

# A tattered coat upon a stick



**Ejaz Haider**

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**P**resident Barack Obama, during his campaign, talked about banning the “bomb”. North Korea, perhaps the most isolated country in the world after Myanmar, has just conducted another nuclear test and by some reports at least five missile tests to put the icing on the cake.

Whither non-proliferation? But let’s first get closer to home.

Pakistan, which put the bomb on the shelf eleven years ago, has seen a spate of reports in the western, especially US press, casting serious doubts over the safety and security of Pakistani nuclear assets.

The Strategic Plans Division, the secretariat of Pakistan’s National Command Authority, has had it up to its ears. The SPD has held dozens of briefings in the past four years, trying to inform the world that Pakistan’s nuclear assets are safe and secure. But the issue keeps recrudescing like eczema.

Given the nature of the new kind of warfare that involves the state(s) against non-state actors, some analysts doubt the relevance of nuclear weapons. They argue that strategic arsenals, meant to deter state adversaries, are useless against non-state actors; indeed, given the increasing capacity of non-state actors to harm states, there is existential danger of nuclear assets falling into the hands of these actors.

Well, yes and no. But let’s assume yes. Can something be done?

The answer would also have to assume a situation in which inter-state rivalries are a thing of the past. Correct if that assumption were, nuclear weapons capability would no longer be sexy – or at least would lose its buying power.

Mohamed ElBaradei, the outgoing director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, however, doesn’t think so. At the helm of IAEA for eleven years, Mr ElBaradei says nuclear weapons retain their currency because the non-proliferation regime is not “fair”. He predicts more nuclear weapons states, what he calls “virtual NWSs”, that would, while remaining within the NPT, develop weapons capability but remain a screwdriver’s turn away from it. If and when needed, says Mr ElBaradei, they could put a weapon together in a couple of months. And they would inch closer to that line without opting out of the NPT.

Next year in April, the NPT has its quinquennial review conference (RevCon). Mr ElBaradei insists that without deep cuts by the US and Russia (the two possess between them 95 percent of the world’s nuclear

weapons), they would not have the moral authority to tighten up the non-proliferation regime.

Would Mr Obama make deep cuts before having the moral authority to tighten up the non-proliferation regime? Difficult, if not impossible. A task force report in the US says the country's nuclear weapons are in danger of losing credibility. James Schlesinger, a former defence secretary who headed the task force, wants the US to "up its game" or else countries under the US security umbrella might start building their own arsenals.

One report describes General Kevin Chilton, head of US Strategic Command, as lobbying for new, better bombs. Already, the US is moving from LEP (life extension programme) for its weapons under the SSP (stockpile stewardship programme) to RRW (reliable replacement warhead) programme. Some analysts also insist, and technically correct they are, that new weapons and different designs require testing!

So while Mr Obama has talked about ratifying the CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty) and strengthening the non-proliferation regime, he is likely to face tough debates at home about what needs to be done – and why.

The lesson is not lost on the world. If the US, with the strongest conventional military, needs the bomb, so do states that cannot afford state-of-the-art conventional capabilities.

There is yet another problem. The India-US nuclear deal has already created an exception for India. While it has done much good for New Delhi, it hasn't redounded to the advantage of the non-proliferation regime. Another lesson here: give the world fait accompli and use the capability as a bargaining chip.

Add to this another twist in the tale. In 2002, the US came out with its NPR (nuclear posture review) which talked about TNWs (tactical nuclear weapons) and, more disturbingly, using them for operational purposes against elusive enemies. The term employed was "forward deterrence". The two roles envisaged for these weapons were bunker-busting and earth penetration. The most important step in this regard was the decision by the US Congress to revoke the (then) 10-year-old Spratt-Furse ban on the research and development of weapons below a 5-kiloton yield and the allocation of funds for R&D.

That continues. It is meant to plug into the ongoing smaller irregular wars. Use the strategic arsenals to deter states; use battlefield TNWs to take out non-state adversaries.

The problem is: if such weapons are used at some point, the norm against using nuclear weapons on a conventional battlefield against non-nuclear adversaries will be shattered. The consequences could be extremely hazardous. Moreover, while the possibility of terrorist groups stealing a weapon or picking up a broken arrow is remote today, such battlefield weapons, located close to the contested zone, could more easily get into the hands of such groups. And since most would be artillery shells, the delivery vehicles (guns in this case) would also be easy to acquire – especially if a base were overrun.

Finally, the US demarches against Iran have also diluted Article IV of the NPT which stipulated "the

inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and in conformity with Articles I and II of this Treaty". That takes care of the third most important pillar of the treaty.

It is in this backdrop that Pakistan has to decide on what it wants to do with its nuclear capability and how it must add value to it. The issue calls for a clear policy in this regard. So far we do not have any doctrine. Eleven years after having tested, that is not very commendable.

As for the western press and analysts, Pakistan should not react to such absurd reports. The world should either accept our word for how safe and secure our assets are or simply lump it.

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