

Dividends of strategic equilibrium



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Pokhran I in 1974 and the aftermath of the 1971 separation of East Pakistan spurred Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his team to seek a matching nuclear capability for Pakistan. This political vision was given meaning by the extremely capable and committed scientific community that encouraged many of their expat fraternity to return and pursue what had now become a closely held secret objective. Somewhere in the early 1980s, Pakistan crossed the threshold and became a nuclear capable nation. The first delivery system got qualified around the mid-80s, and Pakistan was well and truly a member of the nuclear club. And, for record, no, it was not the F-16; so the Americans need not lose any sleep.

Pokhran II in 1998 was an epic event. It unleashed on the world what was by then an open secret: that India was a nuclear capable nation; that it had a wide variety of various yield weapons; and that it could afford to test assets in almost equal numbers on two different days.

What perhaps were most fascinating to the Pakistani observers were the tests in the one kiloton and sub kiloton range on the second day that practically confirmed to Pakistanis their intended theatre of employment. The much-touted thermonuclear test however did not happen for some reason, more likely technical.

These tests also had other effects: they spoiled the day for the Nawaz Sharif government, which, suffering from low foreign exchange reserves on the back of some questionable economic policies and a bearish global economy, now was placed in a quandary on how to respond to this major and blatant geo-political move by the Vajpayee government.

Option I was to stay ambivalent; the world already knew what Pakistan possessed. Leave the world guessing your next move; in so doing cede the critical advantage in the Indo-Pakistan context of both morale and nationalistic fervour; and more damagingly submit to India's likely demeanour of arrogance and condescension.

Option II was to use the opportunity to establish itself in the nuclear club, forcing a fait accompli on the world at large; gain a strategic equivalence neutralising any perceived advantage to India; and restore national morale with an equally strong and resplendent show of nuclear power. The flipside of the second option to some was the entirely unnecessary international political pressure that Pakistan would have to bear and negotiate.

When the tests did occur on May 28, strictly within the Indo-Pakistan context, terms like the 'Hindu bomb'

and the 'Muslim bomb' found mention, discolouring what was in fact an extremely well deliberated strategic move.

There was immediate fallout from the tests. The US and most of the West applied sanctions on Pakistan, further debilitating its woeful economy, pushing foreign exchange reserves down to the last \$500 million. The more positive outcome salutary to the inherently competitive and traditionally confrontational relationship between India and Pakistan was a strategic move by both nations to establish communication at the prime ministerial level and work towards resolution of issues in a negotiated process.

Then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited Pakistan in February 1999, not only as a statesman of great vision, but also to underline the arrival of strategic balance and equilibrium in the subcontinent independent of any external attachments for balance of power.

Vajpayee's visit was also a reaffirmation of the conclusion reached after nuclear tests, that war, as has been known in the region, perhaps will never recur, and that the price of such a war would be horrendous and self-destructive.

Pakistan was to defeat the advantage so gained by the nuclear equilibrium soon after, through a surreptitious, entirely superfluous and unnecessary adventure in Kargil, tearing to pieces the strategic equation of balance and equilibrium on the altar of tactical stupidity and jingoist adventurism. That the nation is still reeling from the aftermath of this inexplicable excursion and persists in a state of imbalance on the back of Pervez Musharraf's decade-long rule is borne by the difficulties staring Pakistan in the face today.

What could have ushered in an era of peace and stability under the balance of a strategic overhang was lost to a coterie that failed to perceive beyond their parochial interest of medieval heroics against an adversary that under a more realistic and changing strategic environment was ready to change course towards a more cooperative and cohabiting arrangement.

The nexus of militancy, extremism and transnational terrorism in a nuclear capable nation has become the most worrying aspect about Pakistan today. The continuing instability portrays Pakistan as an insecure environment for nuclear weapons; not that there is a danger of those falling into the hands of the disruptors – just that what should have accrued strategic stability has become the sine qua non for apprehension and conjecturing.

This has thus become the moment for those opposing Pakistan's status as a nuclear power to reinforce the roots of instability to further heighten anguish and international concern. Other than the threat terrorism might hold by its nature, the war to defeat terrorism has also become the struggle to prove Pakistan's capacity to possess nuclear weapons.

It is a matter of open conjecture that the on-going insurgency in Pakistan's northwest, and the resurgence of trouble in Balochistan has its roots in not insignificant support from India and Afghanistan, perhaps with some Russian elements. The resulting perception of tumult and turmoil again reinforces the big players'

tendency to question Pakistan's credentials as a nuclear power. This becomes evident in the barrage of nuclear related concerns emerging from the American political establishment. It is usual for Pakistanis to domestically assume that the US would, as a final objective, somehow force Pakistan to roll back its nuclear programme.

If taken seriously, it would be a most testing undertaking with a major impact on US-Pakistan relations. It might take the following route: push Pakistan to declare a moratorium on any further expansion of the programme – this shall lay to rest Pakistan's on-going work with the Chinese on nuclear power plants, of which plutonium of fissile capacity is a natural by-product. That such plutonium may be used for miniaturised weapons and enable hybrid payloads will become a source of concern. While Pakistan will need to own such a capability for strategic, operational and deterrence reasons, the world might categorise the effort as proliferation of a different nature.

Thence will begin the long road to goad, coerce and urge a roll back, beginning perhaps with a reduction process as exercised in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty between the United States and Russia. The fact that Pakistan's economy has been put on a drip-feed, and will continue to be regulated disabling major growth and independence, will keep the nation bound to damaging fiscal and economic regimes dictated by international financial institutions. The independence of the economy may then be proposed to be bartered with the elimination of nuclear weapons. While any Pakistani's reaction to such a proposal is quite understandable, we need to know that nations such as South Africa, and to some extent Brazil, have in the past given up their programmes under varying obtaining conditions.

The larger issue for Pakistan will be to exercise enough sovereignty and establish its own datum for minimum credible deterrence; declare that to the world in a clearly enunciated policy, shedding the notion of ambivalence, which is not only archaic but rooted in flawed strategic thinking; achieve the qualitative and quantitative milestones set in her declared programme; and then invite international inspection agencies, such as the IAEA, to inspect her civilian power sites a la India.

Pakistan's enriched Uranium route is a homegrown capability that does not need any international monitoring. However, Pakistan should at the outset assure the global community of zero tolerance in any shape, form or manner of lateral sharing of the nuclear technology, and at an appropriate time choose to sign the NPT. However, for all this, Pakistan must be admitted to the nuclear club, de-facto initially through a treaty enabling assured nuclear materials supplies through the NSG, and then de-jure along with the other new members, India and Israel. Pakistan could subsequently commit to nuclear disarmament when rest of the world, including the P-5, is ready to embrace and ratify the concept.

What may have begun as a quest for equivalence has ultimately gained relevance as strategic balance, ushering in the longest period of no-war, though inept leadership and flawed notions of operational thinking have practically done their utmost to plunge the two nations into war; both Kargil, and the 2002 military stand-off are cases in point. Perhaps, what might appear paradoxically reassuring is the fact that the region has refused to go to war, which is a clear proof that the strategic equilibrium continues to be resilient and can withstand geo-political faux pas. That may be the only silver lining; proponents of limited war under a nuclear over-hang notwithstanding.

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