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Pakistan's rush for more bombs — why?

The rush for more bombs has much to do with its changing relationship with US and Indian military modernisation.

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On January 24, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon vented his frustration at Pakistan's determined opposition to a treaty that would limit fissile material production for use in nuclear weapons. For three years, Pakistan has single-handedly — and successfully — blocked the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva from discussing an effort that would reduce nuclear weapons globally. Consequently, within diplomatic circles, Pakistan has acquired the reputation of an outlier that opposes all efforts towards this end.

The opposition comes in the backdrop of news that Pakistan has the world's fastest-growing nuclear arsenal. This claim — which still reverberates around the world — was first published in a Bulletin of Atomic Scientists report entitled "Pakistan's nuclear forces — 2011". The authors, Hans M Kristensen and Robert S Norris, say although the numbers of Pakistani warheads and delivery vehicles is a closely-held secret, yet "we estimate that Pakistan has a nuclear weapons stockpile of 90-110 nuclear warheads, an increase from the estimated 70-90 warheads in 2009". They reckon that if the expansion continues, Pakistan's stockpile could reach 150-200 in a few years. By this count, Pakistan's arsenal may have already exceeded India's, and will soon rival Britain's.

The Bulletin report has not been denied by Pakistan. Its stockpile of highly enriched uranium is increased daily by thousands of centrifuges whirring away at the Kahuta Laboratory (and possibly elsewhere). This is augmented by plutonium producing reactors at Khushab; two are already at work and a third is undergoing trials. Google Earth photos show that a fourth one is under construction. The plutonium has no commercial purpose. Instead, the goal is to produce lighter but deadlier bombs to be fitted on to missile tips.

Pakistan's position is that it needs to produce still more bombs — and hence more bomb materials — because of India. It cites the US-India nuclear deal, along with older issues related to verification problems and existing stocks. Indeed, that infamous deal is Pakistan's strongest argument and a correct criticism: the US has committed itself to nuclear cooperation with a state that is not a signatory to the NPT and one that made nuclear weapons surreptitiously. Now that the sanctions once imposed are long gone, India can import advanced nuclear reactor technology as well as natural uranium ore from diverse sources — Australia included. Although imported ore cannot be used for bomb-making, India could in principle divert more of its scarce domestic ore towards military reactors. Pakistan also says that "Cold Start" — an operation conceived by the Indian military in response to more Mumbai-type attacks — requires it to prepare tactical nuclear weapons for battlefield use.

But the US-India nuclear deal may actually be a fig leaf. Pakistan's rush for more bombs has as much to do with its changing relationship with the United States as with Indian military modernisation. This racing reflects a paradigm shift within Pakistan's military establishment, where feelings against the US have steadily hardened over many years. Post-bin Laden, the change is starkly visible.

In the military's mind, the Americans are now a threat, equal to or larger than India. They are also considered more of an adversary than even the TTP jihadists who have killed thousands of Pakistani troops and civilians. While the Salala incident was allowed to inflame public opinion, the gory video-taped executions of Pakistani soldiers by the TTP were played down. A further indication is that the LeT/JuD is back in favor (with a mammoth anti-US and anti-India rally scheduled in Karachi next month). Pakistani animosity rises as it sees America tightly embracing India, and standing in the way of a Pakistani-friendly government in Kabul. Once again "strategic defiance" is gaining ground, albeit not through the regional compact suggested by General Mirza Aslam Beg in the early 1990s.

This attitudinal shift has created two strong non-India reasons that favour ramping up bomb production.

First, Pakistan's nuclear weapons are seen to be threatened by America. This perception has been reinforced by the large amount of attention given to the issue in the US mainstream press, and by war-gaming exercises in US military institutes. Thus, redundancy is considered desirable — an American attempt to seize or destroy all warheads would have smaller chances of success if Pakistan had more.

But such an attack is improbable. It is difficult to imagine any circumstances — except possibly the most extreme — in which the US would risk going to war against another nuclear state. Even if Pakistan had just a handful of weapons, no outside power could accurately know the coordinates of the mobile units on which they are located. It is said that an extensive network of underground tunnels exists within which they can be freely moved. Additionally, overground ones are moved from place to place periodically in unmarked trucks. Mobile dummies and decoys can hugely compound difficulties. Moreover, even if a nuclear location was exactly known, it would surely be heavily guarded. This implies many casualties when intruding troops are engaged, thus making a secret bin-Laden type operation impossible.

The second — and perhaps more important — reason for the accelerated nuclear development is left unstated: nukes act as insurance against things going too far wrong. Like North Korea, Pakistan knows that, no matter what, international financial donors will feel compelled to keep pumping in funds. Else a collapsing system may be unable to prevent some of its hundred-plus Hiroshima-sized nukes from disappearing into the darkness.

This insurance could become increasingly important as Pakistan moves deeper into political isolation and economic difficulties mount. Even today, load-shedding and fuel shortages routinely shut down industries and transport for long stretches, imports far exceed exports, inflation is at the double-digit level, foreign direct investment is negligible because of concerns over physical security, tax collection remains minimal, and corruption remains unchecked. An African country like Somalia or Congo would have sunk under this weight long ago.

To conclude: throwing a spanner in the works at the CD (Geneva) may well be popular as an act of defiance. Indeed, many in Pakistan — like Hamid Gul and Imran Khan — derive delicious satisfaction from spiting the world in such ways. But this is not wise for a state that perpetually hovers at the edge of bankruptcy, and which derives most of its worker remittances and export earnings from the very countries it delights in mocking.

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