

THE CTBT AND THE ISOLATIONIST AGENDA

Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy

If the Pakistan's military government could have its way, the CTBT would be a signed document today. Fearful of a backlash, however, it has chosen refuge in the pathetic excuse that signing can come only after there is a national consensus. There is obviously no mechanism by which to judge whether this condition can ever be satisfactorily achieved. The net result of "requiring consensus" has been to let loose a confused and unfocused national debate full of vitriol but little substantive content. The initial spurt of enthusiasm for decisive action has given way to interminable foot dragging.

By a curious twist of fate the strongest advocate of the CTBT is Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar, a man renowned for his impeccable anti-Indian credentials, a build-more-bombs nuclear philosophy, and implacable opposition to nuclear treaties. India's initial inclination to sign the CTBT, and reap rich benefits, had evidently galvanized him into action. But Mr Sattar miscalculated by thinking that his formidable reputation had made his position unassailable. In his initial speeches he had argued that signing the CTBT would not diminish Pakistan's nuclear capability speech. Subsequently this drew a swift communiqué of denunciation from a range of religious leaders, criticism during Friday prayers in mosques throughout the country, and calls for his resignation by the Muslim World Order.

Mr. Sattar insists – correctly so in my opinion – that the CTBT will have little impact on Pakistan's nuclear capability. Because Pakistan has already tested its nuclear weapons and proven that they work, further testing is only of marginal significance. Indeed, signing the CTBT does not prevent Pakistan from keeping the nuclear weapons it presently possesses, increasing their numbers, making them more reliable, simulating them on computers, developing new types, or even testing most components of a nuclear weapon. The CTBT also places no restrictions on improving aircraft and missile delivery systems. Nor does it provide for intrusive inspections of Pakistan's nuclear weapons facilities. The treaty demands only that a country refrain from further nuclear testing. For these reasons the Pakistani nuclear establishment has, by and large, not publicly opposed the CTBT, and is even generally supportive.

Mr Sattar could have pursued this logic still further. The fact is that Pakistan does not need to test but India does. In fact, there was no technical necessity for Pakistan to test last May because it possesses only simple fission uranium weapons for which testing is unnecessary. One need only recall that the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, which belonged to this category, was never tested because US physicists were so totally confident it would work. In the absence of further help from allies, Pakistan is highly unlikely to develop boosted fission or thermonuclear weapons, which do need testing. On the other hand, India has a much more ambitious program than Pakistan's that includes such weapons. These advanced weapons require repeated testing in order to be counted as militarily potent and therefore scientists in the Indian nuclear establishment are opposing

the CTBT tooth-and-nail. On balance, India loses more than Pakistan in strictly technical terms but calculates that the political advantages are sufficiently great to offset this.

That General Musharraf may have privately nodded approval to Mr. Sattar is highly likely. The reason is perfectly obvious: signing the CTBT is seen as a way of decreasing Pakistan's estrangement from the international community in general, and the United States in particular.

Over the years relations between the United States and Pakistan have been increasingly dominated by four key points of difference: Afghanistan, Kashmir, training camps for Islamic militants, and nuclear proliferation.

On Afghanistan, Pakistan is determined to maintain its current support for the staunchly anti-Indian Taliban government, the installation of which is proudly considered by military leaders as a foreign policy victory. It is undeterred by international isolation of the Taliban, and their frequent characterization as medieval barbarians. Convinced that the "strategic depth" offered by Afghanistan provides security in the event of a pull-back from the eastern front, military strategists argue against any major shift in policy and see both Rabbani and Masud as vehicles for Indian influence in Afghanistan. Hence, there are strong compulsions in the Pakistani military to resist substantive changes in Afghan policy.

Still stronger compulsions govern Pakistan's Kashmir policy. The high level of militant activity in Kashmir after Kargil, and statements by leaders such as Hafiz Saeed of the Lashkar-i-Tayyaba lauding the military government's policy, suggest that the government would like to keep Kashmir hot. Pakistani doctrine over the last decade has been to tie up Indian forces in Kashmir and inflict losses through low-intensity cross-border infiltration. President Clinton's appeal to respect the Line of Control was therefore received with much coldness in Islamabad.

Linked with Afghanistan and Kashmir is the issue of training camps for Islamic militants, whose number and scope have increased hugely in the last decade. They have been valuable instruments for achieving Pakistan's goals in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Even though they are recognized as the source of sectarian violence, official circles are ambivalent about the need to curb them. Since any effort to reduce their activities and power would be violently resisted, it is unlikely that the government will move against them. Hence their growth, or a continuation at present levels, is seen as inevitable.

Equally inevitable is the rejection of US suggestions to curb missile and bomb development. Presently Pakistan, like India, is furiously engaged in increasing its stock of fissile materials, and putting into production a range of intermediate range ballistic missiles with nuclear warhead capability. Perceiving that it is hopelessly outgunned, Pakistan's reliance upon nuclear weapons has increased to the point where no act short of war or total collapse will persuade it to renounce them.

In this situation, where there appears little room for any kind of maneuvering, there is one gesture suggesting a kind of “compromise”. In fact, this is a “compromise” which does not require giving up anything of real substance. The CTBT is precisely this, and this is exactly why Mr Sattar and company are so keen to get on with it. Quite correctly, they see CTBT signing as a marginal, but necessary, concession that allows business-as-usual to continue – and perhaps also brings with it a small increase in external aid. In their opinion, until that magic day dawns when the country’s innumerable crises are solved, this is the best that can be done.

While every Pakistani government has exercised occasional rhetoric about self-sufficiency, these governments have also been fully convinced that further international credit is an absolute necessity, and that a disastrous collapse of the economy would follow if credit lines were to be disconnected. This reality is no less apparent to the present regime.

This opportunistic position is firmly rejected by Pakistan’s jihadist school, which is wedded to a vision of Pan-Islamism in which Islam is pitted in a struggle against the rest. Quite correctly, it recognizes that there is no such thing as a free lunch. Even if the CTBT were entirely innocuous and had zero impact on Pakistan’s nuclear forces, it is nevertheless a concession to Western and US demands, and a dangerous first step down the steep slippery slope. The jihadists fear that the next item on the Western agenda will be to insist that the multitude of camps in Pakistan, where Muslim militants fighting various Islamic causes receive training, be closed down. In view of the developing nexus between India and the US on terrorism, the jihadists open antagonism with the US, and with Kargil and the hijacking incident being fresh in people’s minds, this is a realistic expectation. Qazi Hussain Ahmad of the Jamaat-I-Islami sees Mr Sattar acting at the behest of the “US, Israel, and other anti-Islamic forces” because “Pakistan’s nuclear program belongs to the entire Muslim Ummah (community)”

Isolationism therefore flows inevitably from the jihadist position. The outside world, with the exception of select Islamic countries, is seen as inimical to their cause. Hence jihadists demand that international credit lines be cut, and Pakistan should refuse to pay back past loans because they were given to governments headed by corrupt leaders. They concede that if retaliation causes external trade to cease, and the economy collapses, there may be difficulties. However, jihadists consider these to be temporary and a necessary sacrifice for ultimate victory in Kashmir and elsewhere. Have not the Taliban won Afghanistan in spite of a hostile Western world, they argue.

The logic of this isolationism is, however, unclear and contradictory. If Pakistan defaults and breaks its economic ties with the West, will Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia willingly bail out Pakistan, or at least pick up the tab for weapon purchases? Given their weak response to Pakistan’s appeals for economic aid after the West imposed sanctions following the nuclear tests, this does not seem to be likely. It is also unclear why, after having argued ceaselessly for internationalization of the Kashmir dispute, a sullen withdrawal into isolationism will be beneficial. But articles of faith cannot be challenged by arguments based upon reason, no matter how sound and well-argued. Perhaps this is

what retired General Hamid Gul meant when, criticizing Mr Sattar's position on the CTBT, he declared that passion and politics should never be separated.

The CTBT signing is an emotive issue, full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing for Pakistan as a nuclear arms control treaty. Contrary to appearances, this controversy does not pit nuclear doves against nuclear hawks. Nor is it a dispute about peace or war with India. Instead, it is an increasingly rancorous argument between those who fear Pakistan's deepening international isolation and those who celebrate it.

At most signing the CTBT would be an affirmation that Pakistan prefers engagement over isolation. It also carries some small cash value – perhaps a billion dollars annually -- provided Pakistan signs before India does. Signing is still possible but unlikely. While the heavens will not fall if the government backpedals away from the CTBT, the symbolism will not be lost. The message this will radiate is that Pakistan's major foreign policy decisions henceforth will be made not by its army leaders, and even less by its foreign ministry. Instead it shall be the increasingly influential ulema and jihadists in the country's mosques who will determine the course that the country will take.

Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy is Professor of Nuclear and Particle Physics, Quaid-e-Azam University