

WHAT PAKISTAN'S BOMB COULD NOT BUY

by
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On the eight anniversary of Pakistan's nuclear tests, there is little point in debating whether we should have followed India down the nuclear gutter. But there is need for a sober stock-taking that moves us away from the still rampant, chest-thumping, nuclear triumphalism. So far the region's nuclear "experts" and "strategists", actively assisted on both sides of the border by their respective states, have effectively monopolized discussion on nuclear policy. But many promises remain unfulfilled and various political and social costs for Pakistan are barely acknowledged. What are these?

The most obvious fact is that testing the Bomb speeded up the subcontinent's arms race, rather than slowing it down. If you had believed what the nuclear pundits used to say, it should have been the other way around. Their argument was so seductive and simple that even well-meaning people were taken for a ride. They said acquiring the Bomb would assure national security into eternity – the threat of a nuclear response would deter territorial violations by the other, and hence the need for conventional arms would evaporate. Just a few bombs would do. Before the May 1998 tests, and even for several months later, some Pakistanis cheerfully wrote that after going nuclear, little more than salaries for soldiers would be needed. Defence budgets could be slashed, and (at last) funds would go into development and education.

Instead, what have we seen? Today the acquisition of battle tanks, artillery, fighter aircraft, surface ships, submarines, anti-ballistic missile systems, early warning aircraft, and space-based surveillance systems is now claimed – by many of the same people – to be more urgent than ever before. The US-India nuclear deal, if ratified by Congress, will add fuel to the fire. After India's breeder reactors come on line, it will be able to produce as many nuclear warheads in just one year as it had in the previous 30. Pakistan is sure to react in various ways.

The once-popular concept of "minimal deterrence" died after India's firm statement that the requirements for a deterrent force will be "dynamically determined" and cannot be explicitly stated. In other words, it will never say how many bombs are enough. That is not how it used to be. I well remember my intervention during a conference in Chicago (1992) which provoked the Indian strategist K. Subramanyam to angrily protest that "arms racing is a Cold War concept invented by the western powers and totally alien to sub-continental thinking". We Pakistanis and Indians were supposed to be infinitely wiser than the compulsive Americans and Soviets. But one sees that every aspect of Cold War racing has been punctiliously followed on the subcontinent. Tactical nuclear war-fighting, once considered escalatory, is reported to be incorporated into current Indian and Pakistani military doctrines.

The fact is that nuclear racing and doctrines is everywhere and always driven by the same implacable, mad, runaway logic. Should there be the slightest danger of the race slackening, a nuclear "expert" will point to the other side's latest acquisition and shout wolf. With every passing decade, advances in technology make it easier and cheaper to create ever more deadly

nuclear weapons, buy or make longer range and more effective missiles, and go for various hi-tech weapon systems that could not have been imagined just a while ago.

For Pakistan, the nuclear cost – political and social – has been even higher than for India.

First, nuclear weapons led to Pakistan's Kargil debacle. The 1998 tests gave to the country's leaders a false sense of security. This was the direct cause of a misadventure that ended in a stunning political and diplomatic defeat for Pakistan. If anything, it made clear that Pakistan can now never hope for a military victory in Kashmir.

The Kargil episode offers the very first example in history where nuclear weapons, by dint of creating a presumed shield for launching conventional covert operations, were responsible for having brought about a war. The unrestrained propagation of false beliefs in nuclear security brought India and Pakistan to the brink of a full-blown confrontation that could well have been the very last one. Arguably it was the BJP that, by ordering Pokhran-II, fathered Kargil.

Second, Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapons has made it effectively a less independent state, rather than the other way around. While Pakistan became popular in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries after testing, its inability to stand up for real Muslim interests remains as chronically weak as ever. Unlike many European and non-aligned countries – which were vociferous in their opposition to the US war upon Iraq – Pakistan chose the side of pragmatism. One can also be sure that if Iran's nuclear facilities are bombed by the US, Pakistan's leaders will do no more than cluck their tongues and shake their heads in mild disapproval. The Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline provides yet another example of nuclear Pakistan unable to assert even its trade preferences.

Although nukes have pushed up Pakistan's rental value for fighting the wars of other nations, the constraints put upon its behavior have also greatly increased. The danger that our nukes may turn loose is a source of deep discomfort to Pakistan's chief patron and paymaster, the United States of America. The fiery rhetoric of religious parties, who claim the Bomb for the entire Muslim Ummah rather than just for Pakistan, understandably terrifies many in the West. Moreover, the A.Q.Khan episode – in spite of Pakistan's repeated assertions that the matter has now closed – is still very much on the minds of the US establishment and media. These reasons account for the US's flat rejection of any kind of nuclear deal with Pakistan along the lines that it had proposed to India.

For the time being, with General Musharraf in power, the US is willing to tolerate Pakistan's nuclear arsenal – and may even satisfy some of its needs for advanced conventional weaponry. But this could be short lived. Many gaming scenarios played in the US strategic war planning institutions indicate that there are well-rehearsed contingency plans if Pakistan's political situation changes radically after General Musharraf's departure, planned or otherwise. Clearly, Pakistan is a country that is closely watched and monitored.

Third, and finally, while a connection is sometimes alleged, in fact nuclear weapons have been irrelevant to two of Pakistan's critical needs – national integration and high technology. If anything, the effect has gone the other way.

National integration remains a distant goal, and the hope that the Bomb would be a rallying call for all Pakistanis has essentially disappeared. The tumultuous, officially inspired, 1999 celebrations of “youm-e-takbir” in all four provinces and dozens of cities were supposed to infuse a new sense of national spirit. Bomb and missile replicas were installed at every other street corner; many still survive. But love for the centralized Islamabad-based Pakistani state, run by military generals with a passion for real-estate and wealth, is conspicuously absent. The ongoing widespread insurgency in Baluchistan and rising bitterness in Sind are sending clear messages of a dangerous disaffection. Nuclear weapons cannot compensate for the absence of a democratic process, which alone can weld Pakistan’s disparate people into a nation.

The failure is evident. Punjab celebrates the Bomb while Baluchistan protests it. It resents the fact that the nuclear test site – now radioactive and put out of bounds – is located upon Baluch soil. Accused of dumping nuclear wastes, the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission is now being increasingly targeted by Baluch nationalists as an instrument of foreign domination. On May 15, 2006 Baluchi insurgents reportedly launched a mortar attack on a Pakistani nuclear establishment controlled by the PAEC in the vicinity of the Dera Ghazi Khan-Quetta highway.

And, what of the Bomb being a technical miracle? Over thirty years ago, fearful of India’s newly acquired nuclear weapons, Pakistan set out on its own quest to become a nuclear weapons state. It lacked a strong technological base. But its secret search of the world’s industrialized countries for nuclear weapons technologies was successful. It now advertises itself as a high-tech state.

But in a world where science moves at super-high speeds, nuclear weapons and missile development is today second-rate science. The undeniable fact is that the technology of nuclear bombs is six decades old. Famine-stricken North Korea, with few other achievements, is probably also a nuclear power and clearly has a very advanced missile program. In fact it had transferred this technology to Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and other countries. While Pakistani and Indian weapons programs have diverted substantial financial and material resources away from social and scientific needs, they have merely used scientific principles discovered and developed elsewhere. Not surprisingly, there are no worthwhile spin-offs. Surely it is time to drop the pretence that making nuclear weapons and guided missiles is a wonderful thing.

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