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# SCHOLAR WARRIOR

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# The Nuclear Crescent

## Pakistan and the Bomb

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JOEL SANDHU

*"If India builds the bomb, we will eat grass or leaves, even go hungry. But we will get one of our own"*

— *Zulfikar Ali Bhutto,*  
*Former Pakistani President (1965)*

The injection of nuclear weapons to South Asia has long been the subject of intense international concern. Pakistan's nuclear test of May 1998 put to rest years of speculation as to whether Islamabad, long suspected of developing covert weapons capabilities, would openly exercise its nuclear option.

### **Pakistan's Nuclear Buildup**

Pakistan's nuclear weapons program emerged from a pressing need to counteract political coercion and/or a military offensive by India, especially when Pakistan could no longer count on offsetting security relationship with the United States. Pakistan did not put in place a clear concept of deterrence on how its nuclear option would prevent another conflict with India after Pakistan's crushing loss of and partition with East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after 1971 or after India's nuclear test in 1974 turned that option into an imperative. Today, defence planners in Islamabad have put in place a comprehensive set of policies and procedures to manage nuclear weapons during times of peace and conflict. However, the security landscape around Pakistan is transforming fast. The shifts in the international and regional environments have created new security concerns for Pakistan as it looks to expand its nuclear arsenal and refine its nuclear strategy.

Traditionally, Pakistan's military leaders saw conventional military preparedness and an alliance with the United States as the best way to counter the Indian military buildup. After China conducted its first nuclear

test in 1964, India began taking measures to ready its own nuclear option. Pakistani elites saw the writing on the wall and lobbied for Islamabad to follow suit. Led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the nuclear lobby in Pakistan tried to persuade the government to start a nuclear weapons program, but to no avail. The call was denied by the then Pakistani military establishment who opted for conventional defence and alliance as the best response to India's expanding military capability. However, two key events changed this strategy and accelerated Pakistan's nuclear weapons pursuit. First, the United States imposed an embargo on military supplies to Pakistan in 1965 following the Indo-Pakistan War that year. Second, the partition of Pakistan with East Pakistan after 1971 led many in Islamabad to believe that a Pakistani nuclear weapon may have prevented Indian intervention and the subsequent dismemberment of East Pakistan from the West. The previously ignored nuclear option stood vindicated when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto came to power. He launched Pakistan's nuclear weapon program in January 1972.

To bypass the multitude of nonproliferation pressures and hurdles that challenged the acquisition of nuclear weapons, Pakistan developed a "highly secretive and personalized decision making system that gave extraordinary autonomy to the heads of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) and the Khan Research Laboratories (KRL)".<sup>1</sup> This allowed Islamabad to acquire a nuclear deterrent quickly, cheaply, and secretly.<sup>2</sup> China's also played a significant role in assisting Pakistan to acquire nuclear weapons, including the export of warhead designs and allegedly enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) for several warheads. Pakistan's surreptitious nuclear activities also allowed KRL director Abdul Qadeer Khan to diversify his nuclear network into an illicit exporter of nuclear technology. Following the international revelation of the A.Q. Khan network, the Pakistani government reorganized the nuclear structure and put in place effective command and control arrangements.<sup>3</sup>

## **Threat Perception and Nuclear Strategy**

Pakistan's development of a nuclear deterrent in the late 1990s was a direct result of competing threat analyses and concerns over the country's national security that were repeatedly advocated and defended by the country's decision-makers since the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> An analysis by Khan and Lavoy suggests that Pakistan faces a four-dimensional threat. First, is the prospect of an outright military war with India that could escalate to the verge of nuclear war. Second, tensions on Pakistan's western border have exploded into a wider insurgency

throughout the country with direct implications for the country's nuclear security should terrorist get hold of fissile materials. Third, is the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran and a negative security situation in the Persian Gulf. Fourth, Pakistan's military forces could be entangled in domestic political violence in a major internal security situation with or without the involvement of external powers, such as India, thereby creating a linkage between domestic unrest and the nuclear deterrent.<sup>5</sup>

The primary role of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal in its security strategy is deterrence vis-à-vis a larger and wealthier India and to offset the military imbalance. On the one hand, Pakistan matches India's military modernization by acquiring comparable weapons, equipment, and training.<sup>6</sup> On the other, Pakistan counts on offsetting security relationships by engaging in strategic alliances with the United States and China. Nonetheless, Pakistan continues to see nuclear weapons as the surest crises stability measure. The government in Islamabad wants sufficient nuclear forces for a second-strike capability, reliable and accurate deliverable means as well as a robust command and control system. Taken together, these are Pakistan's requirements for a strategy of minimum deterrence against a more powerful India. As such, some would argue that nuclear weapons have provided the ultimate security that Pakistan has sought, lending credence to Kenneth Waltz's argument about the stabilizing effect of nuclear weapons.<sup>7</sup>

## **Nuclear Doctrine**

Pakistan's nuclear doctrine is centered on a minimum deterrent; it has repeatedly eschewed a no-first use policy, and remains a non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). After the 1998 nuclear test and the creation in 1999 of the Strategic Plans Division (SPD) – charged with controlling the country's nuclear weapons and facilities – Pakistani defense planners recognized the imperative of creating a controlled, transparent, and larger structure if national security was premised on nuclear weapons. Despite a statement by senior military official alluding to situations where nuclear weapons might be used, Pakistan's nuclear doctrine is deliberately ambiguous.<sup>8</sup> The perception in Pakistan is that its nuclear force is necessary to support the country's conventional military to deter a potential attack by India. Despite three major wars between the two rivals and numerous other skirmishes, these events did not spiral out of control – a state Ashely J. Tellis calls “ugly stability”.<sup>9</sup>

## **Looking Ahead**

Unlike India, whose rise to major power status has been assisted by a nuclear weapon capability, Pakistan's nuclear capability has exposed a number of the country's weaknesses, including civil-military relations, the rise of extremism, and revelations of proliferation. The security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and facilities has been a key concern in recent years with the rise of terrorist attacks and insurgencies and the expansion of landmass falling under the control of the insurgents in the country. The latest developments in the region have increased fears that terrorist could target or penetrate nuclear facilities and put Pakistan's nuclear security at risk. For example, Pakistan's nuclear facilities such as the Khushab facility and the Gadwal enrichment plant are within close proximity of areas under attack from the Taliban.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, senior Al-Qaeda leaders have repeatedly expressed their interest to gain control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons.<sup>11</sup>

Events and experiences in and around Pakistan over the last four decades have institutionalized the role of nuclear weapons for the country's strategic independence and geographic integrity. These include 1971 war over East Pakistan and the nuclear explosion by India three years later; the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union; the Kashmir crises in 1990; and finally the 9/11 attacks on the US and the 2001-2002 military crisis with India. There is now a near absolute consensus in Islamabad on the importance of nuclear capability in the country's polity. To this end any new security trends and threats are likely to push the nuclear establishment to modernize and expand the Pakistani nuclear force. For example, in response to emerging US-India strategic partnership, and specifically the US-India civil nuclear deal, Pakistan's National Command Authority (NCA), the main nuclear decision-making body, publicly stated that any deal that would shift the nuclear balance would force Pakistan to reassess its minimum nuclear deterrent requirements.<sup>12</sup> The implication of this statement is that Pakistan would seek to match an expansion in India's nuclear force potential.

Pakistan's future nuclear weapons policy will depend on a number of developments at the regional and international level and rooted in the evolving Asian power balance. These include: how the regional dynamic will affect the relationship and power balance between India and Pakistan and prospects for conflict resolution between the two neighbors; how the war on terrorism develops and the role Pakistan plays in it; how the United States acts in Asia (particularly with China and India) and the Islamic world (in particular with Iran); and developments between Pakistan's military establishment and the

civilian government. Looking ahead, Pakistan will continue to pursue strategic military equilibrium by match developments taking place in India. As such, Islamabad's response to a rising India will have direct impact the regional security environment and the Asian power balance.

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**Joel Sandhu** is a Research Associate at the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin, an independent think tank focusing on effective and accountable governance.

## Notes

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