



Threat to Pakistan's Nuclear Complex: Exaggerated? Underestimated? Or Complacent?

Sitakanta Mishra*

The current internal mayhem and consequent assertion of Pakistani political-military authorities that "nuclear capability of Pakistan is in safe hands"¹ has created more anxiety on the state of its nuclear arsenal. Though Pakistan's past proliferation record erodes the credibility of its assurances, its current emphasis on security of its nuclear arsenal "marks a shift" from its early focus on acquiring technology, rather than safeguarding it. Although, it would be reasonable to trust Islamabad's repeated proclamation that all its "nuclear installations are under extra security", and that Pakistan is serious about securing its fissile material, but the probability of some factions being able to lay their hands on the nuclear material cannot be ruled out.

As the turmoil in Pakistan's politico-security situation continues, the concern about the safety of its nuclear arsenal has grown across the spectrum. The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the advance by Islamic militants in Pakistan as a "mortal threat" to the global security.² According to her, "US could not contemplate the possibility of the Taliban taking control of Pakistan's nuclear assets". In response, President Asif Ali Zardari, while speaking to a group of international journalists on 27 April 2009, ruled out the possibility of his country's weapons falling into the hands of the Taliban. Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani on 2 May assured the security of nuclear arms by saying "Our nuclear arsenal is in safe hands".³ Army Chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani also appears confident of the safety of the arsenal.

Although, it would be reasonable to trust Islamabad's repeated proclamation that all its "nuclear installations are under extra security" and that Pakistan is serious about securing its fissile material, but the probability of some factions being able to lay their hands on the nuclear material cannot be ruled out.

Old Wine in Old Bottle with Added Flavour

These apprehensions and subsequent assurances from Pakistan are not new. In the aftermath of 9/11 and US intervention in Afghanistan, the issue of safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal has been in the air for quite sometime. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto also underlined this threat. President Pervez Mushrraf tightened the oversight and reportedly, received US

help for upgradation of security in and around nuclear installations. But the recent political chaos in Pakistan and resultant fear is unique in many ways. First, Pakistan leaders had never before openly admitted that their Muslim nation actually faces serious internal threat from an alliance of joint *Jihadi* forces comprising the Al Qaeda, Taliban and other militant groups. Second, it is clear that the threat to Pakistan's nuclear weapons

is linked to the trajectory of the Islamist militants operating inside Pakistan and not from India. This was also recognized by former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who stated on December 2, 2007 that Al Qaeda affiliates could hijack Pakistan's nuclear weapons if the country fails to neutralize the Taliban.⁴ Third, it is a truism that any assistance to avoid this danger cannot be advanced within the ambit of the nonproliferation regime since the NPT does not permit such cooperation for non-NPT members and Pakistan is not a nuclear weapons state under NPT. Lastly, the US secret assistance to Pakistan in guarding nuclear arms is now not so secret but the

*Sitakanta Mishra is a Senior Research Scholar at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

question still arises whether Washington has done enough and if Pakistan has fully revealed necessary details of its nuclear inventory for this purpose.

The American Burden

America's sharing of technology with Pakistan to secure its arsenal has been debated at least on two occasions: (a) right after the nuclear tests in 1998; and (b) in the aftermath of 9/11. The debate over proper sharing of nuclear safety technology began just before Colin Powell, the then Secretary of State, was sent to Islamabad after the 9/11 attack as the US was preparing to invade Afghanistan. Reports suggest that the US has contingency plans in place under which American Special Force Operatives would deploy to Pakistan to secure nuclear weapons sites in the event of an Islamic takeover. However, there is no official confirmation of this. Over the last few years the US administration has spent almost \$100 million on a highly classified programme designed by the Departments of State and Energy to help Pakistan in this regard.⁵ Much of this money was spent in reinforcing the physical security like fencing, surveillance systems and equipments for tracking movement of nuclear materials. On an average, the US has been spending 16.7 million dollars per year and about 65% more on securing Pakistan's arsenal than on securing Russia's.⁶

However, it is unclear whether Pakistan has received any assistance from the US in putting the Permissive Action Link (PAL) technology (an electronic locking system) on its devices to eliminate chances of their unauthorized use. Since this technique requires the details of warhead design and configuration, Pakistan was reluctant to share too much information about its arsenal. Islamabad is suspicious that American-made technology in their warheads could include a secret "kill switch" enabling the Americans to turn-off their weapons. While Gen. Khalid Kidwai who is in-charge of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, has acknowledged receiving "international" help, some reports say Pakistan has developed its own PAL system with American assistance.

Who Guards Pakistan's Nukes?

Pakistan's nuclear devices are known to be in "recessed" stage – warheads are separated from the triggering devices – and are stored at different locations. Also the delivery systems to carry the bombs are claimed to be far removed from the nuclear warheads. It is believed that a multi-layered security system is in place, in and around the facilities, accompanying a personnel reliability programme and battery of checks aimed at rooting out human foibles. Around 2,000 scientists, working with sensitive materials and information at these sites, undergo extensive background checks before providing the security clearance. Security at all nuclear sites is the responsibility of a 10,000-member security force, commanded by a two-star general.⁷ Moreover, since 1998, Pakistan's nuclear weapons have been under a "strong multi-layered institutionalized decision-making, organizational administrative and command and control structure". The command and control of Pakistani nuclear weapons is compartmentalized and includes strict operational security. It is based on C4I2SR (command, control, communication, computers, intelligence, information, surveillance and reconnaissance) and has three components: the National Command Authority (NCA), the Strategic Plans Division (SPD), and the Strategic Forces Commands. The NCA was created in 2000. The SPD acts as the secretariat for the NCA and coordinates with the strategic forces commands. The authority to launch a nuclear strike require approval by the NCA which is a 10-member body consisting of the President, Prime Minister, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, the ministers of Defence, Interior and Finance, the Director General of the SPD, and Commanders of the Army, Air Force and Navy. While all decision-making on nuclear issues rests with the NCA, the SPD manages and controls the nuclear weapons on behalf of the NCA. And the division is headed by a retired army general. Though Pakistan seems to have well placed the nuclear command structure, the Army plays a major role in safeguarding the arsenal, and given the nature of Pakistani power structure, it is clear that the Army Chief would be the final authority.

Reports suggest that the US has contingency plans in place under which American Special Force Operatives would deploy to Pakistan to secure nuclear weapons sites in the event of an Islamic takeover. However, there is no official confirmation of this. Over the last few years the US administration has spent almost \$100 million on a highly classified programme designed by the Departments of State and Energy to help Pakistan in this regard.

Apprehensions and the Realities

Due to the accelerated internal politico-security disturbances coupled with the chaotic regional security environment, where Al Qaeda and other *jihadi* groups are in search of vulnerabilities of the state, the apprehension of Pakistan's nukes falling into their hands is obviously wide-spread. Michael

Krepon has argued that "a prolonged period of turbulence and infighting ... could jeopardize the army's unity of command, which is essential for nuclear security".⁸

Director General of the IAEA Mohamed El Baradei has expressed fears that a radical regime could take power in Pakistan, and thereby acquire nuclear weapons. George Perkovich says that the current safeguards should ensure that any possible collapse of the civilian government in Islamabad would not affect the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. His concern centres around the possibilities of a scenario in which pro-Islamist elements within Pakistan's military and security forces turn against General Khalid Kidwai, who heads the security structure.⁹

However, Pakistan views these apprehensions as "hostile campaign of the international media" and strongly proclaims that "foolproof" measures have been put in place ... no possibility of them falling into "wrong hands".¹⁰ Pakistani political consultant Hasan-Askari Rizvi, downplaying the threat of Taliban insurgency says, "the threat to nuclear weapons is not so imminent because they are far away from those places and secondly, they are under control of the army. Only a few people know about it" and the Pakistani army would defend their control of the nuclear weapons till the end.¹¹ Lt. Gen Khalid Kidwai opines that "in Pakistan we have been extremely conscious of our responsibilities and obligations in this regard and we have instituted command and control structures and security measures in a manner so as to make these fool proof".¹²

The question, however, is whether the apprehension is exaggerated, the threat is underestimated or the authority is complacent? At the first instance, a realistic assessment of the nature of current political

instability and the resultant threats to nuclear assets needs

to be undertaken. Secondly, the strength of the security blanket already in place and the concerned agencies' preparedness to deal with the worst situation definitely needs to be evaluated. Thirdly, and most importantly, the intent, motivation and capabilities of the *jihadi* terrorist outfits for such an activity,

needs careful assessment.

Threats Emanating from Political Instability & Potential Splits within the Military:

Political instability resulting from the opposition by Islamic groups to the government's support to the US for eliminating Taliban can be alarming. In such a situation, Islamic groups like Jamaat-i-Islami, Jamaat-i-Ulema, Jamaat-i-Islam, etc. could form alliances with radicals in the Pakistan army. It is of more concern, if a radical leader takes over as the president who can exercise final nuclear button vested in him being the Chairman of the NCA though it is doubtful if the Army Chief would permit such a thing. But the factional infighting within the Pakistan Army could pose a dangerous question over the command and control of nuclear forces. We have to keep in mind several (seven to be precise) assassination attempts faced by former president Musharraf, in which, in all probability, Pakistani military and intelligence officers were involved.

Though, chances of Taliban or Al Qaeda getting their hands on the arsenal is theoretically possible, what is more fatal is the increasingly-radicalised younger Pakistanis who are finding their way into military and research circles and could act like sleeper cells. On 29 November 2007, *The Wall Street Journal* reported booting of an employee from Pakistani nuclear programme for passing out political pamphlets of an ultraconservative Islamic party and coaxing his colleagues in joining him

at a local mosque for party rallies.¹³ Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, former director general of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC), formed the Ummah Tamir-e-Nau (UTN, Reconstruction of the Muslim Ummah) in March 2000 after his resignation from AEC in 1999¹⁴. With uncertain loyalties in sections

Lt. Gen Khalid Kidwai opines that "in Pakistan we have been extremely conscious of our responsibilities and obligations in this regard and we have instituted command and control structures and security measures in a manner so as to make these fool proof"

Though, chances of Taliban or Al Qaeda getting their hands on the arsenal is theoretically possible, what is more fatal is the increasingly-radicalised younger Pakistanis who are finding their way into military and research circles and could act like sleeper cells.

of the army, if a radicalized army leadership emerges, definitely the security of nuclear arsenal would be in jeopardy. Therefore, prolonged political instability would weaken the oversight from the civilian government.

Even if we assume that the physical security structure is well placed, the chances of threat from insiders can still not be completely discarded.

Vulnerabilities of Existing Safety Structure: Little is known about the security arrangements in and around the nuclear facilities in Pakistan. Despite the American assistance, reports suggest that US and other suppliers apparently ruled out sharing some essential safety equipments considered dual-use with Pakistan. Even if we assume that the physical security structure is well placed, the chances of threat from insiders can still not be completely discarded. Suffice it to say, the Pakistani government and the army was always aware of the clandestine nuclear trafficking network that A.Q. Khan presided over. Undoubtedly, parts of the procurement network engineered by Khan are still active. In late 2001, acting on tips from US, Pakistan detained two of its retired nuclear scientists who had met with members of Al Qaeda, including bin Laden in Afghanistan. Mr. Hoodbhoy of the Quaid-e-Azam University says the new generation students are more radical than the previous generation. They are sympathetic towards those fighting Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq and some of these students would find their way into the country's military and nuclear research circles also.

The most probable form of nuclear threat to Pakistan from these groups could be explosion of 'dirty bomb' and a 'nuclear hoax'. By exploiting the existence of radical military and scientist elements, they can acquire fissile materials to fabricate a 'suitcase bomb' and detonate it by mixing with conventional explosive.

Intent, Motivation and Capability of the Outfits: Grabbing a full fledged nuclear device by any radical outfit is extremely difficult if Pakistan's arsenal are really disassembled and dispersed. Fabricating a bomb by acquiring fissile material through smuggling or snatching during transportation would be an even more difficult task since it requires state-level resources and coordination. But sabotaging a nuclear facility in the operating areas of the radical groups is a possibility. If any of these groups

The new generation students are more radical than the previous generation. They are sympathetic towards those fighting Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq and some of these students would find their way into the country's military and nuclear research circles also.

have the intent or motivation to reach 'do or die' situation, they might resort to the extreme option of destroying a nuclear facility. However, this would end up inviting a sharp response of the government

and their own operation would be affected if radiation were to be caused thereby.

The most probable form of nuclear threat to Pakistan from these groups could be explosion of 'dirty bomb' and a 'nuclear hoax'. By exploiting the existence of radical military and scientist elements, they can acquire fissile materials to fabricate a 'suitcase bomb' and detonate it by mixing with conventional explosive. On the other hand, if they are unable to acquire any such things, the simple rumour of acquisition of a nuclear bomb by a terror outfit, would create havoc in the public, and will obviously cause mass disruption of normal life. Since the public perception of anything nuclear is negative, by creating such hoax situation, they can potentially bargain with the government.

Conclusion

So far, there is no precedence of nuclear terror in Pakistan, but any complacency on this issue is unwarranted and even dangerous as it is unknown when and in which form such an incident would take

place. But overstating the assumed-threat would also be incorrect. The Islamic groups represent a minority faction and can effectively be silenced. Also the Pakistan Army, despite growing fears of Islamisation, remains a professional force. Although, a rogue military commander or unit could in theory gain control over a cache of fission bombs, owing to their unconstituted nature, enormous inter-organisational effort would be required to reconstitute them.

However, local riots and protracted political instability could result in temporary loss of control over some facilities. In this respect, it would not be unreasonable to assume that Pakistan defence forces probably have some contingency plans to airlift the fissile cores and non-fissile

assemblies to pre-planned alternative locations. Repeated pronouncements and assurances of Pakistani elite leaders about safekeeping of their arsenal underline their awareness and responsibilities but a gloomy domestic

environment is bound to distract their concerns which the non-state actors could effectively exploit. Given the many complexities of the situation, it is necessary that India keeps a close watch over the developments and be prepared for every possible contingency.

Notes

- ¹ "Pakistan's nukes won't fall to Taliban, assures Zardari", *Hindustan Times*, April 27, 2009.
- ² Ron Synovitz, "Rising Tide of Militancy Feeds Fears about Pakistan's Nukes", at www.rferl.org
- ³ "Nuclear arsenal in safe hands: Pak PM", at <http://www.zeenews.com/news528467.html>
- ⁴ "Extremists could threaten nuke facilities: Benazir Bhutto", *Times of India*, December 2, 2007.
- ⁵ "U.S. Secretly Aids Pakistan in Guarding Nuclear Arms", *The New York Times*, November 18, 2007.
- ⁶ Noah Shachtman, "Securing Pakistan's Nukes", at, www.wired.com, November 30, 2007.
- ⁷ "Analysis: Pakistan, Taliban and Nuclear Arms", CNN.com, April 27, 2009.
- ⁸ "US Pakistan Strategic Relations", Statement before the Committee on Senate Homeland Security and Governmental

Affairs Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, *International Security*, June 12, 2008.

⁹ Quoted in Ron Synovitz, "Rising Tide of Militancy Feeds Fears about Pakistan's Nukes", at, http://www.rferl.org/content/Rising_Tide_Of_Militancy_Feeds_Fears_About_Pakistans_Nukes/1615403.html,

¹⁰ "Nuclear arsenal secure: Pakistan", at, www.rediff.com, December 14, 2007.

¹¹ "Analysis: Pakistan, at, Taliban and Nuclear Arms", CNN.com, April 27, 2009.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Peter Wonacott, "Inside Pakistan's Drive To Guard It's a-Bombs", *The Wall Street Journal*, November 27, 2007.

¹⁴ Kanchan Lakshman, "Bhutto Warns of al-Qaeda Threat to Pakistan's Nuclear Arsenal", *Terrorism Focus*, Vol. 4, Issue 41.



The Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Cmde Jasjit Singh, AVSM, VrC, VM (Retd) Centre for Air Power Studies.

P-284, Arjan Path, Subrota Park, New Delhi 110010
Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Ms Shalini Chawla e-mail: shalini@aerospaceindia.org

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.