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Pakistan's nukes: How many are enough?

It was a lie that the Bomb could protect Pakistan, its people or its armed forces.

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The latest news from America must have thrilled many: Pakistan probably has more nuclear weapons than India. A recent *Washington Post* article, quoting various nuclear experts, suggests that Pakistan is primed to “surge ahead in the production of nuclear-weapons material, putting it on a path to overtake Britain as the world’s fifth largest nuclear weapons power”.

Some may shrug off this report as alarmist anti-Pakistan propaganda, while others will question the accuracy of such claims. Indeed, given the highly secret nature of nuclear programmes everywhere, at best one can only make educated guesses on weapons and their materials. For Pakistan, it is well known that the Kahuta complex has been producing highly enriched uranium for a quarter century, and that there are two operational un-safeguarded plutonium-producing reactors at Khushab (with a third one under construction). Still, the exact amounts of bomb-grade material and weapons are closely held secrets.

But for argument's sake, let's assume that the claims made are correct. Indeed, let us suppose that Pakistan surpasses India in numbers – say by 50 per cent or even 100 per cent. Will that really make Pakistan more secure? Make it more capable of facing current existential challenges?

The answer is, no. Pakistan's basic security problems lie within its borders: growing internal discord and militancy, a collapsing economy, and a belief among most citizens that the state cannot govern effectively. These are deep and serious problems that cannot be solved by more or better weapons. Therefore the way forward lies in building a sustainable and active democracy, an economy for peace rather than war, a federation in which provincial grievances can be effectively resolved, elimination of the feudal order and creating a tolerant society that respects the rule of law.

Pakistanis have long imagined the Bomb as a panacea for all ills. It became axiomatic that, in addition to providing total security, the Bomb would give help us liberate Kashmir, give Pakistan international visibility, create national pride and elevate the country's technological status. But these promises proved empty.

The Bomb did nothing to bring Kashmiri liberation closer. India's grip on Kashmir is tighter today than it has been for a long time and is challenged only by the courageous uprising of Kashmiris. Pakistan's strategy for confronting India – secret jihad by Islamic fighters protected by Pakistan's nuclear umbrella – backfired terribly after Kargil and nearly turned Pakistan into an international pariah. More importantly, today's hydra-headed militancy owes to the Kashmiri and Afghan mujahideen who avenged their betrayal by Pakistan's army and politicians by turning their guns against their former sponsors and trainers.

What became of the claim that pride in the bomb would miraculously weld together the disparate peoples who constitute Pakistan? While many in Punjab still want the bomb, angry Sindhis want water and jobs – and they blame Punjab for taking these away. Karachi staggers along with multiple ethnically motivated killings; Muhajirs and Pakhtuns are locked in a deadly battle. As for the Baloch, they are in open revolt. They resent that the two nuclear test sites – now radioactive and out of bounds – are on their soil. Angry at being governed from Islamabad, some have taken up arms and demand that army cantonments be dismantled. The Bomb was no glue.

Some might ask, didn't the Bomb stop India from swallowing up Pakistan? The answer is, no. First, an upward-mobile India has no reason to want an additional 180 million Muslims. Second, even if India wanted to, territorial conquest is impossible. Conventional weapons, used by Pakistan in a defensive mode, are sufficient protection. If the mighty American python could not digest Iraq or Afghanistan, there is zero chance for a middling power like India to occupy Pakistan, a country four times larger than Iraq.

It is, of course, true that Pakistan's nuclear weapons deterred India from launching punitive attacks at least thrice since the 1998 tests. India could do nothing after Pakistan's secret incursion in Kargil during 1999, the Dec 13 attack on the Indian parliament the same year (initially claimed by Jaish-i-Muhammad), or the Mumbai attack in 2008 by Lashkar-i-Taiba. So should we keep the Bomb to protect militant groups? Surely it is time to realise that conducting foreign policy in this manner will buy us nothing but disaster after disaster.

It was a lie that the Bomb could protect Pakistan, its people or its armed forces. Rather, it has helped bring us to this grievously troubled situation and offers no way out. It is time for Pakistan to drop its illogical opposition to the Fissile Materials Cutoff Treaty which, incidentally, would impact India far more than Pakistan. We need fewer bombs on both sides, not more.

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