A warning about Pakistan’s illusion of power

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Abstract
The following article is the English translation of the introduction to a 2014 book in Urdu, Taqat ka Sarab (Illusion of Power), edited by A. H. Nayyar, which aims to educate Pakistanis about the attitudes of their leadership toward nuclear weapons. In his introduction, I. A. Rehman explains that Pakistan’s people have come to believe that the successful acquisition of nuclear capability means that their nation’s security is forever ensured. Meanwhile, the politicians who ordered nuclear tests—and the scientists and government functionaries who helped create the nuclear weapons—have used the mere presence of this nuclear weaponry as the justification for demanding not only public recognition and honor but also the right to unlimited authority for ruling over Pakistan. Consequently, free discussion and honest opinion about nuclear weapons have been nearly prohibited, under the premise that any such talk poses a basic threat to national security.

Keywords
arms race, nuclear tests, nuclear weapons, Pakistan, security

Despite its lack of development and an acute paucity of financial resources, Pakistan has joined the ranks of producers of deadly nuclear weapons. But it has not bothered to seriously consider the adverse consequences of making atomic weapons and storing them, questions to which even the leading nuclear states have no answer.

Nor have Pakistan’s people been given the opportunity to ponder the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons in a war between India and Pakistan. They may have heard that those who survive such a war will envy those who died, but there is neither the opportunity—nor the permission—to deliberate about such a fundamental warning in the public forum.

Therefore, the author, Abdul Hameed Nayyar, has rendered a great service to the people of Pakistan by compiling this book. It is the kind of essential work that should have been done long ago.

The book contains Urdu translations of thoughtful articles written in English by internationally recognized physicists. All the authors are not only acknowledged authorities in their fields, they have also set formidable examples by starting debates at the national and global levels on topics that are often unpopular with those in power. They truly “speak truth to power.”

The fact that three Pakistani scientists—Pervez Hoodbhoy, Zia Mian, and Abdul Hameed Nayyar—are among
these conscientious scholars should be a matter of pride for Pakistan. By warning the peoples of India and Pakistan of the consequences of their infatuation with nuclear war and nuclear weapons, these worthy scientists have set a shining example, for which we are indebted.

Two great qualities of this book stand out: that the authors have based their viewpoint on scholarly research of the highest standard; and that they have relied on solid reasoning rather than sentimentalism.

Nothing will remain the same

The book’s first essay gives a detailed assessment of the magnitude of destruction from a nuclear war, including information on how many people would die immediately, and how many would slowly and painfully succumb to various afflictions related to nuclear war. I should like readers to linger a while on the last sentence of this particular essay, which states: “In short, if nuclear weapons are ever used in South Asia, nothing will remain the same.” Not only would people’s lives and property be destroyed, but their historical and cultural heritage too would disappear. While it is difficult enough to accept the claim of today’s warmongers that they have the right to put their own and other people’s lives at stake, they would also endanger our cultural heritage—a heritage which we have a duty to transfer safely to future generations.

The second essay proves that India and Pakistan cannot have an effective warning system that would save them from the horrible destruction of a nuclear war between them, or permit them to launch a retaliatory strike. R. Rajaraman argues that India just cannot indulge in the luxury of putting up the kind of warning system that the US established. “And the reason is not only that such a system is very expensive, our geography comes in the way. A missile from India aimed at Pakistan or vice versa takes only five minutes. It is too short a time to allow a meaningful warning, not to speak of permitting deliberation over a response.” It is essential to admit this glaring reality on both sides of the India–Pakistan border.

This essay also covers the consequences of accidents at nuclear weapon storage sites, and the dangers of amassing large stocks of nuclear weapons. It shows how a nuclear stockpile can cause serious harm to its owners even in times of peace. Obviously, Pakistan and India have far fewer resources than the United States to safeguard against nuclear weapon accidents, and far too many dangers.

The article on “Civil Defense in the Face of a Nuclear Attack” merits special attention from Pakistani readers. Richer countries made very ambitious plans for civil defense against nuclear attacks, and then abandoned them because “they found out that only a few high civil and military officials and important political leaders could be saved from nuclear attacks.” The ultimate conclusion is that making an effective system of civil defense in the event of a nuclear war is practically impossible.

The next article tells us that aside from the destruction from a nuclear war, there are many harmful consequences that people suffer simply during the course of acquiring nuclear weapons. The authors show that “severe adverse impacts on human health start to happen in each of the long chain of processes needed to make nuclear weapons.” And their impact has the greatest effect upon poor and helpless people. For example, there
has not been adequate assessment of the harmful effects of the mining of uranium ore on the health of Pakistani people. It is essential now to stop attempts at concealing this information.

A statement at the end of the article is absolutely true for the Pakistani situation: “Unfortunately, keeping good and reliable accounts of public health is not a priority, since those with hefty bank balances do not mind sacrificing those without any bank balance, and this is done in the name of development, progress, national security, and prestige.”

Or, as Rosalie Bertell put it: “If we wish to keep accounts of our health as well as we do of our money, nuclear activities—whether for war or peace—would be banned immediately.” I believe this statement is worthy of pasting in every educational institution in the country.

The article by R. Rajaraman, M. V. Ramana, and Zia Mian on early warning of missile attacks bears a special importance for Pakistani people because they are particularly misguided about the usefulness of their national missile program. The distance to targets of Indian and Pakistani missiles is so short that there cannot be an effective early warning system. Here the situation is not comparable to the one that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union, where it was still possible to destroy or change the course of a missile in flight. After an extensive discussion, the authors reach the following conclusion:

It is the duty of every citizen to warn of these dangers.

The future

Where and how can nuclear weapons be stored? What should be the system of guarding them? Who should have the authority to use them? Mian’s article on the command and control of nuclear weapons warrants the attention of both citizens and rulers of Pakistan. The only conclusion after a comprehensive discussion on all aspects of the nuclear command and control is: “The viability of nuclear command and control depends on the unpredictability of circumstances and human behavior” where “the smallest details can assume central importance” and “even the most advanced experts and the most experienced practitioners are narrowly and incompletely informed,” and in which “no one understands the whole.”

The above article should be read in conjunction with Pervez Hoodbhoy’s article “Is the Nuclear Arsenal Safe?” because he has discussed in detail the four dangers to Pakistan’s nuclear weapons.

His conclusion that “there is no way for any external power, whether America or India, to effectively deal with
Pakistan’s nukes” may make Pakistan’s war lobby happy, but the warning the author has given is worth considering seriously: “While nuclear survivability increases Pakistani confidence and prevents dangerous knee-jerk reactions, it has also encouraged adventurism under a nuclear shield.” Hoodbhoy has in this case given the example of the Kargil conflict, which is a valid point. (Kargil is a high mountain peak in Kashmir that gave its name to a two-month war that Pakistan and India fought with conventional weapons in the early summer of 1999.) But with a little thought it becomes clear that the feeling of becoming an atomic power soon transforms itself into arrogance. Kargil or no Kargil, as soon as nuclear capability is achieved, the psychology of rulers and policy makers undergoes a change; it gets poisoned with adventurism, which affects all administrative matters.

Two articles narrate the history of the making of nuclear weapons in Pakistan and India. Branding Pakistan’s nuclear journey a “Flight to Nowhere,” Hoodbhoy has adroitly and in detail recounted the arguments crafted by advocates of nuclear capability, and shows how the argument of deterrence was popularized. But, according to the author, very effective and conclusive answers to these arguments arose over time:

Eleven years ago a few Pakistanis and Indians had argued that nuclear weapons would not give us security and peace. Fellow citizens condemned them, branding them traitors and foreign agents. But now each passing moment is proving these peace-lovers correct.

Ramana has penned the story of India’s nuclear trajectory, and while describing the opportunism of the scientists who conducted the nuclear tests, he has also taken note of public sentiment. Exposing the intent of the Indian elite, he urges Indian scientists to join the public movements demanding that decision-making be based on democracy and justice. How we wish to see such movements grow in Pakistan too, with Pakistani nuclear scientists invited to join them!

To justify the huge expenditures on nuclear programs in both India and Pakistan, the need to solve the energy crisis is often emphasized. Two essays in this collection examine this argument. Suvrat Raju comments on the Indian case and discusses in detail the US-India nuclear deal. Simultaneously, Hoodbhoy comments on the Pakistani case and points out the risks associated with nuclear power plants. Both essays are convincing. In addition, however, the Pakistani public must also see why the developed countries are now avoiding the construction of new nuclear power reactors.

The short essay by Abdul Hameed Nayyar and Mian on battlefield nuclear weapons is extremely valuable. It highlights the irrationality of the philosophy of deterrence. Battlefield nuclear weapons have limited utility because once a war starts the probability of the intended or unintended use of nuclear weapons increases, and the same weapons that were taken to provide security become a cause of devastation.

Mian, Hoodbhoy, and Nayyar have together penned three articles describing the efforts being made at the national, regional, and global levels to stop production of fissile materials, arrest proliferation, and promote disarmament. It would be beneficial to the people of Pakistan to read these articles, to not only critically examine the policies of their government, but also to play their part
in reforming those policies in the best national interest.

The essays in this book have been authored by scientists, who, perhaps with the sensitivities of their readers in mind, have pointed out the defense-related benefits of nuclear weapons as well. However, in my view there is absolutely zero benefit of nuclear weapons, but a great deal of loss.

**Further points**

Here I would like to seek the attention of the editor of this book, the scientists, and the promoters of peace regarding two or three points, hoping that they will be considered in the future.

Nuclear weapons have changed the nature of war so much that it has become impossible to justify a nuclear war. Committing atrocities on the non-combatant population of the enemy was once an old tradition. The victors felt free to violate the rights of the vanquished by slaughtering or enslaving the male population and making the women into sex slaves. Everything was permissible, as illustrated in the medieval European military order “Cry havoc,” which allowed soldiers to pillage and loot.

After a centuries-long struggle, rules of war were framed under which parties were obliged to look after wounded enemy soldiers, and the human rights of noncombatants began to be honored.

But these moral principles of war were violated during World War II, when civilian populations were heavily bombarded to make them plead for surrender. The worst demonstrations of the mad urge to secure military victory through the massacre of civilian populations was witnessed in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Today, when the supreme ideals of humanity have finally come to be accepted globally, the making and using of weapons to obliterate human population centers in order to win a war can only be regarded as the most vulgar form of the human mind’s absolute decadence. Therefore, the demand to regard nuclear weapons as contrary to human-kind’s well-being, and to banish them forever, is absolutely right.

The second noteworthy point is that there was a time when nuclear weapons were justified by claiming that their acquisition would make it possible to reduce conventional military expenditures. This was argued very forcefully in India. It was said in Pakistan too, albeit a bit less forcefully, probably because open discussion of military matters is prohibited here. Experience has shown, however, that this far-fetched reason is given only to blur public thinking. It has no connection with reality. We have now learned that the bill for conventional weapons will continue to rise, along with the expenses for making more nuclear weapons, conducting further research, and struggling to keep the weapons safe—all of which continue to demand a share of our financial resources, a burden that Pakistan can ill afford.

The third point is that when a poor country, dependent on external aid, becomes a nuclear weapon state, its patrons, especially friends with ill will, try to get greater control over it. For example, Pakistan’s biggest benefactor is perennially worried about Pakistan’s nuclear weapons falling into “irresponsible” hands. Effective control over nuclear weapons has become the foremost condition for aid in the future. The kinds of pressures that Pakistan faces in its foreign policy domain are
visible to everyone. Had Pakistan not made the mistake of acquiring nuclear weapons, its relations with other countries would not have come under such clouds, and it would have been under much less pressure.

In short, I submit that to foreclose any public debate in Pakistan on issues of security is not only unnecessary, it can also prove fatal to the national interest. No nation can be defended by weapons alone. How much security can be provided by nuclear weapons? How serious are the issues of defending nuclear weapons? Why would a nuclear war between India and Pakistan result in untold misery for the people of both countries? The limited and fossilized thinking of the ruling elite is not enough to answer these questions. It is the right of all conscientious citizens to ponder these matters and compel their rulers not to overstep the policy guidelines set by the public.

I hope that this book will play an important role in enabling the public to exercise their duty.

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Reference

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I. A. Rehman is secretary-general of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (http://www.hrcp-web.org), chairman of the Pakistan-India Peoples’ Forum for Peace and Democracy, and was formerly chief editor of the daily Pakistan Times and an executive member of the Pakistan Peace Council.