclear Non-Attack Agreement, as well as Missile Launch Notification Agreement. Through these agreements the two countries promised not to attack each other's nuclear facilities, and the exchange lists of nuclear facilities every year. And they also promised to send each other notification about missile tests. This measures I think are very helpful for preventing unnecessary nuclear conflicts or for preventing inadvertent nuclear escalations of conflicts. In the long run, they might even help build confidence between the two rivals. So, personally, I have always been amazed by the two countries' ability to reach such agreements, and I am also very interested in knowing your thoughts on whether such confidence-building measures can be extended to China-India and U.S.-China.

Mahapatra: Let me outset a point out, that both India and Pakistan are very responsible countries to a large extent. India and Pakistan fought many rounds of war. '47-'48, '65, '71, a little level of exchange in '99. Now, most of these wars were extremely limited and localized wars. The human casualties were very, very limited. In fact the number of people who have been killed by terrorists is much more than the wars fought between India and Pakistan. But whenever the Western discourse comes on India-Pakistan, a kind of scary situation is painted. Maybe that is the perception of the West; it looks more scary from outside. But I would underline the point that Indians and Pakistanis are not crazy enough to commit mass suicide by fighting a nuclear war no matter what kind of words are exchanged during the heat of any crisis. And a series of measures that are already in place, and you already mentioned that, are in fact very constructive measures to reassure each other that our restrained behavior in armed conflict should continue deep into the future in the interest of the people of the subcontinent and probably in the interest of the world. China and India should also have similar kind of understanding and MOUs, memorandum of understanding. Signing such agreements would itself be a psychology benefit to the strategic community in China and India. About the U.S. and China, I think this is much more complex. The U.S. is not a neighbor of China. It is a distant country. There is no doubt about it that the U.S. has thousands of military personnel in the Asia-Pacific region, and our coastal military bases—they're all Americans. But in the ultimate analysis the physical distance between the U.S. and China would bring in new kind of dimensions, which would require more debate and discussion and detailed analysis of that. The way India and Pakistan have signed such agreements in a way are important; but unlike India-Pakistan, China-India relationship is slightly different. Indians do not consider China as an enemy. Indians do not consider China as a strategic partner, even though agreements have been signed. So our trust level is somewhere in between, but the trust level in between India and Pakistan is very low. So in that case, these kinds of agreements come under

suspicion whether it is just a piece of paper or it is going to be an agreement. But if similar kind of agreements are signed between India and China I believe it will not be on a piece of paper. It will be believable, credible.

Zhao: Professor Mahapatra, thank you very much for spending time with me today and for offering very insightful comments. I appreciate it. And that's it for this edition of the Carnegie-Tsinghua China in the World Podcast. If you would like to read or learn more about China-India relationship, you can find more articles, events, and podcasts on our website at www.carnegie-tsinghua.org. I encourage you to visit and see the work of all of our scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Thanks for listening, and be sure to tune in next time.