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Anniversary: What if Pakistan did not have the bomb?

Could the Bomb really have saved Pakistan in 1971? Can it do so now?

By Pervez Hoodbhoy

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Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan has spent the last few years confined by the Pakistan Army to one of his palatial Islamabad residences where he whiles away his days writing weekly columns in newspapers. This venerable metallurgist, who claims paternity rights over Pakistan's bomb, says it alone saves Pakistan. In a recent article, he wistfully wrote: "If we had had nuclear capability before 1971, we would not have lost half of our country – present-day Bangladesh – after disgraceful defeat."

Given that 30,000 nuclear weapons failed to save the Soviet Union from decay, defeat and collapse, could the Bomb really have saved Pakistan in 1971? Can it do so now?

Let's revisit 1971. Those of us who grew up in those times know in our hearts that East and West Pakistan were one country but never one nation. Young people today cannot imagine the rampant anti-Bengali racism among West Pakistanis then. With great shame, I must admit that as a thoughtless young boy I too felt embarrassed about small and dark people being among our compatriots. Victims of a delusion, we thought that good Muslims and Pakistanis were tall, fair, and spoke chaste Urdu. Some schoolmates would laugh at the strange sounding Bengali news broadcasts from Radio Pakistan.

The Bengali people suffered under West Pakistani rule. They believed their historical destiny was to be a Bengali-speaking nation, not the Urdu-speaking East Pakistan which Jinnah wanted. The East was rightfully bitter on other grounds too. It had 54% of Pakistan's population and was the biggest earner of foreign exchange. But West Pakistani generals, bureaucrats, and politicians such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, feared a democratic system would transfer power and national resources to the East.

Denied democracy and justice, the people of East Pakistan helplessly watched the cash flow from East to fund government, industry, schools and dams in the West. When the Bhola cyclone killed half a million people in 1970, President Yahya Khan and his fellow generals in Rawalpindi's GHQ could not have cared less.

The decisive break came with the elections. The Awami League won a majority in Pakistan's parliament. Bhutto and the generals would not accept the peoples' verdict. The Bengalis finally rose up for independence. When the West Pakistan army was sent in, massacre followed massacre. Political activists, intellectuals, trade unionists, and students were slaughtered. Blood ran in street gutters, and millions fled across the border. After India intervened to support the East, the army surrendered. Bangladesh was born.

That Pakistan did not have the bomb in 1971 must surely be among the greatest of blessings. It is hard for me to see what Dr AQ Khan has in mind when he suggests that it could have saved Pakistan.

Would the good doctor have dropped the bomb on the raging pro-independence mobs in Dhaka? Or used it to incinerate Calcutta and Delhi, and have the favour duly returned to Lahore and Karachi? Or should we have threatened India with nuclear attack to keep it out of the war so that we could endlessly kill East Pakistanis? Even without the bomb, estimated civilian deaths numbered in the hundreds of thousands if not a million. How many more East Pakistanis would he have liked to see killed for keeping Pakistan together?

Some might argue that regardless of the death and destruction, using the bomb to keep Pakistan together would have been a good thing for the people of East Pakistan in the long term. A look at developmental statistics can help decide.

Bangladesh is ranked 96th out of 110 countries in a 2010 prosperity index compiled by an independent London-based think-tank, the Legatum Institute, using governance, education, health, security, personal freedom, and social capital as

criteria. Pakistan is at the 109th position, just one notch above Zimbabwe. By this measure the people of the East have benefited from independence. The UN Human Development Index puts Bangladesh at 146/182 and Pakistan at 141/182, making Pakistan only marginally superior. This implies that Bengalis would have gained little, if anything, by remaining with West Pakistan.

But numerical data does not tell the whole story. Bangladesh is poorer but more hopeful and happier. Culture is thriving, education is improving, and efforts to control population growth are more fruitful than in Pakistan. It is not ravaged by suicide bombings, or by daily attacks upon its state institutions and military forces.

What can the bomb do for Pakistan now? Without it, will India swallow up Pakistan and undo partition? Such thought is pure fantasy. First, India has a rapidly growing economy and is struggling to control its population of 1.2 billion, of which almost half are desperately poor. It has no reason to want an additional 180 million people to feed and educate. Second, even if an aggressive and expansionist India wanted, asymmetrical warfare would make territorial conquest and occupation impossible. The difficulties faced by America in Iraq and Afghanistan, or of India in Kashmir, make this clear.

The bomb did deter India from launching punitive attacks at least thrice since the 1998 tests. There were angry demands within India for attacking the camps of Pakistan-based militant groups after Pakistan's incursion in Kargil during 1999, the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament the same year (initially claimed by Jaish-e-Muhammad), and the Mumbai attack in 2008 by Lashkar-e-Taiba. However, this problem only exists because the bomb has been used to protect these militant groups. The nuclear umbrella explains why Pakistan is such a powerful magnet for all on this planet who wage war in the name of Islam: Arabs, Chechens, Uzbeks, Uighurs, and various westerners. It was, as we now know, the last lair of Osama bin Laden as well.

Pakistan is learning the same painful lesson as the Soviet Union and white-South Africa learned. The bomb offers no protection to a people. Rather, it has helped bring Pakistan to its current grievously troubled situation and offers no way out.

On this May 28, the day when Pakistan tested its nuclear weapons, let us resolve to eliminate this curse rather than celebrate. Instead of building more bombs, we need to protect ourselves by building a sustainable and active democracy, an economy for peace rather than war, a federation in which provincial grievances can be effectively resolved, elimination of the feudal order and creating a tolerant society that respects the rule of law.

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