



Pakistan's Nuclear Assets India's Concerns

Ali Ahmed
Security Analyst, New Delhi

Introduction

The terror attack in Mumbai that occurred in a concurrent timeframe has reinforced India's concerns in the region. It has led to commentary in India on the 'mutuality of strategic interest' of India and the US over developments in Pakistan. Central to these concerns is the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal from the threat posed to it from two directions: an Islamist takeover of Pakistan and second, from a terrorist attack on the facilities to gain access to nuclear devices or material.

PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR ASSETS: HOW SAFE ARE THEY?

Khalid Kidwai, head of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Directorate which is the Secretariat of the National Command Authority, has dismissed concerns over the security of Pakistan's nuclear enclave, stating, "This is all overblown rhetoric. Please grant to Pakistan that if we can make nuclear weapons and the delivery systems we can also make them safe. Our security systems are foolproof." After the AQ Khan revelations of 2004, this is taken with considerable skepticism.

Zafar Ali, another Pakistani military official in a paper, visualizes a threat scenario that involves outsiders or insiders and the possibility of collusion between the two. These concerns are: theft of nuclear weapons or weapon-grade material by extremist or terrorist groups; vulnerability of nuclear weapons during war time, movement, and deployment; domestic instability whereby religious extremists could gain control over them; worries that experts from the nuclear complex could steal sensitive information and assist terrorist groups; sabotage; and lastly, unauthorised launch. He is sanguine

about safety measures, believing that the small size of Pakistan's nuclear assets and facilities makes them easy to guard with the 8000-strong Security Division whose personnel, along with civilian technicians with the weapons program are passed through a vigorous personnel reliability program involving four intelligence agencies.

Keeping nuclear weapons in a de-mated condition complicates theft. In crisis and conflict conditions, since security precautions are more stringent, the likelihood of security problems arising becomes more remote. A 'three man' rule is operative in Pakistan, as against the 'two man' system elsewhere, for implementing nuclear readiness decisions. The creation of the NCA, PNRA, Security Division, Strategic Force Command; promulgation of relevant laws; and setting up systems for the effective monitoring of strategic organizations, are steps to meet the potential challenges.

It can be conceded that the \$ 100 million that have been provided to strengthen nuclear security have been better spent than the other \$ 11 billion given to Pakistan since 9/11, an observation shared by a November 2007 New York Times report. While for the US such assistance would bolster counter proliferation efforts, for Pakistan, it would enable greater security for its nuclear arsenal, whether through better technology or security systems and procedures. Such a transfer was debated in 1998 and again in 2001. While scientists favoured the transfer, the State Department had reservations with regard to the implications of the transfer under the Nuclear Non Proliferation Act of 1998. Such assistance dates back to October 2001, to the meeting between the then Secretary of State, Colin Powell and Pervez Musharraf.

While the US had additionally offered to provide physical security assistance, Islamabad declined

the offer, owing to the intrusive nature of the assistance. It has accepted technical assistance such as the supposed transfer of Permissive Action Links technology in 2003 - a technology it now claims as indigenous. It may be pertinent to note however, that Italian visitors of the Landau Network, in their famous report of 2002, report Kidwai as having told them that 'there is no such thing as PALS' since the weapons are apparently kept in an disassembled state - a position later denied. The *New York Times*, in 2007, reported that the secret aid program was drawing on American experience in containing leakages from the former Soviet Union with much of the money being spent on physical security, like fencing and surveillance systems, and equipment for tracking nuclear material. In summation, revelations regarding AQ Khan's 'walmart', and the extent of the complicity of the Army, lead to the conclusion that the extent and nature of security and control over nuclear weapons are ambiguous at best.

II

PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR ASSETS: THREAT SCENARIOS

Graham Allison, nuclear expert on the bipartisan Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism, has expressed the concern that "the unknown variable here is the future of Pakistan itself, because it's not hard to envision a situation in which the state's authority falls apart and you're not sure who's in control..." The major concerns in this connection are the fear that Islamists may destabilize and take over Pakistan and second, that they may infiltrate the nuclear enclave.

A civilian official from the PNRA, acknowledges fears with respect to the second scenario stating "the vulnerability of these facilities to nuclear terrorism cannot be ignored, especially in the current context of Pakistan's active participation with US and Western Allies in the War on Terror." The verdict of the Landau Network report is also similar in this regard: "...the risks of nuclear proliferation in

Revelations regarding AQ Khan's 'walmart', and the extent of the complicity of the Army, lead to the conclusion that the extent and nature of security and control over nuclear weapons are ambiguous at best.

Pakistan may be more significantly linked to the acquired nuclear expertise combined with pro-radical political attitudes, than with the actual risk of leakage of fissile material or of nuclear weapons."

The PNRA Official expresses fear of interdiction by terrorists of Pakistani weapons on the move, in response to an Indo-Pakistan crisis, and of the infiltration of nuclear facilities by extremists, as in the case of Bashiruddin Mahmood and Abdul Majeed, scientists with Al Qaeda links. This is the likely strategy of Islamists and has driven counter proliferation efforts since 9/11.

The first scenario, in which nuclear weapons fall into the hands of Islamists on their taking over a failing Pakistani state however, requires further reflection. The apprehension is that there may be a break down in the corporate cohesion of the Army leading to a coup or civil war in which rational-secular forces in the Army and society are pitched against radical Islamists. In an interview to Spiegel Online International however the new ISI chief, Lieutenant General Shuja Pasha, said, "Many may think in a different direction, and everyone is allowed to think differently, but no one can dare to disobey a command or even do something that was not ordered,"

The threat is in proportion to continuing American military action on Pakistani territory and pressure on the Pakistan Army for military action against the Islamist-Taliban combine. The Army's failure to protect Pakistani sovereignty from unpopular US intrusiveness and the extent of its failure against the Taliban in NWFP and FATA, would strengthen opposition to the current level of participation of Pakistan in the GWOT. Additionally, this may result in greater reluctance and in the face of increasing pressure, even lead to a threat of withdrawal. The extent of disaffection is evident from the acceptance of the extremist rationale as a legitimate point of view by the Director General, ISI, Shuja Pasha, who is quoted to have told Spiegel, "Shouldn't they be allowed to think and say what they please? They believe that jihad is their obligation. Isn't that freedom of opinion?"

The Pakistani Army will have to gauge the extent of leverage it can exercise in terms of determining the levels of engagement with the Americans. This would be significantly reduced in the face of greater American military assertiveness inside Pakistan. There is already evidence of this in terms of the increasing number of Predator attacks since mid-2008. The Army seeing itself as the 'last bastion' of a troubled state would not risk its corpo-

rate identity in a war that is increasingly being seen as someone else's war. Therefore, the assessment here is that before reaching a stage of internal rupture, Pakistan will take preventive measures to redefine its role in the GWOT.

Having understood this to an extent, the US has turned its attention to both incentivise and pressurise Pakistan. Realising that it cannot pressure Pakistan beyond a point and that it cannot 'go it alone', particularly in conditions of recession, US strategy is likely to gravitate towards a more political approach than has been the case so far. This will defuse the predicament of the Pakistani Army considerably and indirectly forestall any threat to the nuclear arsenal.

This is more appropriate than the alternative scenario that some realist analysts appear to prefer that for understandable reasons also constitutes Pakistan's favourite conspiracy theory. According to this scenario the threat to Pakistan's nuclear assets is less from Islamists than from the US, aligned possibly with India. Such pre-emptive action would involve the US and possibly Indian Special Forces, seizing control of the arsenal, in conjunction with the rational-secular elements of Pakistan's Army, presently in control. Fearing US pre-emption of the arsenal, Musharraf is believed to have dispersed these assets to six secret places after the outbreak of the Afghan war. In case control has passed into the hands of the Islamists, this would require surgical action to retrieve the situation. The success of such an enterprise would depend on the intelligence available, its timing and the extent of participation of the rational-secular elements.

All these however, are likely to be scarce, since if the Islamists and the rational-secular elements are likely to agree over anything, it is going to be the security of strategic assets. In case opposition has to be overcome first, it would be a hazardous venture that would lead at best to partial success, since the extent of the compromised arsenal would not be known and it would not be possible to address the entire arsenal, kept dispersed, in multiple locations, simultaneously. The possibility of partial success and incomplete action should deter such action in the first place. The outcome of such an assertion of control by a foreign power over strategic assets would ensure the strengthening of counter Islamist efforts. Mobilisation of the forces to face ensuing contingencies would make for a self-fulfilling prophecy. It could catalyse nuclear use where their use has at least initially perhaps not been contemplated. Therefore, this argument requires to be combated now before it

Fearing US preemption of the arsenal, Musharraf is believed to have dispersed these assets to six secret places. In case control has passed into the hands of the Islamists, this would require surgical action to retrieve the situation.

gains traction, since owing to the requirements of secrecy, it is unlikely to be discussed.

III IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

Improved Indo-US relations are reckoned as one of the few gainful legacies of the Bush administration. The less visible but more dynamic area of cooperation has been 'military ties'. Joint military exercises of consequence for our consideration here are those involving the Special Forces of the two states. Professional gains apart, joint training enlarges the scope of military options by enabling future joint operations. The interoperability buildup gives rise to the possibility of a joint Indo-US intervention in Pakistan to secure its nuclear arsenal in conjunction with the rational-secular elements within its Army, and polity becomes a response option. It is certainly a threat apprehended by Pakistan, as is also evident from the paper by the SPD officer, referred to earlier: "Rumors of preemptive or preventive action by India or Israeli or US forces create a worrisome situation for Pakistan... Strategizing preemptive or preventive use of force has potentially dangerous consequences for security, stability, and peace....Although such responses appear possible in theory, their implementation could be extremely difficult and dangerous. A U.S. military action to seize or cripple Pakistan's strategic nuclear assets may encourage India to take similar action...In the context of South Asia, this would be a major destabilizing factor." Pakistan had voiced concerns regarding preemptive attacks against its nuclear assets earlier in the mid-80s and during the run up to the Chagai tests. The utility of such fear mongering of information war purposes is moot. This seemingly far-fetched circumstance of intervention needs to be predicated on invitation from authorities, if embattled, in Pakistan. Even then, the consequence of Indian presence energizing Islamists would require to be factored in. In case the US is taking it on, there would be lesser requirement for Indian involvement, giving India the choice to stay out.

It would be best however, if India could restrain

any such impulse in its strategic partner. This owes to the deterrent rhetoric in Pakistan from hyper-realist quarters, indicating that irrespective of the direction and source of attack on its nuclear assets, the response would be directed at India. Mirza Aslam Beg, former Chief of Pakistan Army, is reported to have made the threat. He is also said to have advised Iran in the same vein, but with the default target being Israel, in case of a threat to Iranian nuclear installations.

While an Osirak situation is ruled out by ground realities, preventive or preemptive disabling of Pakistani nuclear capability by powers such as US and India, in case of developments considered adverse to their security is apprehended in Pakistan. The presumption in Pakistan is that such action would only be with Indian complicity or concurrence. This requires India to be wary of contingency planning elsewhere, such as in the US Central Command, wherein Pakistani nuclear assets are to be secured by intervention. It would dramatically heighten threat levels to India momentarily, and the threat would continue in case of failure or partial failure of such an enterprise.

India's position needs to be derived from its grand strategy. This is to husband power indices through a period of peace and stability in such a manner as to become a great power over the middle term. While export of terror from Pakistan has destabilising portents for India's endeavour at economic and social transformation, this can be managed without getting overly enmeshed in the GWOT. Doing so would only provide nationalist ballast to Islamist forces, contending the US and Pakistan in the region. India should exercise its newly-forged clout with the US to get it to apply the 'indirect approach' to the problem which could envisage a political opening up to the Taliban. Isolation of the core Islamists would result in strengthening the rational-secular strand in Pakistani Army and democratic forces within society. Not only will this help diminish the threat from the Islamists, but also the threat, as perceived by Pakistan, from an India-US combine to its strategic nuclear assets.

IV CONCLUSIONS

Pakistan, though a state perpetually in danger of becoming a 'failed state with nuclear weapons', has credible control over its nuclear assets. This control however, is threatened by the spread of Islamism in Pakistan, which is likely to increase, es-

pecially in case of misapplied policies in favour of a military-dominant approach to the problem of the Taliban in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, it must be noted that this fear is exaggerated and is intended to pressurise Pakistan 'to do more' in the GWOT. Pakistan however, will place its concerns regarding national existence and cohesion at the forefront of any such consideration. It cannot be expected to run the risk of a rightist coup or self-consuming civil war in its efforts towards the GWOT. Doing so would only detract from the aims of the international community in the region. Therefore, it would be prudent to realise that as a nuclear state, it requires greater space for making strategic choices in the GWOT. This would ensure more effective security of its nuclear assets than the proposed provision of security by external forces. The feared denouement of an Islamist grab would only be hastened by such action. Even in case of an Islamist takeover of Pakistan, there is no need for India to emulate an Iraq in the wake of the Iranian revolution. The 'mutuality of interest' between India and the US indeed exists, but needs revision along these lines.

REFERENCES

- David Albright, "Securing Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Complex," Stanley Foundation for the 42nd Strategy for Peace Conference, October 2001, www.isisonline.org/publications/terrorism/stanleypaper.html).
- "Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons: Proliferation and Security Issues," CRS Report for Congress, June 2008.
- Zafar Ali, 'Pakistan's Nuclear Assets and Threats of Terrorism: How Grave is the Danger?', The Henry L. Stimson Center, Jul 2007
- David Senger and William Broad, 'US Secretly Aids Pakistan in Guarding Nuclear Arms', *New York Times*, Nov 18, 2007.
- "Nuclear safety, nuclear stability and nuclear strategy in Pakistan: A concise report of a visit by Landau Network - Centro Volta," January 2002.
- David Sanger, "Obama's Worst Pakistan Nightmare," *New York Times*, January 11, 2009.
- Saleem Zafar, "Vulnerability of Research Reactors to Attack," Henry L Stimson Center, April 2008.

