

Nuclear nuisance?



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As Pakistan enters its twelfth year as an overt nuclear state, the spectrum of views on the utility of the capacity remains extremely broad. On balance, critics retain a strong voice, their main argument that the nuclear capability has not delivered on its promises. Concerns include: the inability of nuclear weapons to eliminate crises/conflict with India; increased suspicion by the international community and continuous diplomatic pressure to disarm; and lack of benefits in terms of decreased defence and increased development expenditures.

The anti-nuclear argument is misplaced and reflects a lack of understanding about the role nuclear weapons play in a state's overall strategy.

The multi-dimensional nature of the nuclear capability notwithstanding, just like any other military platform, these weapon systems have limitations in terms of their potential utility. In Pakistan's case, most of the failures the anti-nuclear lobby points to were never meant to be fulfilled in the domain of strategic weapons. Also, that our leaders presented the nuclear capability as the be all and end all of Pakistani problems is another problematic matter.

Let's consider these three concerns in turn.

The foremost rationale for acquiring nuclear weapons was to deter India. On this count, Pakistan has succeeded. Since 1998, there has been a tangible shift in the Indian outlook towards Islamabad. The 1999 and 2003 initiatives to converge at the negotiation table were an outcome, partly, of the realisation on India's part of its inability to resolve the Pakistan problem militarily. This is especially true for Operation Parakram in 2001-02, which confirmed for New Delhi the fact that Pakistan's sub-conventional proxy war could neither be tackled through coercion, nor through an all-out conflict.

As for the limited war at Kargil, two points should be noted. One, nuclear deterrence does *not* prevent limited conflicts. In fact, the "stability-instability paradox" suggests that stability at the strategic level will increase the likelihood of short, confined wars. Kargil is empirical evidence of this paradox. So while limited wars under the nuclear overhang are not inevitable, nuclear weapons place far greater demands on decision makers not to succumb to the temptation of making limited tactical gains through military



Dr AQ Khan poses in a tunnel under the Chagai Hills shortly after Pakistan's 1998 nuclear tests

means despite having the option to do so.

Here, the Pakistani military officers who ordered Kargil failed miserably. In fact, in hindsight, it is clear that they lacked any understanding of the new dynamics nuclear weapons had introduced into the South Asian equation. The planners may have erroneously believed that Pakistan's elevated international status as a nuclear power would force the world to treat its claim on Kashmir more respectfully post-Kargil.

In reality, any strategist would have been able to forecast that the nuclear overhang would bring excessive embarrassment to the aggressor given the inherent risk of escalation. The world simply could not adopt a stance that would have encouraged a nuclear-armed state to hold the entire region hostage.

As far as increased suspicion by the international community and continuous diplomatic pressure to disarm are concerned, the fact is that because of the nuclear capability, the US has put up with Pakistan in a much more conciliatory manner than it would have otherwise.

On the terrorism front, Pakistan has been a frontline ally, but one which according to the American outlook has created serious headaches for Washington. While the argument need not be stretched beyond what it is worth – there is nothing to say that the US would have intervened directly in FATA had nuclear weapons not been present – one does hear constant concerns among decision makers in Washington that the latter cannot afford to abandon a destabilising *nuclear power*.

Taking instability as exogenous to the nuclear equation (this is warranted as instability has not been caused by nuclear weapons), the presence of nuclear weapons has allowed Pakistan a somewhat larger manoeuvring space vis-à-vis the US.

As for the question of constant worries about Pakistan's nuclear weapons finding their way into the 'wrong' hands, criticism is indeed warranted. However, again, we find ourselves in this situation not because of the presence of nuclear weapons but because of our track record on nuclear proliferation. For example, the AQ Khan affair has put Pakistan squarely on the back foot in terms of its credibility in the comity of nations. The proliferation scandal was borne out of horrendous management errors with regards the security of the arsenal. Even so, the distinction between the strategic capability and its management should never be eschewed. It is the latter, not the former, that ought to be criticised.

Finally, the concern about Pakistan's growing economic and social problems is completely irrelevant to the nuclear weapons debate. The idea that nuclear weapons reduce pressure on conventional arms spending and thus have a downward effect on overall military budgets is academic at best. The Cold War experience has long rendered this argument invalid. That such rhetoric nonetheless remained at the forefront of justifying Pakistan's nuclear capability only reflects political expediency. It was indeed a lack of understanding on the part of our civilian elite that allowed politicians and military alike to run away with this false pretence.

The only charm of nuclear weapons in terms of spending is that a modest capability is cheap to acquire

(the official figure of Rs 272 billion thus far is reasonable when compared to conventional spending). However, to have expected Pakistan to reduce its conventional expenditure was never realistic since Pakistan bases its defence strategy primarily on conventional, not nuclear, deterrence. Nuclear weapons only present an overhang in the background. This is a tactical imperative. Any move to rely heavily on nuclear weapons as the chief deterrent will be both highly destabilising for the nuclear regime and non-credible as a threat to hold out to India.

The implication of the above for development is obvious. Nuclear weapons end up adding, not reducing, the overall cost of defence marginally; thus there is no possibility of freeing up further funds for development.

If we are to have objective cost-benefit analyses of nuclear weapons, the true picture of what the capability promises must be established publicly: one, India will continue to be deterred from taking an all-out offensive; two, as long as Pakistan can continue to maintain robust command and control of the weapons and the country does not decent into total chaos, the US will remain engaged with Islamabad in constructive endeavours; three, the expenditure on nuclear weapons will increase but will still constitute a relatively small share in overall spending; four, if conventional expenditure is curtailed it will be due to growing economic compulsions, not because of the presence of nuclear weapons; five, nuclear weapons will increase Pakistan's importance but whether this enhances Islamabad's leverage in diplomacy or undermines it (by creating mere nuisance value as Kargil did) will depend on what role leaders demand from nuclear weapons in the country's overall strategy; and finally, nuclear weapons bear no relevance to the country's development.

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