

NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND PAKISTAN'S DEFENSE

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The last two decades have seen a gradual rise in public concern about strategic weapons proliferation. Smaller nation's interest in acquiring nuclear weapons, which had waned in the late 1980s and early 1990s, is again on the rise. Not only the existence of vast surpluses of usable fissile material in the USA, Russia, Japan and Europe have also further intensified concerns over its possible leakage and theft but also the prospect of terrorist use of nuclear, chemical or biological munitions that was so dramatically highlighted by the Japanese subway sarin attacks of 1995 and London attack of July 2005 on underground tube train is also a source of continuous headaches. Finally, the last decade has also seen the increasing pace of space technology proliferation underscored by ever more advanced Chinese, North Korean, Iranian, Indian and Pakistani missile and satellite launches¹. This paper initially discusses the question why nations go nuclear and then focuses on the dilemma confronting Pakistan and why it eventually opted for the acquisition of nuclear weapon's capability.

Why nations go nuclear?

Security perceptions of almost all nations are directly linked with the real and perceived threats confronting them from time to time. Threat is a geopolitical environmental condition for which the price and penalty will have to be paid by the target state if it fails to build its own effective warding-off mechanism. Since the environmental conditions are constantly changing, the threats to the security of a state often either recede or acquire alarming proportion depending on the direction of change. To obviate real or perceived threats, nations seek power, allies or support of a large and influential group. Because of the inability of international political system to evolve its own effective collective security arrangement coupled with operative economic and power disparities and inequalities, most nations of the world are left with no option but to fall back upon the age old recognized principle of self-help. Thus one witnesses a phenomenon in which almost all that nations are

constantly striving to create that kind of power equilibrium or disequilibrium which affords maximum security to them. Pakistan is no exception to this general rule. Pakistan's security policy has changed periodically in order to accommodate the geopolitical realities of the time. Initially Pakistan sought security through alignment but, recently it has opted for security through non-alignment.

While there exists a vast body of preventive measures to contain nuclear proliferation and in cases even force has been used in the name of preventive measures, the prospects for further proliferation cannot be ruled out or discounted altogether. Different nations have different reasons to opt for nuclear weapon option

Four sets of arguments are frequently advanced by states contemplating to acquire nuclear weapon; military security, political prestige and influence, economic gains, and domestic pressures and compulsions. Nations feeling insecure and lacking resources to match their major adversaries' military capabilities tend to argue that the possession of a limited nuclear deterrence could dissuade the enemies from committing aggression. To be able to deter a militarily superior rival, especially a nuclear adversary, or to acquire military superiority over any enemy or potential enemy or to strengthen one's bargaining lever, or to reduce military dependence upon an ally in particular and on external sources of military hardware in general, or to acquire complete military independence, are frequently expressed factors that influence nations to opt for nuclear option. The Soviet Union (in 1949), the UK (1952), France (1960) and China (1964) all acquired the desired nuclear capability in pursuit of the objective of being able to deter their nuclear adversaries.

Second major motivation inducing nations to go nuclear is the belief that the acquisition of nuclear weapons enhances a country's prestige and status. It is often stated that the Chinese explosion accelerated the process of according the Peoples Republic of China its due status. Similarly, General de Gaulle's decision to go nuclear was tremendously influenced by his desire to see France securing its legitimate place in world forums and organizations.

Closely trailing the status-motivation is the quest for international recognition by those nations that are confronted with recognition problems. The indigenous production of nuclear weapons demonstrates self-reliance and political independence. States seeking domineering regional role and leadership tend to believe that the acquisition of nuclear weapons' technology would accelerate the process of attaining the desired status. India is often quoted in this category.

Third major argument revolves around the economic gains that accrue from going nuclear. The nuclear energy is regarded a relatively cheap source of power, particularly in the those countries that lack sufficient oil, gas and coal deposits on the one hand and have no great hydro potential on the other. Acquisition of nuclear energy not only tends to reduce their dependence upon external sources of energy but also lessens their budgetary pressures. Besides, the acquisition of nuclear energy can provide economic and military spin-off benefits.

Final set of considerations and pressures are of purely domestic nature. A country facing serious economic, political and social problems may find its panacea in a dramatic technological breakthrough. A high visibility technical breakthrough can easily divert attention from complex internal problems. Pressure groups like civil and military bureaucracies, scientific community, political parties etc., can also generate pressure to tilt the balance towards nuclearization of the country. Again India is also quoted in this regard.

Dilemma: Signing or not signing the NPT

A close look at Pakistan's domestic scene and its regional situation clearly indicates that sufficient considerations existed to compel Pakistan to opt for nuclear path. Equally powerful factors were also operative to dissuade Pakistan from undertaking the forbidden road to nuclearization. Instead of discussing the incentives and disincentives influencing Pakistan's nuclear pursuits, perhaps, a more appropriate approach would be to spell out the options that were available to Pakistan and then within each option highlight the

advantages and disadvantages.

In many ways Pakistan's nuclear choices, directly or indirectly, were and still are linked with the developments in the region; more specifically the Indian nuclear policy. Besides the operative internal and international constraints, developments on its periphery tend to curtail its options. Under the then existing circumstances there seemed to be four basic options that can be discussed. The first option was to sign the NPT and resolve quickly its acute energy problem by securing the requisite power plants with the goodwill and help of the members of the NPT system. The second option was to refuse to sign the NPT and strive for nuclear weapons status with a view to acquire at least a limited deterrence. Since Pakistan could never hope to match India's conventional might, a limited nuclear deterrence could keep India at a safe distance. A third option was to carry on with the policy of nuclear ambiguity with a view to keep India uncertain and simultaneously perfecting nuclear technology for both peaceful and military purposes but drumming only plough share pursuits. And the fourth option was to declare the nuclear weapons capability but scrupulously refrain from embarking upon a route leading to nuclear weapons acquisitions.

Given the operative energy situation and the consequent long spells of load shedding, many thought that perhaps the best option for Pakistan was to sign the NPT. Among the major advantages that could have accrued from the signing of NPT, the most important one would have been the installation of much desired power plants. Although Pakistan had floated international tenders for power plants, the response was extremely poor. The total reserves of fossil fuels (including oil, coal, gas and hydro) are extremely limited in relation to the fast increasing population and rapidly growing economy. A very high percentage of its oil needs are being met through imports; and the oil imports alone are consuming equally high percentage of the total foreign exchange earnings. In the light of continuously escalating cost of external sources of energy and the existing deficiency of internal sources of energy, it was thought to be rational at the time that Pakistan should develop nuclear energy quickly, at least to meet its increasing power requirements, over the

next 20 years. Needless to assert that the signing of the NPT would have enormously facilitated the installation of much desired power plants. Membership of the NPT would provide access to advanced technologies and would have invoked greater willingness among the suppliers to provide the desired material enabling Pakistan to quickly perfect its nuclear projects and programs.

Secondly, the unilateral signing of NPT could have generated enormous pressures for India to adhere to the NPT system and would make India's position somewhat awkward; awkward because such pressures will embarrass the Indians who would be unable to change their stance. India regards the NPT as an unsatisfactory and discriminating treaty. The indefinite extension of NPT was not viewed favorably by the Indians. Why would India bind its hand while the other powers continued experimentations in the nuclear field? Over the years resistance to the signing of the NPT had further strengthened and almost all factions of Indian Society began to see the NPT as unacceptable. Besides, India was known to be unwilling actor to give up its nuclear weapons option unless China had decided to destroy its nuclear stockpiles. China's declaratory commitment not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons under any circumstances had not been able to alleviate India's apprehensions. In addition, India had already upgraded its missile programme and successfully launched both Agni and Prithvi.

Third, abandoning the quest for weapon technology implied that we opt out of the nuclear race. India and Pakistan were already locked in a nuclear arms race. Opting out meant that cost involved in perfecting the nuclear device and its delivery system would be drastically reduced. The costs of acquiring, maintaining and delivering the nuclear arms are undoubtedly enormous. To be able to maintain the existing large establishments of the armed forces and simultaneously incur the cost of nuclear weaponization may prove to be greatly strenuous for weak economy. Admittedly, it is true that the relative cost of nuclear weapons is lot less than the maintenance of large scale of conventional forces but it still is an additional cost which **a country** has to bear. Besides, the acquisition of weapons does not necessarily reduce the cost incurred by the maintenance of large establishments of conventional forces. This is especially true

of Third World countries because military offers perhaps the largest number of employment opportunities. Fourth, signing of the NPT by Pakistan could have signaled the other aspiring states to realize the futility of acquisition of nuclear weapons influence their thinking in a psychological sense.

Just as there were many advantages in signing the NPT, there were also few disadvantages. First, signing the NPT implied giving free hand to India in its nuclear pursuits. Although India's declared nuclear policy had been and continued for quite sometimes that it would not build nuclear weapons, however reports frequently appeared in world press that had categorically emphasized that India would never abandoned its secret pursuit to eventually weaponize its nuclear program. A close scrutiny of comprehensive nature of India's nuclear programme in conjunction with various periodic press reports, clearly reflected that India was storing weapon grade nuclear material for eventually weaponization when its government so decides. Many Pakistanis thought that giving up nuclear weapons option entailed encouragement for India to embark upon its customary coercive path towards its neighbors. India had been known to have introduced its combat troops in neighboring countries whenever the need arose (either on its own initiative or on the request of the neighboring country).

Second, the signing Of the NPT would have invoked strong reaction among some of the political parties that had openly been advocating that Pakistan should make the 'bomb'. Given the then existing political scenario of Pakistan, with the ongoing intense political divide, abandoning such an option could have placed the incumbent government in a somewhat embarrassing position. In a society where the transfer of civilian bureaucrat and a military officer can generate so much political reaction, an issue like abandoning the nuclear option within the context of existing regional situation was bound to invoke unnecessarily strong reaction.

Third, many of the regional neighbors looked toward Pakistan with hidden admiration for highlighting India's hegemonistic regional designs, the signing of the NPT could have

been interpreted as giving into India's pressure. Such a situation could have adversely influenced the thinking of regional neighbors. If a regional solution had been accepted by India, then they would have readily accepted it as they would also remain partners in the regional approach.

Opting for Nuclear Weapons

Advantages: The argument that Pakistan should make the 'bomb' had been periodically voiced in Pakistan, though not so consistently and forcefully as it was frequently done in India. Following the Indian explosion of 1974, former Prime Minister, Zulfikar All Bhutto expressed a strong desire to acquire nuclear capabilities comparable to that of the Indian accomplishment. The basic rationale of Pakistani 'bomb' was twofold: to avoid a likely Indian nuclear blackmail in the future, and to adopt the theory of limited deterrence. Given the then Indian drive for quantitative and qualitative expansion of its armed forces, the goal of even attaining near parity situation seemed certainly beyond Pakistan's resources. To be able to check aggressive designs that may be entertained by the Indian decision-makers, the most feasible option needed to concentrate on acquiring the ability to raise the cost to an unacceptable level and this could be only done through the acquisition of even a limited nuclear capability which, in turn could deter the Indians or at least generate sufficient pressures to initiate a process of rethinking.

Secondly, a case for the bomb could also be made out on the basis that uncertainty of situation which tended to encourage the adversaries to undertake preemptive strikes. If the actual work regarding the perfection of nuclear device continued but its existence was publicly denied, a ring of uncertainty grows which, in turn, could eventually prepare the nation for the worst case scenario and could have tempted them to contemplate selective preemptive attacks. But on the other hand, if the, nation has already publicly opted for the bomb, deterrence steps tend to inhibit the potential adversary from contemplating such actions.

Thirdly, it was often argued that if both India and Pakistan

acquired nuclear bombs, the chances of a nuclear war would rapidly increase mainly because of their demonstrated' antagonism, the frequent use of force to settle their disputes in the past, proximity of borders, and the continuing complex disputes like Kashmir etc. The underlying assumption was that the volatility of relationship made the risk of conflict much higher in South Asia than between any other antagonistic nuclear pairs. The abilities of the Indians and the Pakistanis to act rationally was not really given deserving weight even though the evidence of caution and statesmanship had been demonstrated by both Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto when they signed in December, 1988, an agreement not to attack each others' nuclear installations. In addition, many more confidence building measures had been taken in order to reduce tension between the two countries and lessening the chances of war.

Fourthly, an argument was also made out in favor of the bomb as its acquisition would make Pakistan the first Muslim country to acquire nuclear weapons capability. Pakistan has always sought to establish a special relationship with the Muslim countries and has made every effort to strengthen the existing bonds at bilateral as well as multilateral level. Technologically, Pakistan was and in many ways still is regarded as relatively advanced when compared with Middle Eastern states, despite their enormous oil wealth and consequent rapid drive towards modernization and industrialization. Pakistan was probably the only country in the Muslim world with a reasonable nuclear base. Indeed many thought that the acquisition of advanced nuclear technology would make Pakistan one of the most important and respected members of the Muslim Bloc.

Disadvantages: Among the major disadvantages that the acquisition of the bomb would be that it would provide the much awaited and much desired legitimization excuse to India. Although evidence existed at the time, in many forms, that indicated that India was already well set on route to nuclear weaponization. India had never publicly acknowledged that she intended to acquire nuclear weapons but simultaneously India was defending her right to retain weapons option rather vigorously. Besides, a Pakistani bomb would generate sufficient pressures inside India, to compel the incumbent

government, to opt for weapons even if the government of the day was not too inclined towards this direction. Already a strong pro-weapon lobby existed in India and also sizeable section of the scientific community had formed a pressure group of its own, supporting the lobbyists. “Since we can, why should we not go in for nuclear weapons” was another line of argument put forth by the Indian lobbyists. A Pakistani bomb would have equipped the lobbyists with an invincible weapon. The publication of reports, mostly in the Western press, in 1979 that Pakistan had secretly acquired the requisite components of a uranium enrichment plant provided the much needed boost to the pro-weapons lobby in India. Convinced that Pakistan was about to acquire the bomb, the lobby activated its campaign with all the resources it could muster. The lobby urged the government ~not only to stay ahead of Pakistan in nuclear weapons technology but also to stop wasting any more time and start building a nuclear arsenal.

Second major disadvantage would have been the huge cost that would have been incurred in perfecting the weapon system. Linked with the acquisition of weapons technology was the problem of a delivery system. Even if Pakistan had successfully exploded an atomic device, disregarding its dangerous implications, how would it cope with the issue of a delivery system? A bomb without a delivery system was just as useless as high velocity gun without ammunition. Compared to Pakistan, India was far ahead in its carrier system program. It was making its own aircrafts and missiles.

Third major disadvantage would be earning the wrath of the NPT community. A Pakistani bomb was likely to adversely affect its relations with almost all donor countries as well as other members of the NPT system. Pakistan, being not only a developing country but one which had acute security problems, was vulnerable to Western economic sanctions. Long delays or total denial of World Bank or IMF loans or its consortium’s aid could have seriously impaired its developmental progress and security mechanism. To check Pakistan’s nuclear conduct and to plug various existing loopholes, the American Congress passed several interrelated laws threatening to punish Pakistan if it acquired nuclear weapons or even contemplated to do so. Despite Pakistan’s repeated assertions that

are had not acquired nuclear weapons, the Americans invoked Pressler Amendment in the autumn of 1990 and terminated US economic assistance and military sales of Pakistan.

Fourth disadvantage that needs to be highlighted here was that acquisition of nuclear bomb would further encourage nuclear proliferation. Most of the threshold countries would use Pakistan's entry into the exclusive nuclear weapons club as a legitimate excuse to embark upon their own nuclear weapon programme. A world of nuclear plenty may become little more dangerous than the world in which the acclaimed possession of nuclear weapons was confined to only limited number of states.

Concluding Remarks

Given the advent of 21st Century and the nature of currently operative international system many factors can influence the decision makers to opt for the acquisition of hitherto forbidden nuclear weapons or abandon their quest in this regard. These include the major shift in most powerful nation's (US) foreign and security policy, a breakdown of the global non-proliferation regime, domestic imperatives, erosion of global and regional security, and increasing availability of technology. A close examination of those states that have already acquired nuclear weapons and those which are engaged in the acquisition of dreaded arsenal clearly reveals that one of the above mentioned factors was operative and heavily influenced the decision makers of particular country. Besides, the discriminatory nature of policy pursuits of certain countries or of a system further paved the grounds for the acquisition of nuclear weapon capability.

Given the past history of acrimonious relationships with India, Pakistan's nuclear posture is unlikely to change unless a major development takes place and the Pakistanis stop perceiving threats to its security. Undoubtedly Pakistan's quest for the acquisition of nuclear weapons was mainly motivated to counter threats emanating from its larger next door neighbor though one cannot deny the minor contributions of other factors. Not only the nuclear weapons are seen as balancer but these weapons are also

viewed as weapons of last resort in Pakistan.

Cognizant of increasing gap in conventional capabilities between India and Pakistan, it was realized that Pakistan can neither hope to match the rapidly increasing conventional weapons strength of India nor afford to be trapped in the undesired arms race. The acquisition of nuclear weapons could provide the much sought after panacea. While it is not too fetched to assume that the defense of Pakistan was the major motivating factor in influencing the decision to opt for nuclear weapons. However the other factors also contributed their share in facilitating the final decision.

Admittedly Pakistan has not yet clearly outlined in its nuclear doctrine specifically mentioning the eventuality in which the deployment of nuclear weapon would be seriously contemplated but it has been reported that an Italian writer quoted an interview with the Director General of Strategic Plans Division (DGSPD) and described certain situations in which the use of nuclear weapons could be seriously considered. Among these eventualities included Indian conquest of large part of Pakistani territory, destruction of large part of Pakistan's land and air forces, Indian pursuit of effective economic strangulation, Indian successful push for Pakistan's political destabilization and creation of large scale internal subversions etc. ² It needs to be mentioned here that the DGSPD later denied the use of the wording of the above mentioned contingencies.³

Compared to Indian quest for nuclear weapons, Pakistan's rational for nuclear weapon program is indeed security driven. Not only Pakistan has consistently faced a looming threat from India, the main determinant for its defence and foreign policies has always been Indian policies. While Pakistan's main objective is deterring rather than fighting a war with India, other objectives of Pakistani nuclear doctrine in dealing with perceived threat from India are to maintain an overall strategic equilibrium, to neutralize conventional military asymmetries against India, and to maintain its territorial integrity and political sovereignty.⁴

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End Notes

- ¹. Emerging threats about proliferation of weapons, these views had been discussed by various prominent scholars of the world.
- ². Quoted in Zafar Iqbal Cheema's article ' The Role of Nuclear Weapons in Pakistan's Defense Strategy' in **IPRI Journal**, Vol.iv, No.2, Summer 2004, pp.59-80.
- ³. **Ibid.**
- ⁴. **Ibid.**