

Are Pressures from the U.S., India, and Israel Too Much for Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Program to Withstand?

By Muqtedar Khan | September 24, 2003

Pakistan's national defense strategy centers on protecting the country's nuclear weapons capability from a threat by one or more of three states that are currently working very closely—the United States, India, and Israel. That strategy includes a nuclear first-strike policy.

In that light, the question that Washington needs to address is more complex and requires more subtle geopolitical analysis than what policy makers on the Hill have been indulging in lately: Can the world in general—and the United States, India, and Israel in particular—afford to make such a nation feel as confused and insecure about its relations with them as they have?

Pakistan has perhaps taken more risks than any other nation in the U.S. war on terror. Yet it remains extremely insecure about its relations with Washington. Pakistan's extensive and risky cooperation with the United States has done little to alleviate its own security dilemmas. Pakistan today remains exposed to the dangers of preemptive strikes from the other close U.S. allies in the war on terror—India and Israel.

Pakistan's nuclear weapons, sought primarily for defense against a militarily superior India, seem to have increased the possibility of Pakistan becoming a victim of attacks from more powerful nations far and near, rather than making it more secure.

Washington seems to maintain a strategy of coercive diplomacy combined with economic assistance for Pakistan, which rewards it economically for its cooperation but does not reduce its geopolitical threats. Pakistan, in spite of being a close ally of the world's most dominant power, continues to live in a Hobbesian world.

As Pakistanis, especially the Islamists, are made to feel that their nation is being bullied into working against its own interests and its own people and faith, their anger, resentment and fear is increasing. At seminar after seminar on South Asian security and on the war on terror, I hear Pakistanis express deep concern, confusion and suspicions about Washington's policies and

in particular the emergence of a new anti-Pakistan axis created by the United States, Israel and India.

All three of these nations now identify what they call "Islamic terrorism" as the main threat to their own security, and their ultimate nightmare involves Jihadis armed with nukes.

Pakistan essentially identifies three dangers to its national security and they are:

- a conventional strike by India from the Kashmir border or a strategic strike by India against Pakistan's nuclear facilities;
- a preemptive strike by Israel at Pakistan's nuclear facilities with India's direct assistance or by using India as a base; and
- a preemptive strike by the United States against Pakistan's nuclear facilities to prevent them from becoming available to Islamists who could easily come to power in Pakistan.

Pakistan's first-strike policy, very simply, means that when in danger, the Pakistanis will trigger the nukes. Keep in mind that this is the policy of secular, rational generals and not some crazy Mullahs.

In other words, we do not have to wait for Pakistani nukes to fall into the hands of Taliban types before we see them lighting the sky; if we scare the present administration too much, that will be sufficient motivation.

Nothing can be scarier for the present military establishment in Pakistan than the threat to their nuclear weapons. Is Washington scaring the Pakistanis that way? Yes it is. Things have not reached dangerous levels, but who knows what the threshold level of Pakistan is? How much pressure can it handle?



Washington continues to insinuate that Pakistan has been sharing its nuclear secrets with Iran and North Korea. Washington also continues to express its worries about the stability of Pakistan's command and control structure and the possibility of Pakistani nukes falling into the hands of militant Muslims. Despite Pakistan's repeated reassurances on both counts, Washington continues to maintain its doubts.

Meanwhile, every time Indians meet with Israelis, the conversation is the same. Israelis ask, "What can you do for us?" And Indians ask, "What are you going to do about Pakistan?" So far Israel has not expressed much concern over Pakistani nukes; it is more worried about the Iranian nuclear program. But the growing Indo-Israeli military and intelligence cooperation and the Indo-U.S. military exercises in Kashmir are definitely raising the fear barometer in Islamabad.

The United States must understand that it cannot enhance its own security by making others feel insecure. While it works to keep Taliban types out of power and out of range of the nuclear buttons in Pakistan it must also work to reduce the stress and uncertainty in the minds of those who now already have their fingers on the nuclear buttons in Islamabad.

Washington can take the following concrete steps to allay mutual fears (if the neoconservatives can be made to understand the word mutual).

Washington can use the war on terror to develop a semi-formal regional security institution involving the United States, India, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Starting with the basic limited goal—that is in the

interest of all four nations—of keeping the Taliban types out of power in southwest Asia and maintaining regional stability, the United States could reduce tensions and allay fears. This setup may also come in handy as a forum for a future Indo-Pakistani peace process and for resolving the Kashmir issue through regional summits.

The United States can continue to guarantee Israeli security. It must use this guarantee to keep Israel from destabilizing other regions in pursuit of real or imagined threats. An institutional U.S. security interest in southwest Asia will also help to reduce Israeli fears about Pakistani nukes.

Finally, the United States must learn that it cannot have an instrumentalist approach to other nations. It cannot force Pakistan to take risks with its domestic and international balances of power in the U.S. interest without the United States also taking steps to keep Pakistan from being over exposed to strategic threats. A disregard for Pakistani domestic politics gave the Islamist parties a historically unprecedented victory in the last elections, contributing to current tensions in Washington, Tel Aviv, and New Delhi.

Before the nukes are triggered, Washington must learn to nurture its allies while nudging them towards safer policies and pro-U.S. postures.

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p. 2

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