



PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR SECURITY: SEPARATING FACT FROM FEAR

Tabir M. Azad

For more than a decade fears have been voiced by the international community at the prospect of Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists or other non-state actors. The author argues, however, that such concerns have been largely overblown and that Pakistan has undertaken commitments and measures to safeguard its arsenal, as was confirmed in last month's nuclear security index published by the Nuclear Threat Initiative.

Since acquiring nuclear weapons capability in 1998, Pakistan has come under the international spotlight because of concerns over the security of its nuclear weapons, while the significant role that they play in maintaining strategic stability in South Asia has been largely overlooked. In fact, nuclear weapons are a source of security and survival for Pakistan, allowing it to pursue a strategy of deterrence vis-à-vis India—one that arguably contributes to preventing a direct confrontation between the two states. Their function in providing stability is often forgotten by the international community that is instead fixated on the dangers of nuclear terrorism—that is, the country's nuclear arsenal falling into the hands of terrorists and non-state actors. It is argued here that such concerns have been largely overblown, and that Pakistan has established sufficient safety and security measures to prevent this from happening. Nonetheless, Pakistan could still do more, not least through an active nuclear diplomacy, to provide assurances to the international community over the safety of its nuclear weapons.

Threats of Nuclear Terrorism

The threat of nuclear terrorism gained particular attention after the events of September 11, 2001, with fears that terrorists could wreak even greater destruction if they gained possession and know-how of nuclear materials. In this regard, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has categorized four potential nuclear security threats: theft of a nuclear weapon; theft of material to make an improvised nuclear explosive device; theft of other radioactive material

for a radiological dispersal device; and sabotage of a facility or transport vehicle. In the specific case of Pakistan and India, a fifth possible scenario has also been elaborated: by carrying out terrorist attacks in India or Pakistan that lend credence to the possibility of state complicity, this may lead to conflict between the states that could even involve nuclear weapons.

In regard to the threats above, Pakistan has been criticized over the safety and security of its nuclear weapons, with the fear that terrorists and other non-state actors may be able to acquire nuclear materials or devices from Pakistan. Elaborating the serious security threats to Pakistan's nuclear weapons, Western security analysts and policy makers have pointed to the weakness of the central government, rising U.S.-Pakistani tensions, and increasing extremist threats from radical Islamists, as well as the fact that terrorist attacks on military installations including suicide bombings have been observed in the last few years, all heightening the perception that Pakistan's nukes are not secure.

It should be borne in mind, however, that the current situation of turmoil in Pakistan is largely attributable to the war in Afghanistan and that the instability engendered is not linked to the safety of Pakistan's nukes per se. It is also the case that regardless of threats, perceived or real, there has not been a credible case of theft from—or the successfully breaching by terrorists of—a nuclear facility in Pakistan. Negative presumptions or false media reporting is unhelpful, and fears over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal should be grounded in fact and not speculation. Further,



there has been a tendency among some observers in recent years to underestimate Pakistan's efforts and commitments.

Measures for Nuclear Security

It is necessary to recognize that ensuring nuclear security is a continuous process and that there is no perfection or final stage in any security system. As the world advances in nuclear technology and weapons, demands placed on security are also increasing which all nuclear power states need to meet. Various nuclear safety and security conventions, treaties, and regimes have been introduced by the IAEA in this regard. The safety of its nuclear weapons is one of Pakistan's core national security interests. It follows the IAEA's nuclear safety and security parameters and has taken the necessary steps to improve security and control of its nuclear weapons. Notably, Pakistan has improved its ranking in the much-cited 2014 Nuclear Materials Security Index published last month by the Nuclear Threat Initiative, with the progress findings stating that Pakistan as the "most improved" country has made efforts to "update its nuclear security regulations and to implement nuclear security best practices."

Indeed, Pakistan's nuclear security culture has evolved during the last decade and its nuclear command and control (C2) system has matured. Accordingly, Pakistan has adopted all advanced and highly developed safety and security measures to safeguard its nuclear weapons. In this regard, for example, it has adopted a Personal Reliability Program (PRP) and Human Reliability Program (HRP) to prevent personnel—who are subject to extensive screening—from being infiltrated by extremists. In terms of security, steps have been made to implement the principle of "multilayered" physical security of nuclear facilities and assets, which involves different tiers of security perimeters around installations. Additionally, Pakistan has a dedicated professional nuclear security force of around 25,000 personnel to protect strategic assets.

In a statement by the head of the Pakistan delegation to the IAEA 57th General Conference in 2013, moreover, it was stated that the "IAEA is providing assistance [to Pakistan] in enhancing physical protection and nuclear security through the establishment of a training infrastructure as well as implementation of security upgrades at nuclear facilities." The U.S. has also expressed positive signals regarding Pakistan's nuclear security management, with senior U.S.

military and government officials stating at various forums that Pakistan's nukes are in safe hands, and that physical protection and training are sufficient and improving.

Conclusions

There is a need for a more nuanced analysis of the real scale of the threat to Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. Nuclear terrorism should be recognized as a global threat and all nuclear weapon states are equally responsible to secure their nuclear assets. While Pakistan has made strident efforts to ensure that its arsenal is safe and secure, the country should focus its efforts more on effective representation in global platforms and so improve its nuclear diplomacy. This should also be allied with sincere global cooperation in advancing Pakistan's efforts to secure its nukes. Finally, in recognizing that continuous efforts need to be made, providing academic scholarships, training, and other opportunities to young Pakistani professionals in the field of nuclear studies will further facilitate exchanges and consolidate a stronger nuclear safety culture both in Pakistan and among the wider nuclear community.

Tabir M. Azad is completing a PhD at the Department of Strategic & Nuclear Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad. A Visiting Fellow at ISDP in 2013, he is currently pursuing a fellowship in the United States as part of the Technical Nuclear Safety and Security Scholar Program.

The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.

© The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2014. This Policy Brief can be freely reproduced provided that ISDP is informed.

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

WEBSITE: WWW.ISDP.EU