



Pakistan's nuclear complex: threatening world peace?



Aditi Malhotra

Finally the realisation is dawning that the proposition that because Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is under the exclusive control of the Pakistan Army it is safe and secure and not likely to fall into terrorist hands is fundamentally flawed. Simple arithmetic will prove that since military dictator Gen. Ziaul Haq introduced the imported Saudi brand of Wahabi Salafi-ism as the credo of the armed forces every soldier from the Chief of Army Staff down to the soldier has been dyed in the deepest shade of Islamic fundamentalism. The recent Rand Corporation study has underscored that the Pakistan Army is using the nuclear arsenal to help jihadi operations against India.



South Asia is yet again in the spotlight for its 'enthusiastic' nuclear attitude. With the recent unveiling of China-Pakistan nuclear cooperation, the issue of Pakistan's nuclear security has once again gained momentum. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi proclaimed that post-nuclear summit "the world is comfortable with them" [Pakistan's nuclear assets] and Pakistan "attaches the highest importance to the security of nuclear materials and facilities." Some officials in the West seem to regard their [Pakistan] nuclear assets as safe but it would not be wrong to state that this belief prevails primarily owing to the strategic importance of Pakistan in US's Af-Pak policy. The overriding concern about Pakistan's nuclear security is overtly pronounced in the reports of some Western analysts.

Army-jihad complex

As internal turmoil dominates the political landscape of Pakistan, the criticality about the safety of its nuclear complex needs to be revisited. Pakistan's nuclear discourse has many dimensions and this article will explore certain crucial aspects. Specifically, they are the Army-Jihadi complex, supra-national individuals like A. Q. Khan, intentions of terrorist groups, theft of nuclear material and lastly, assassination of key nuclear commanders.

One of the most (seemingly) comforting arguments lies in the belief that Pakistan's nuclear weapons are safe, purely because they remain under the jurisdiction of the Army. Examining the Pakistani case, there seems to be a serious susceptibility from individuals and factions within the military and intelligence services, who are in cahoots with terrorist groups. What places the vulnerabilities at the peak is the dangerous relationship between the army, intelligence services and the terrorist groups. While a segment of Taliban may be against some sections of Pakistani society; several elements in Taliban continue to maintain a cosy relationship with

the Pakistani Army, especially its intelligence establishment. Therefore, the struggle within the Pakistani Army and the perils of Army-jihadi complex pose a serious security problem for Pakistan's nuclear arsenals.

Zia's legacy

Tracing historical accounts, extreme religious ideas penetrated the military during the rule of General Ziaul Haq, which led to ISI's strong links with religious groups. Extreme Islamisation became a part of Pakistan's foreign policy and was evident with unbound support given to the mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan war.

When the US imposed sanctions on Pakistan for establishing its covert nuclear programme, the young officers of those times bore anti-American sentiments. Additionally, they were most receptive to Islam fundamentalist ideology and anti-Americanism. Unfortunately, those young officers today are two and three-star generals. Taking into account the extreme Islamisation that dominated the army for decades, there is a clear-cut dichotomy in the present demand of a 'moderate Islam' outlook.

The "war on terror" has compelled these same officers to crack down on Islamists. This reaction is obviously something new to the officers who were indoctrinated to support the mujahideen in Afghanistan and then in Kashmir. The allegiance of some officers does remain with the current objectives, while some consider it as anti-Islamic. This is evident by the rising 'bear count' in the armed forces that reflects their strong religious attitude. The case of Khaled Sheikh Mohammed best reflects the connection between terrorist groups and the military. Khaled, the alleged mastermind of 9/11, after escaping many arrests was finally arrested in 2003, at a 'safe house' of a serving army officer with links to Jamaat-i-Islami. For this reason, this dangerous link cannot be forestalled.

Pakistan established the practice of Personnel Reliability Programme (PRP) to weed out terrorist sympathisers and ensure a high degree of reliability among its members. It is stated that any personnel that do not adhere to PRP standards are not allowed access to nuclear facilities. The PRP standards

include religious orientations, personality complications, sexual deviancy etc. Further, the Pakistani Army has introduced the practice of two-man rule system which ascertains that it is mandatory to have at least 2 personnel at a sensitive area at all times. Such preparations are believed to guarantee that no unsound individual gains control of nuclear weapons.

Rogue actors

The practice in itself is commendable and theoretically assures a high degree of security, but its application is questionable. What is not in the public domain is how well these procedures are implemented and if any defectors have ever been identified or removed. It is true that unreliability can crop up in various forms and even if all individuals are not a threat, some are likely to be. The unknown figure is what causes added anxieties and results in severe doubts about Pakistan's claims. According to *Asian News International*, civilians that access highly enriched uranium (HEU) are not scrutinised as thoroughly as the military personnel involved in weaponry operations.

It is important to bear in mind that Pakistan's nuclear evolution relied on illicit nuclear procurements, which reveals its inherent dependence on rogue actors. Therefore, it would become difficult to weed out the inappropriate personnel easily, from a system so deeply entangled with rogue elements. It is partially reassuring that former President Musharraf purged many top and middle level officers of the ISI because of their links to the Taliban or Al Qaeda but it is not unreasonable to believe that none are aware of the actual number of Islamic sympathisers in the military or ISI presently. As the line goes, "Who watches the watchmen?" Allied to the intentions of terrorist groups to employ WMD for mass killing, these connections and links are a cause of grave concern.

The secrecy surrounding Pakistan's nuclear assets and procedures to safeguard them has added to the international unease. Even though the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review focuses on the issue of nuclear terrorism and illicit nuclear trade, little has been done in Pakistan to ensure such regulations. The case of A. Q. Khan is one such





Another major situation involves the fears that fundamentalists could assassinate the most important personnel of nuclear command and control, thus creating a gap in the organisation, making it more vulnerable to unauthorised usage. This fear gained much momentum and weight with three attempted assassinations of Musharraf in 2000, 2003 and 2007

incident. Khan, who was never actually "punished", was kept under house arrest till the Pakistani court recently declared him a 'free citizen' and allowed him to 'move freely and continue his activities'. Dr. Khan, known as the father of Pakistan's nuclear programme, eventually became the ringmaster of a nuclear black market, which was revealed in February 2004.

Musharraf's testimony

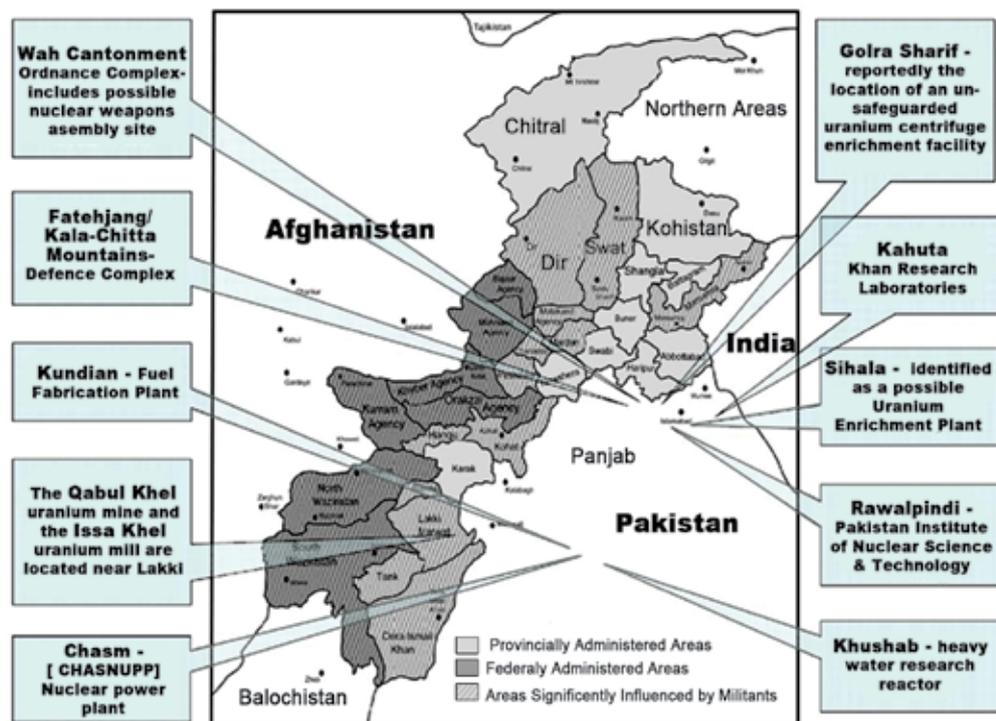
When former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf was questioned on this case, he maintained that the army did not know about such activities. He said, "...if there was some individual who for personal gain wanted to sell national assets ... it could be possible because it was not under strategic checks and controls." The statement reveals a daunting fact. In case the army wasn't aware about the activities (a highly unlikely scenario), it reflects that the army did not exercise serious control over its nuclear establishments. Pakistan remains a serious concern because the black market network established by A. Q. Khan has been instrumental in nuclear proliferation. Most of the States that have relied on this network for their nuclear efforts are prone to instability, viz North Korea, Iran, Libya and allegedly

Myanmar.

However, A. Q. Khan's case is not in isolation. Another example is that of Sultan Mahmood, an Islamist who eventually gave up his position as director of Pakistan's Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC). He reportedly revealed some rough designs of creating a nuclear weapon to Osama bin Laden in 1999. Apart from this case, Prof. Chaudhry Abdul Majeed and Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, two renowned nuclear scientists in the region, with deep religious orientation, have also been involved in leaking nuclear information to the Taliban. These reports contradict Pakistan's

to acquire an atomic bomb. Adding to the scare was a *fatwa* issued by Sheikh Nasir bin Hamid al-Fahd, allowing the use of WMD, even if it involves killings of innocent Muslims.

An important and rather intimidating characteristic of Pakistan's nuclear infrastructure is that major nuclear sites are in close proximity of violence prone regions on their western frontiers. The establishment of the same away from the eastern border was originally intended to minimise the likelihood of an Indian attack on the infrastructure. Unfortunately, this has got the facilities closer to the instable Af-Pak region. These areas remain the hub of terrorist



Source: Shaun Gregory, "The Security of Nuclear Weapons in Pakistan".

continuous pronouncements that their nuclear assets are in safe hands.

WMD's allowed

Another worrying dimension is the intentions of terrorist networks and their reach. Although Al Qaeda has, so far, employed conventional explosives for destruction, reports reveal that they may be willing to employ nuclear weapons for the same. American accounts have reported that Osama bin Laden has declared the possession of nuclear weapons as a religious duty. Furthermore, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has reported about his efforts

activities and sectarian violence in the country.

Dirty bombs

According to the *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, there are approximately 47 terrorist and extremist organisations in Pakistan. While some are involved with strong ties to infiltration into Jammu and Kashmir, others are a part of Pakistan's Taliban with strong ties to Afghanistan's Taliban or foreign jihadis.

Apart from these, there are groups involved in sectarian violence, specifically, insurgents involved in



Baluchistan, Shia / Sunni and Punjabi / Sindhi violence. Consequently, the presence of such groups contributes to security threats to the nuclear facilities. Numerous attempts have been made by terrorist groups to accumulate enough nuclear fuel to create dirty bombs or a nuclear weapon (which is highly unlikely to happen in the near future).

Pakistan is capable of making plutonium and HEU for nuclear use. The potential theft of nuclear fuel directly implies the ease for the terrorists to make a dirty bomb. Pakistan has been unable to account on the quantum of nuclear fissile material within its boundaries. This further leads to worry because without a record of the nuclear material present, it would be difficult to track stolen material (if any). Presently, no available accounts declare that a terrorist group, functioning independent of a government, have the skills to develop a nuclear weapon. Certainly, developing a nuclear weapon is not easy even if the terrorists gather the needed nuclear material. Besides, one cannot deny that outsiders cannot get access to nuclear fissile material. There have, however, been numerous recorded cases of thefts. According to UN agency reports, in 2005 and 2006 alone, there have been more than 250 cases of unauthorised possession, theft or loss of nuclear or related materials reported to the UN IAEA Illicit Trafficking Database (ITDB). Having noted this, it is particularly important for Pakistan to keep a track of its fissile material, strictly monitoring the movements of fuel. There are strong reasons to believe that Pakistan does not have fissile material protection, control and accounting (MPC&A) systems installed at its nuclear facilities. These systems are easily available but seemingly Pakistan neither will be able to afford nor possess the expertise to produce a similar technology.

Control by assassination

Another major situation involves the fears that fundamentalists could assassinate the most important personnel of nuclear command and control, thus creating a gap in the organisation, making it more vulnerable to unauthorised usage. This fear gained much momentum and weight with three attempted assassinations of Musharraf in 2000, 2003 and 2007. All attempts had links to army personnel



and Al Qaeda. Benazir Bhutto's killing is also considered as an evidence of Islamic anger and also points towards the role of Pakistan army.

One cannot ignore that in order to fulfil their plans of eliminating key commanders the fundamentalists will have to resort to simultaneous attacks on numerous commanders. Despite the pattern of previous attacks, eliminating all key leaders seems highly improbable. As mentioned before, many back-up plans and contingency remain untested, therefore adding an element of uncertainty to the scenario. Based on reports, there have been three suicide attacks at, or close to Sargodha Air Base (nuclear weapons and missile storage facilities). Other attacks were in Punjab, NWPF and Wah Cantonment ordnance factory. It is important to note that the sites targeted provided security facilities for Pakistan's nuclear programme. Clearly, Pakistan is at war with itself. In view of the drone attacks in the tribal agencies of Pakistan and the offensives launched by the Pakistani Army, acts of violence by insurgent Taliban forces will continue to escalate and be a source of constant threat for Pakistan's nuclear security.

Dual-key system

It is prudent to consider that no security arrangement is foolproof but Pakistan should adopt measures to minimise its vulnerabilities and direct its efforts to a relatively more

secure nuclear complex. Primarily, it is essential to ensure the existence of stable democratic institutions in the country. Serious efforts should be made to implement a version of 'dual-key system', with a balance of civilian and military participation in it. To facilitate enhanced security, a guardianship system that was once practiced by the US in 1940s should be adopted.

Pakistan should adopt a more rigorous PRP in order to identify their malcontents better. Accordingly, Pakistan should adopt a much more transparent attitude regarding their nuclear doctrine, nuclear assets, PRP defectors etc. This will facilitate its relationship of trust and cooperation with the international community.

Genuine efforts should be directed towards employing internationally trusted systems like the MPC&A. Such systems provide higher guarantee of nuclear safety internally and externally. It is important for Pakistan to practice recessed deterrence and comply with it even under extremely tensed situations. This reduces the chances of any potential theft or unauthorised usage. In the nutshell, Pakistan should not evade the issue of nuclear security but rather work towards a more secure nuclear complex. **D.A**

The writer is a research assistant at Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi.

