

PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR TESTS – TEN YEARS LATER

by
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Its May 1998 and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif congratulates wildly cheering citizens as the Chagai mountain trembles and goes white from multiple nuclear explosions. He declares that Pakistan is now safe and sound forever. Bomb makers become national heroes. School children are handed free badges with mushroom clouds. Bomb and missile replicas are planted in cities up and down the land. Welcome to nuclear Pakistan.

Fast-forward the video ten years. Pakistan turns into a different country, deeply insecure and afraid for its future. Grim-faced citizens see machine gun bunkers, soldiers crouched behind sandbags, barbed wire, and barricaded streets. In Baluchistan and FATA, helicopter gunships and fighter jets swarm the skies.

Today we are at war on multiple fronts. But the Bomb provides no defense. Rather, it has helped bring us to this grievously troubled situation and offers no way out. On this awful anniversary, it is important that we relate the present to the past.

Some say that India forced Pakistan to test. This could indeed be true. India lied about its “peaceful” nuclear program, India tested first, India then hurled threats at Pakistan, India jeered as Pakistan agonized over its response. But once Pakistan followed suit, it forgot that it had done so reluctantly and under provocation. The Bomb immediately generated its own dynamics.

Post-Chagai, it was a different Pakistan. A euphoric nation felt the expected pain of international sanctions but shrugged it off. In retrospect, the high cost of the weapons program, as well as the flight of capital are almost irrelevant. A historical accident fixed this problem: after Pakistan's 911 U-turn, the West rushed to fill the state's coffers and avert its imminent collapse.

But the gravest damage was psychological and political, not material. It could not be undone. The official celebration of violence, and the encouragement of public joy at successful bomb-making, proved to be the most lasting and pernicious legacy of the May 1998 nuclear tests. They changed the national psyche. Most significantly, they changed the way in which military and political leaders thought, spoke, and behaved.

The Bomb turned into a fantastic talisman, able to ward off all evil. For military men, Pakistani nukes were not just a counter to Indian nukes but also the means for neutralizing India's larger conventional land, air, and sea forces. For diplomats and politicians, the bomb was a sure way to guarantee that the world would make India negotiate. Flushed with success, the Pakistani leadership hit on what, in their view, was a brilliant strategy for confronting India – jihad by Islamic fighters protected by Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

Kargil followed. This secret invasion in early January 1999, was conceived and implemented by General Pervez Musharraf. But to blame only Musharraf – a fashionable thing to do in these times – is to sacrifice truth for convenience. Blinded by nuclear euphoria, there was scarcely a voice in Pakistan against an adventure that, six months later, left over a thousand dead and dealt the country a humiliating defeat.

But Kargil was just one consequence. More significantly, the Bomb fed a culture of violence that eventually grew into the hydra-headed militancy now haunting Pakistan. Some mujahideen, who felt betrayed by Pakistan's army and politicians, would ultimately take revenge by turning their guns against their sponsors and trainers. The body parts spattered across Pakistani cities by suicide bombers, Taliban-bombed schools and colleges, or the now-frequent lynching of thieves and bandits and roasting them to death, flow from the social acceptance of violence and brutality in conflict situations.

Terrorism and fanaticism, not India, shall be the real threats to Pakistan in the foreseeable future. The writ of the Pakistani state has already ceased to hold in parts of the country. Terrorists have repeatedly targeted Pakistani officers and soldiers, and their wives and children. Even their fortified residential compounds are not safe. Officers are now understandably afraid to drive in official vehicles, to wear uniforms in public, or even to stop at traffic lights.

It was a lie that the Bomb could protect Pakistan, its people, or its armed forces. The Bomb cannot help us recover the territory seized by the Baitullahs and Fazlullahs. Our nukes certainly give us the ability to destroy India – and to be destroyed in return. But that's about it. The much-vaunted nuclear dividend turned out to be empty.

Some might ask, didn't the Bomb stop India from swallowing up Pakistan? Even if India wanted to, this would be impossible. Conventional weapons, used by Pakistan in a defensive mode, would be sufficient defence. If mighty America could not digest Iraq, there can never be a chance for a middling power like India to occupy Pakistan, a country four times larger than Iraq.

Others believe that nuclear weapons earned international respect for Pakistan. Indeed, in the aftermath of the tests, Pakistan's stock shot up in some Muslim countries – before it crashed. Recently, a poll carried out by the BBC in 17 countries showed that Pakistan belongs to the five most disliked countries in the world: Iran (54%), Israel (52%), Pakistan (50%), United States (48%), and North Korea (44%). Nukes for popularity or respect don't work well either.

The Bomb was also supposed to unite all Pakistan, build a nation out of disparate peoples. The tumultuous, officially organized, 1999 celebration of "youm-e-takbir" across the country was supposed to do exactly this.

But the Bomb failed as national glue. Today, it is true that many in Punjab still want the Bomb. But angry Sindhis want water and jobs, and they blame Punjab for taking these

away. The Baluch resent the fact that the nuclear test site – now radioactive and out of bounds – is located on Baluchistan's soil. Many have taken up arms and demand Punjab's army get off their backs. The Pathans, trapped in a war between the Taliban and the US-Pakistani armies, principally want protection against suicide bombers as well as American Predators and the Pakistan Air Force.

How can Pakistan be made a more normal, more secure country? What can persuade our people, and the world, that the country has a future?

The threat to Pakistan is internal. Therefore churning out more nuclear warheads, or test-launching more missiles, or buying yet more American F-16's or French submarines, will not help. Pakistan's security problems cannot be solved by better weapons. No ill-fed, ill-educated nation can be secure. No viable nation can discriminate between its citizens for reasons of ethnicity, religious faith, or economic status. Force and violence cannot summon a sense of citizenship.

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, and a society that respects the rule of law.

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