



United States and Nuclear Pakistan

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Abstract

Political instability, the rise of the right-wing political leadership and an increase in the number of terrorist organisations operating from and gaining the support of the Pakistani establishment are reasons that have nations concerned about the safety of nuclear assets within Pakistan. Compounding the problem is the well-established proliferation network of Pakistan that has supplied nuclear technology to North Korea, Libya and Iran. Thus, the US is apprehensive about the safety and security of nuclear weapons and nuclear installations in Pakistan. The US recognises that there are a number of vulnerabilities in Pakistan's security apparatus and has repeatedly offered to help Pakistan secure its nuclear weapons and keep them safe.

Introduction

Political instability, the rise of the right-wing political leadership and an increase in the number of terrorist organisations operating from and gaining the support of the Pakistani establishment are reasons that have nations concerned about the safety of nuclear assets within Pakistan. Compounding the problem is the well-established proliferation network of Pakistan that has supplied nuclear technology to North Korea, Libya and Iran. Thus, the US is apprehensive about the safety and security of nuclear weapons and nuclear installations in Pakistan. South Asia is seen by

the US as a ‘nuclear flashpoint’ due to the hostile relations between two nuclear neighbours, following the nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in 1998. The US has come to terms with the changed environment and is re-evaluating its approach to the region.¹ Pakistan has been a US ‘ally’ during the Cold War and continues to be essential for its fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan this further complicates matters for the US. However, a nuclear Pakistan is not in the best interest of the US as Pakistan is politically fragile and economically instable. Moreover, its relationship with its nuclear neighbour India, is acrimonious and it has unfriendly relations with the other neighbouring countries.

For the US, Pakistan’s nuclear capabilities present at least four challenges:

- a) ‘There is a small but real possibility of the next India-Pakistan crisis escalating to nuclear levels.
- b) Pakistan may decide, as a matter of state policy, to extend a nuclear umbrella (or engage in nuclear technology and weapons sharing) with one or more Middle East (West Asia) States, especially if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon.
- c) There is a hard-to-quantify risk of nuclear theft. Pakistan has a home-grown ‘personnel reliability programme’, but even this could be circumvented in a determined conspiracy.
- d) There is some small chance that should Pakistan unravel, its nuclear assets will be seized by remnant elements of the army for political, strategic, or personal purposes.’²

While the possibility has been debated for a number of years, Pakistan continues to function as a State. Thus, it is necessary to work with the other facts that are currently available to India and the US.

Pakistan’s Nuclear Programme: Safety & Security Concerns

Pakistan is one of the three nuclear weapon States, along with India and Israel, which is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). Pakistan’s nuclear programme started with acquisition of civilian nuclear technology and manpower training in the 1960s, under the US sponsored ‘Atoms for Peace’ programme. It allowed Pakistan to develop scientific collaborations

with laboratories in the West. The defeat in the 1965 War with India deeply changed the nuclear perception in Pakistan. The Kashmir issue instead of being resolved remained a major irritant in India-Pakistan relations. India's military was far stronger and the US despite being Pakistan's ally did not provide it with assistance. These considerations along with the negotiations for the NPT and India's nuclear activities led Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to state in an interview to Manchester Guardian in 1965, "we will eat grass, even go hungry, but we will get one of our own. We have no other choice".³

Pakistan concentrated its focus on the development of nuclear weapons after its defeat in the 1971 War with India and the nuclear test conducted by India in 1974.

In April 1979 President Carter imposed unilateral military and economic sanctions against Pakistan after discovering that Pakistan was secretly constructing a facility to enrich Uranium. The sanctions included denial of fuel and heavy water for an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguarded nuclear power reactor at Karachi. Due to Pakistan's support to the US war in Afghanistan against the USSR, the US did not effectively implement the sanctions and they were lifted by December 1979. However, the sanctions left a profound impact on the minds of Pakistanis who viewed the US and its actions as 'unfair and a betrayal of trust'. Despite sanctions and export control regimes, Pakistan was able to develop its nuclear weapons programme.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook 2013, Pakistan has an inventory of 100-120 nuclear warheads and is increasing the size and sophistication of its nuclear arsenals. It is developing and deploying new types of nuclear-capable ballistic and cruise missiles such as the Shaheen missile and increasing its military fissile material production capabilities. In 2012, Pakistan conducted a series of missile trials, testing most of its nuclear-capable missiles that are currently in operational service or still under development. Pakistan is also expanding its main Plutonium-production complex at Khushab, Punjab.⁴ From the Pakistani perspective, it has invested heavily in nuclear weapons due to security threats from India, which according to the same source has a total inventory of 90-100 nuclear warheads. It has justified its nuclear arsenal by claiming that India's arsenal is a threat and helps it to gain parity in conventional

defence capabilities. According to a report published by the Landau Network-Centro Volta (LNCV) (Italy), Pakistan's nuclear weapons are aimed solely at India. In case deterrence fails they will be used if

- a) India attacks Pakistan and conquers a large part of its territory (space threshold)
- b) India destroys a large part either of its land or air force (military threshold)
- c) India proceeds to the economic strangling of Pakistan (economic threshold)⁵
- d) India pushes Pakistan into political destabilisation or creates a large scale internal subversion in Pakistan (domestic threshold)⁶

This justification for parity resonates not just within the armed forces of Pakistan but also within the political class, as well as the man on the street. Most Pakistanis believe that nuclear weapons are 'necessary' for the country and a guarantor of national sovereignty.⁷ Thus, nuclear weapons in Pakistan are as much to deter external threat as to appease the domestic constituents.

Chronic political instability in Pakistan and Islamabad's military efforts against the Taliban and al-Qaeda raised concerns about the security of Pakistan's nuclear stockpiles. Some observers fear that Pakistan's strategic nuclear assets could be appropriated by terrorists or used by rogue elements in the Pakistani government and military to build a 'dirty bomb'. A 'dirty bomb' also known as a radiological weapon or a radiological dispersal device (RDD), is a conventional explosive packaged with radioactive materials. Such a device does not require much expertise to build.

Since 2007, Taliban-linked groups have successfully attacked tightly guarded government and military targets in the country. Militants carried out small-scale attacks outside the Minhas (Kamra) Air Force Base in 2007, 2008, and 2009, and gained access to the site during a two-hour gunfight in August 2012. Pakistani officials have repeatedly denied claims that the base, which houses the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, is also used to store nuclear weapons. Other incidents include an attack on the nuclear missile storage facility at Sargodha on November 1, 2007, and the August 20, 2008 attack when Pakistani Taliban suicide bombers blew up several entry points to one

of the armament complexes at the Wah cantonment, considered one of Pakistan's main nuclear weapons assembly area. Several Pakistani nuclear facilities, including the Khushab facility and the Gadwal Uranium enrichment plant, are in proximity to areas under attack from the Taliban.⁸ Pakistan has maintained that the attacks were repulsed from the outer periphery of all facilities and this points to Pakistan's ability to safeguard its nuclear assets. The frequency of such attacks on Pakistani strategic and nuclear installations increased the vulnerability of Pakistan's nuclear assets, and it became a concern for the international community.

Additionally, there have been attempts to kidnap officials and technicians working at nuclear sites in western Pakistan.⁹ Further most of Pakistan's nuclear weapons infrastructure, with a few exceptions, are located in the North and West of the country and to the region around Islamabad and Rawalpindi at sites such as Wah, Fatehjang, Golra Sharif, Kahuta, Sihala, Isa Khel Charma, Tarwanah, and Taxila.¹⁰ These are close to or even within areas dominated by Pakistani Taliban militants and al-Qaida.

Fresh tensions for Pakistan come from the likelihood of Iran developing nuclear weapons. While Iran has time and again claimed that its nuclear research is for peaceful use, if it does decide to declare itself a nuclear weapons State, then Pakistan is looking at the prospect of two nuclear neighbours and the possibility of a nuclear crisis in West Asia.

Aware of the increasing doubts on its ability to protect its nuclear assets, Islamabad has tried to assure the international community that it is in control of the weapons and weapons facilities. It established the National Command Authority (NCA) in 2000 to ensure the protection of nuclear weapons from accidental or unauthorized use. It asserts that Pakistan has established a "robust set of measures to assure the security of its nuclear weapons." As far as physical security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and infrastructure is concerned, it adheres to US practices, procedures, technologies, and comprise: (a) physical security; (b) personnel reliability programmes; (c) technical and procedural safeguards; and (d) deception and secrecy.¹¹ It has a multi-layered system of security over nuclear installations. Pakistan operates a layered concept of concentric tiers of armed forces personnel to guard nuclear weapons facilities, the use of physical barriers and

intrusion detectors to secure nuclear weapons facilities, the physical separation of warhead cores from their detonation components, and the storage of the components in protected underground sites. The Pakistan Army is in charge of the section of the personnel who protect these sites. The composition of the SPD (Special Plans Division) which controls use of nuclear devices is also military.¹²

While international concern has been largely with Pakistan's military programme, Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority (PNRA), established in 2001, regulates all aspects of civilian nuclear energy which include licences for imports and exports, to create necessary legislations and regulations, and to ensure the physical protection of nuclear installation and nuclear material including waste.¹³

US Responses

The US is aware of the sensitive nature of the issue when it is discussing nuclear weapons with Pakistan. Nuclear weapons for the US are weapons of deterrence, for Pakistan they are linked to the question of its sovereignty and pride, while being weapons of destruction. The US has generally expressed confidence in Pakistani government's ability to secure its nuclear arsenal. This was noted by President Obama when he addressed this issue in his April 29, 2009, press conference, stating, "I'm confident that we can make sure that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is secure, primarily, initially, because the Pakistani Army, I think, recognizes the hazards of those weapons falling into the wrong hands. We've got strong military-to-military consultation and cooperation."¹⁴ Similar sentiments were echoed by Department of State spokesperson Mark Toner when he stated on November 9, 2011, that the US "continue(s) to have confidence in the government of Pakistan that they both understand the threat to their nuclear arsenal, the varied threats to their nuclear arsenal, that they're taking appropriate steps to safeguard them."¹⁵ The US intelligence community has also articulated similar sentiments.

If Pakistan is keeping its nuclear weapons safe, then why is there such concern for their safety? It is because the US recognises that there are a number of vulnerabilities in Pakistan's security apparatus as discussed earlier. Also the US's knowledge of Pakistan's arsenal is limited;

further reliable information on the operational status of the nuclear arsenals and capabilities, as it is not party to the NPT, is difficult to determine and authenticate.

The attacks on Pakistan's nuclear facilities have brought the matter to the forefront. However, the collapse of the Pakistani government is viewed as the most likely scenario against which the US has a contingency plans. During former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's confirmation hearing in January 2005, in response to a question from Senator John Kerry asking what would happen to Pakistan's nuclear weapons in the event of a radical Islamic coup in Islamabad; Secretary Rice answered, "(w)e have noted this problem, and we are prepared to try to deal with it." The issue of US contingency plans to take over Pakistani strategic assets was raised again in the press following Benazir Bhutto's assassination.¹⁶ The US has since then denied its intention or desire to take control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

The US has repeatedly offered to help Pakistan secure its nuclear weapons and keep them safe. This assistance complies with the provisions of the NPT and within the limits of its domestic laws. It includes best practices and technical proficiency applied by the US to protect its nuclear weapons from unauthorised and accident use, physical security to its facilities and reliability checks of its personnel. The US government has also reportedly offered assistance to secure or destroy radioactive materials that could be used to make a radioactive dispersal device, and to ship highly enriched Uranium used in the Pakistani civilian nuclear sector out of the country.¹⁷ Pakistan's response to these proposals is as yet unclear. There is a trust deficit in the bilateral relationship which has complicated efforts in this area. It is worth noting that, according to some observers, spent fuel from Pakistan's Karachi and Chasma nuclear power plants could be vulnerable to theft or attack. However, Pakistani officials have expressed confidence in the security of its facilities and have said that Islamabad has no plans to transport spent fuel from either reactor.¹⁸

Proliferation is another facet of nuclear security. The proliferation network as espoused by Pakistani scientist Dr. A. Q Khan brought forward the threat of terrorist organisations obtaining nuclear material or expertise related to nuclear weapons from Pakistan. The network was initially used to clandestinely obtain nuclear technology for Pakistan. Thereafter it was used to supply

nuclear technology, design and enriched Uranium for profit to Libya, North Korea and Iran. While the current status of this network is unclear, both US intelligence and other agencies are of the opinion that the network has been not operational. The US Department of Energy and Department of Homeland Security have provided Pakistan with assistance to improve its export control processes.

Apart from the concerns about Pakistan's military nuclear programme, its civil nuclear programme is also being closely monitored by the international community.

In the civil nuclear domain, Pakistan has been critical of the India-US civil nuclear agreement. It has demanded a similar deal from the US, which has so far been denied. Pakistan has also sought negotiations for the same with France and UK, meeting with similar results. To mitigate these setbacks it has increased its civil nuclear cooperation with China, which as a member of the Nuclear Security Group (NSG), has argued that the current agreement for cooperation with Pakistan predates its becoming a member of the NSG.¹⁹ Nonetheless, it has been cautioned against future cooperation without exceptions. Since 2008, Pakistan has been demanding criteria based exemption in the NSG rules, which would allow it to develop nuclear cooperation with the countries of the NSG. This is different from the country based exception that has been made for India, which benefits only India.

Internationally, there is limited support to grant Pakistan an NSG exemption as enjoyed by India. The US Congress is also not in favour of such a deal. The Pakistan lobby in Washington is much weaker than its Indian counterpart, which was crucial in building congressional support for the India-US agreement. In addition, Pakistan has a poor proliferation record and its economy inspires no confidence that a sustainable and profitable nuclear market will develop. The huge political and financial risks involved would deter major suppliers from building nuclear projects in Pakistan, particularly amid persistent domestic terrorism.

Conclusion

While the safety and security of nuclear weapons and material is not the sole basis of the US

Pakistan relations, but these are the major concerns in the relationship. For the US, South Asia and the Asia-Pacific region have gained importance. The US has been promoting its 're-balancing' strategy in the region and has emphasised on its relations with India. Given the nature of animosity between India and Pakistan, the US is apprehensive at the possibility of the 'next war' escalating to a nuclear confrontation.

For India, the threat from a nuclear Pakistan is two-fold; Pakistan as a State is hostile to India and the militaries have fought four wars while skirmishes on the borders between the two continue unabated. The political class has time and again used rhetoric and the use of nuclear weapons against India as a means to build support. The Pakistan military is used to being the dominant force in the country and the population views it with pride. Two crises, the Kargil confrontation in 1999 and the 2001-02 Indo-Pakistani military standoff, ensured that the US employed all diplomatic means to end a possible nuclear exchange. Although official documents are unavailable that can shed light on the Pakistani assessment of the nuclear implications of the operation, it is reasonable to infer that the 'Kargil planners' must have given careful thought to New Delhi's reaction and the nuclear risk that it carried.²⁰

The other threat that emanates from Pakistan is in the form of terrorism. There are a number of terrorist organisations that are operating in Pakistan that are openly hostile to India, some of who have State support. They have carried out acts of terror against India on numerous occasions. India has time and again provided Pakistan with evidence about the involvement of individuals and organisations in acts of terror in India, but operating from Pakistan. None of these efforts have made much progress. In a recent meeting with his counterpart in New York (Sept. 2013), Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh reiterated India's demand for justice and cooperation from Pakistan on these issues. Given Pakistan's proliferation record, hostility of terrorist organisations towards India and the attacks on nuclear sites by them in Pakistan, it is natural for India to be concerned about the safety of nuclear devices in Pakistan. In such a situation if any of these groups are able to obtain nuclear devices or nuclear material with rudimentary knowledge to assemble a dirty bomb, it would prove to be disastrous for the international community and particularly India.

India, the US and the international community would like to avoid such a situation. Washington and Islamabad have been cooperating on Pakistan's nuclear arsenal since 2001. Nuclear security for Pakistan cannot be confined to better safeguards. The US has to encourage Pakistan through technology to secure its arsenal and limit it as well. While a nuclear deal similar to India has been denied to Pakistan, the US has to engage itself with the civil programme. The US has to abandon its short term engagement policy towards Pakistan and ensure its engagements with Pakistan to achieve regional stability and allay proliferation fears.

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Endnotes

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