



By Pervez Hoodbhoy

PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR BAYONET

In an enthusiastic moment, Napoleon is said to have remarked: "Bayonets are wonderful! One can do anything with them except sit on them!" Pakistan's political and military establishment glows with similar enthusiasm about its nuclear weapons. Following the 1998 nuclear tests, it saw "The Bomb" as a panacea for solving Pakistan's multiple problems. It became axiomatic that, in addition to providing total security, "The Bomb" would give Pakistan international visibility, help liberate Kashmir, create national pride and

Even if our nuclear weapons are safe, can they really guarantee Pakistan's safety?

elevate the country's technological status. But the hopes and goals were quite different from those of earlier days.

Back then, there was just one reason for wanting "The Bomb" — Indian nukes had to be countered by Pakistani nukes. Indeed, in 1965, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had uttered his famous statement about "The Bomb": if India got it "then we shall have to eat grass and get one, or buy one, of our own." In the famous Multan meeting that followed India's victory in the 1971 war, Bhutto demanded from Pakistani scientists that they map out a nuclear weapons programme to counter India's. Pakistan was pushed further into the nuclear arena by the Indian test of May 1974.

Although challenged again to equalise forces by a series of five Indian nuclear tests in May 1998, Pakistan was initially reluctant to test its own weapons for fear of international sanctions. Much soul-searching

followed. But foolish taunts and threats by Indian leaders such as L K Advani and George Fernandes forced Pakistan over the edge that same month, a fact that India now surely regrets.

Pakistan's nuclear success changed attitudes instantly. A super-confident military suddenly saw nuclear weapons as a talisman; having nukes-for-nukes became secondary. "The Bomb" became the means for neutralising India's far larger conventional land, air and sea forces. This thinking soon translated into action. Just months after the 1998 nuclear tests, Pakistani troops and militants, protected by a nuclear shield, crossed the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir into Kargil. Militant Islamic groups freely organised across Pakistan. When the Mumbai attacks eventually followed in 2008, India could do little more than froth and fume.

A third purpose, which is still emerging, is subtler but critically important: our nukes generate income. Hard economic times have befallen Pakistan: loadshedding 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 reform has failed, and corruption remains unchecked. An African country like Somalia or Congo would have long ago sunk under this weight. But, like nuclear North Korea, Pakistan feels protected. It knows that international financial donors are compelled to keep pumping in funds. Else a collapsing Pakistan would be unable to prevent its 80+ Hiroshima-sized nukes from disappearing into the darkness.

Over time, then, the country's nuclear bayonet has gained more than just deterrence value; it is a dream instrument for any ruling oligarchy. Unlike Napoleon's bayonet – painful to sit upon – nukes offer no such discomfort. Unsurprisingly, General (ret'd) Pervez Musharraf often referred to them as Pakistan's "crown jewels". One recalls that immediately after 9/11 he declared these "assets" were to be protected at all costs — even if this meant accepting American demands to dump the Taliban.

But can our nukes lose their magic? Be stolen, rendered impotent or lose the charm through which they bring in precious revenue? More fundamentally, how and when could they fail to deter?

A turning point could possibly come with Mumbai-II. This is no idle speculation. The military establishment's reluctance to clamp down on anti-India jihadi groups, or to punish those who carried out Mumbai-I, makes a second Pakistan-based attack simply a matter of time. Although not officially assisted or sanctioned, it would create fury in India. What then? How would India respond?

There cannot, of course, be a definite answer. But it is instructive to analyse Operation Parakram, India's response to the attack on the Indian parliament on December 13, 2001. This 10-month-long mobilisation of nearly half a million soldiers and deployment of troops along the LOC was launched to punish Pakistan for harbouring the Jaish-e-Mohammad, which, at least initially, had claimed responsibility for the attack. When Parakram fizzled out, Pakistan claimed victory and India was left licking its wounds.

A seminar held in August 2003 in Delhi brought together senior Indian military leaders and top analysts to reflect on Parakram. To quote the main speaker, Major-General Ashok Mehta, the two countries hovered on the brink of war and India's "coercive diplomacy failed due to the mismatch of India-US diplomacy and India's failure to think through the end game". The general gave several reasons for not going to war against Pakistan. These

included a negative cost-benefit analysis, lack of enthusiasm in the Indian political establishment, complications arising from the Gujarat riots of 2002 and "a lack of courage". That Parakram would have America's unflinching support also turned out to be a false assumption.

A second important opinion, articulated by the influential former Indian intelligence chief, Lieutenant-General Vikram Sood, was still harsher on India. He expressed regret at not going to war



against Pakistan and said that India had "failed to achieve strategic space as well as strategic autonomy". He went on to say that Musharraf never took India seriously after it lost this golden opportunity to attack a distracted Pakistan that was waging war against the Taliban on the Durand Line. Using the word "imbroglio" for India's punitive attempt, he

pointed out that no political directive had been provided to the service chiefs for execution even as late as August 2002. On the contrary, the Chief of Army Staff was asked to draw up a directive that month to extricate the army.

Now that the finger-pointing, recriminations and stock-taking are over, one can be sure that India will not permit a second Parakram.

Indeed, a new paradigm for dealing with Pakistan has emerged and is encoded into strategies such as Cold Start. These call for quick, salami-slicing thrusts into Pakistan while learning to fight a conventional war under a “nuclear overhang” (by itself an interesting new phrase, used by General Deepak Kapoor in January 2010).

On this score, recent revelations by WikiLeaks are worthy of consideration. In a classified cable to Washington in February 2010, Tim Roemer, the US ambassador to India, described Cold Start as “not a plan for a comprehensive invasion and occupation of Pakistan” but “for a rapid, time- and distance-limited penetration into Pakistani territory”. He wrote that “it is the collective judgment of the US Mission that India



US attack on Pakistan's nuclear production or storage sites would, however, be monumental stupidity. Even if a single nuke escapes destruction, that last one could cause catastrophic damage. But the situation is immensely uncertain and dangerous than that. Even if the US knows the precise numbers of deployed weapons, it simply cannot know all their position coordinates. India, one imagines, would know even less.

would encounter mixed results.” Warning India against Cold Start, he concluded that “Indian leaders no doubt realise that although Cold Start is designed to punish Pakistan in a limited manner without triggering a nuclear response, they cannot be sure whether Pakistani leaders will in fact refrain from such a response.”

Roemer is spot on. Implementing Cold Start, which might be triggered by Mumbai-II, may well initiate a nuclear disaster. Indeed, there is no way to predict how such conflicts will end once they start. Therefore a rational Indian leadership – which one can only hope would exist at that particular time – is unlikely to opt for it. But even in this optimistic scenario, Mumbai-II would likely be a bigger disaster for Pakistan than for India. Yes, Pakistani nukes would be unhurt and unused, but their magic would have evaporated.

The reason is clear: an aggrieved India would campaign – with a high chance of success – for ending all international aid for Pakistan, a trade boycott and stiff sanctions. The world's fear of loose Pakistani nukes hijacked by Islamist forces would be overcome by the international revulsion of yet another stomach-churning massacre. With little fat to spare in the economy, collapse may happen over weeks rather than months. Bravado in Pakistan would be intense at first but would fast evaporate.

Foodstuffs, electricity, gas and petrol would disappear. China and Saudi Arabia would send messages of sympathy and some aid, but they would not make up the difference. With scarcity all around, angry mobs would burn grid stations and petrol pumps, loot shops, and plunder the houses of the rich. Today's barely governable Pakistan would become ungovernable. The government then in power, whether civilian or military, would exist only in name. Religious and regional forces would pounce upon their chances; Pakistan would descend into hellish anarchy.

In another scenario, could Pakistan's nukes be stolen by Islamist radicals? America's worries about this are dismissed by most Pakistanis who consider these fears to be unfounded and suspect such US claims to be hiding bad

intent. They point out that the professionalism of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division (SPD), which has custodial responsibility of the weapons, has been praised by many visitors. Reassuring words have also come from visiting American politicians like Senator Joe Lieberman. With US tutoring and funds, SPD says it has implemented various technical precautions such as improved perimeter security, installation of electronic locks and security devices such as Permissive Action Links, and a personnel reliability programme.

For all this, procedures and technical fixes are only as good as the men who operate them. For example, more or better weapons could not have prevented Governor Salmaan Taseer from being gunned down by his own guards. This incident, as well as numerous insider attacks upon the military and Inter-



Services Intelligence, raise the spectre of a mutiny in nuclear quarters. Given Pakistan's radicalised and trenchantly anti-American environment, it is hard to argue that this would be impossible in a state of crisis.

Since the nukes may not be safe from radicals, it is logical to assume that the US must have extensively war-gamed the situation. Contingency plans would be put into operation once there is actionable intelligence of Pakistan's nukes getting loose, or if a radical regime takes over and makes overt threats. What could these plans be, and would they really work?

An article published in *The New Yorker* in November 2009 by Seymour Hersh created waves in Pakistan. He wrote that US emergency plans exist for taking the sting out of Pakistan's nukes by seizing their trigger mechanisms. He also claimed that an alarm, apparently related to a missing nuclear bomb component, had caused a US rapid response team to fly to Dubai. The alarm proved false and the team was recalled before it reached Pakistan. The Pakistan foreign ministry, as well as the US embassy in Islamabad, vigorously denied any such episode.

What should one make of Hersh's claim? First, it is highly unlikely that the US has accurate knowledge of the storage locations of Pakistan's nukes, especially since they (or look-alike dummies) are mobile. Extensive underground tunnels reportedly exist within which they can be freely moved. Second, even if a location is exactly known, it would be heavily guarded. This implies many casualties on both sides when intruding troops are engaged, thus making a secret operation impossible. Third, attacking a Pakistani nuclear site would be an act of war with totally unacceptable consequences for the US, particularly in view of its Afghan difficulties. All of this suggests that Hersh's source of information was defective.

How would the US actually react to theft? Ill-informed TV anchors have screamed hysterically about Blackwater and US forces descending to grab the country's nukes. But in a hypothetical crisis where the US has decided to take on Pakistan, its preferred military option would not be ground forces.

Instead it would opt for precision Massive Ordnance Penetrator 30,000-pound bombs dropped by B-2 bombers or fry the circuit boards of the warheads using short, high-energy bursts of microwave energy from low-flying aircraft. But deeply buried warheads, or those with adequate metallic shielding, would still remain safe.

A US attack on Pakistan's nuclear production or storage sites would, however, be monumental stupidity. Even if a single nuke escapes destruction, that last one could cause catastrophic damage. But the situation is immensely more uncertain and dangerous than a single surviving nuke. Even if the US knows the precise numbers of deployed weapons, it simply cannot know all their position coordinates. India, one imagines, would know even less.

Hence the bottom line: there is no way for any external power, whether America or India, to effectively deal with Pakistan's nukes. Is this good news? Yes and no. While nuclear survivability increases Pakistani confidence and prevents dangerous knee-jerk reactions, it has also encouraged adventurism — the consequences of which Pakistan had to pay after Kargil.

An extremist takeover of Pakistan is probably no further than five to 10 years away. Even today, some radical Islamists are advocating war against America. But such a war would end Pakistan as a nation state even if no nukes are ever used. Saving Pakistan from religious extremism will require the army, which alone has power over critical decisions, to stop using its old bag of tricks. It must stop pretending that the threat lies across our borders when in fact the threat lies within. Napoleon's bayonet ultimately could not save him, and Pakistan's nuclear bayonet has also had its day. It cannot protect the country. Instead, Pakistan needs peace, economic justice, rule of law, tax reform, a social contract, education and a new federation agreement. ■

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