

Interpreting Pakistan's bomb



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The bomb is an 'equaliser' of unequals. It is a part of the calculus of negotiation of just peace; it is not a facilitator of war. It is a guarantor of prosperity but will become a liability if the state suffers economic collapse

Man made nuclear weapons to scare his enemy and thus 'deter' him. He did not make the nuclear bomb to attack; he made it to lighten the burden of defending. The enemy too developed the bomb because he too wanted to scare his enemy off. In fact, the bomb is born of fear but its development is aimed at arousing a kind of counter-fear in the breast of the enemy. Possibility of mass destruction is what does the trick. When two states have the nuclear bomb they appear to be in a state of aggressive deadlock. They live under 'assured mutual deterrence'.

Pakistan started a 'reactive' bomb programme after India was seen to be moving steadily towards its first bomb. The conundrum was: why was India making a bomb? It had no enemy whom it feared. In the region at least it had fought a war in 1947 with what had just become Pakistan. Did India make the bomb for Pakistan? The Indian 'theory' says it is not against Pakistan but China. Yet the development of the Indian nuclear programme started much before Nehru saw China as an adversary.

Pakistani bomb, India-specific and revisionist: Pakistan thinks the Indian bomb Pakistan-specific. Its own doctrine about its bomb is quite frankly India-specific. It says if India dismantles its bomb Pakistan will do the same thing. This is the ultimate statement of making your bomb specific to one country. It rests on Pakistan knowing that India will never dismantle. India will not dismantle if China dismantles, and it never asks China for dismantling. In fact, China and India are not candidates for a nuclear war at the theoretical level despite India's enhancement of the delivery system. But the potential is there. The nuclear bomb is the bomb of imagination.

India and Pakistan are nuclear rivals. The deterrence between the two is still red hot. A kind of covert low-intensity war is going on between the two. Simply because it is unequal in conventional arms, Pakistan is more likely to launch its bomb first. Deterrence is red hot because the two have not sat down and discussed the status quo which has to be frozen under the nuclear doctrine of deterrence. They don't have the Helsinki Accords (1975) which would have cooled down the deterrence. Pakistan remains revisionist with a bomb. This is not a good situation to be in.

Bombs without status quo agreement: The onus on Pakistan as a revisionist power is not to leverage its covert war with India with its bomb. Pakistan says India has to first decide the status quo. This goes against the history of the development of nuclear theory in the West. In the East-West standoff, the status quo was accepted by both sides more or less as it was. When India and Pakistan as nuclear powers are asked to accept the status quo, India does while Pakistan doesn't. In other words, Pakistan

wants a dividend from its nuclear bomb. On the other hand, in deterrence there are no such dividends. The dividend is in the freezing of the status quo and avoidance of war.

Pakistan and India are both at a crossroads. They have the bomb but no agreement on status quo. Both have to make some very fundamental decisions about their place at the global and regional levels. The fact that they have the bombs should help them make the big decisions. The bomb is a weapon of peace and stability. Pakistan can relate to India any way it wishes except a warlike relationship without fear of being cheated. If it free-trades with India it will not be like Sri Lanka trading with India and not having the guts to complain about its unfair aspects.

The bomb and low-intensity war: Delaying change in its revisionist status and allowing military officers to leverage the nuclear bomb to carry on dangerously risk-taking covert operations against India has endangered Pakistan. It has alarmed the world and lowered the level of acceptance of nuclearised Pakistan together with India and Israel. The Kargil Operation greatly put off the world; it is no longer popular in Pakistan either. But the Pakistani nation wants to retain its nuclear status; it wants to retain the bomb as an option of defence. It is justifiably offended when it is told that its nuclear arsenal is not safe. It is offended at the implied threat that Pakistan should be denuclearised.

Unstable states normally don't qualify as nuclear states. The bomb is safe inside a stable state. It has to remain inside the possessor state and must not seem to slip away when the state is in trouble. When the Soviet Union broke up there was a risk that its nuclear arsenal will start dispersing. Pakistan has been politically unstable over the last thirty years, mainly because of the burden of revisionism it had to carry along with its covert war projects. Voices were raised about its bomb throughout these years. When its instability reached a kind of climax in the 1990s and it began to be labelled a failed state, the alarmist voices became strident.

The bomb and the unstable state: Pakistan put in place what is internationally accepted as a failsafe nuclear command and control system. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is safe; it cannot be stolen. Pakistan is not a failed or failing state either, like nuclear North Korea. But it is suffering fallout from its policy of strategic depth pursued by its military during the 1990s. This policy was connected with its bomb but was as ill-advised as the Kargil Operation. It has become an unstable state not in control of all its territory. Its ungoverned spaces are spreading like a bloodstain and its capital Islamabad is counted among cities thought vulnerable to a takeover.

The world vacillates between raising alarm and being consoled. It was alarmed when we said we don't want to fight the Taliban as they took territory after territory and brutalised local populations. It was alarmed not so much by the situation on the ground as by the state of the Pakistani mind. It began to say the nuclear arsenal could simply pass on to the Taliban as a part of transition of power, as a kind of dowry of the bride of the state as it minced its way into the tent of the caliphate. As if aware of this eventuality, the favourite perception in Pakistan is that 'America is about to grab our bomb'.

Bomb as an equaliser of unequals: Before Iran goes nuclear and the world has two 'revisionist' bombs

in the region, Pakistan must reach a decision about the freezing of the status quo with India. (Iran's bomb is only avowedly revisionist against Israel; it is more likely a status quo one, against 'regime-change'.) Pakistan needs its bomb. It is an asset that should not be lost at a time when we need peace to grow economically. To control massive internal displacement of population Pakistan needs international help. To become stable and to settle down to peaceful coexistence with its neighbours it needs the leverage of its nuclear status.

The bomb is an 'equaliser' of unequals. It is a part of the calculus of negotiation of just peace; it is not a facilitator of war. It is a guarantor of prosperity but will become a liability if the state suffers economic collapse. It is the ultimate 'rational weapon' which cannot be attached to any irrational collective emotion. It must not be attached to nationalism or to any verse of divine Revelation. It is not meant to defeat the enemy but to prevent the enemy from defeating you. It ensures an absence of winning and losing. It is the weapon of absence of war.

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