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Pakistan's alarming nuclear arsenal

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Its strategic objectives could go way beyond India, to take on Israel and support Saudi Arabia. Besides, nuclear devices could fall into the hands of non-state actors.



Islamabad refuses to adopt a "no first use" policy on nuclear weapons, unlike New Delhi.

Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme has expanded considerably in recent years, far beyond what could be considered a minimum credible deterrent against India.

Key indications are — the rapid expansion in fissile material production, especially plutonium; moving ahead with warhead miniaturisation; development of MIRVs (multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles); and medium range ballistic missiles (MRBM).

Pakistan has also blocked progress on the fissile materials cut-off treaty (FMCT) at the disarmament committee in Geneva, a clear sign that its drive to produce fissile material is in high gear. It benefits from technical and diplomatic support from China for its weapons programme, and has also been involved in smuggling of weapons technology and material to North Korea, Iran, and Libya.

Estimates of the number of nuclear warheads with Pakistan vary considerably, due to the secrecy of its nuclear programme. Some estimates put this figure at 100-120 warheads, probably larger than India, which has to manage a credible minimum deterrent against both China and Pakistan.

Pakistan has also developed and deployed the MRBM Shaheen II with a range of 2,500-3,500 km and payload of 1000 kg. A MIRV system is being developed for this missile.

AXIS WITH SAUDI ARABIA

Pakistan refuses to adopt a "no first use" policy on nuclear weapons, unlike India, thus clearly indicating that nuclear weapons would be used in case of defeat in a conventional war.

Fissile material production capability has been greatly expanded by a second heavy water reactor at Khushab, completed in 2010.

This enables Pakistan to produce enough plutonium for 40-50 warheads per year. In addition, the centrifuge plant at Kahuta has 10,000- 15,000 centrifuges and can produce highly enriched uranium. However, the mainstay of the weapons programme seems to be plutonium weapons (requiring only 2-4 kg of plutonium), miniaturised to fit on missiles and boosted with tritium to enhance yields by three to four times.

Given the size of Pakistan's nuclear and missile programme, experts have speculated that its strategic objectives could go way beyond India, to respond to perceived threats from Israel, Iran, and to include nuclear umbrella protection to other states such as Saudi Arabia, with which Pakistan has very close military, political, and religious linkages. In 2003, reports emerged about a secret nuclear cooperation agreement between Pakistan and Saudi

Arabia. In 1986, Saudi Arabia acquired 36 CSS-2 intermediate range ballistic missiles from China, which could be used for delivering nuclear weapons.

Recently it was reported that Pakistan had sold two nuclear warheads to Saudi Arabia, kept separately under heavy guard in Pakistani bases for possible use in future, as well as Ghauri II Missiles with a range of 2300 km. These could provide Saudi Arabia with a deterrent against a nuclear Iran. Given the strong strategic, military, and political relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, this type of cooperation would be seen as mutually beneficial. Financial support from Saudi Arabia for Pakistan's nuclear programme would also be an added benefit.

Weapons transfer

There is a precedent for such weapons transfers. The US has deployed hundreds of nuclear warheads in Europe, despite having signed the NPT. The arguments advanced were that this averted a nuclear arms development by European states, and did not violate the NPT, since the weapons remained under control of US personnel. Pakistan could follow the same route with Saudi Arabia, keeping the weapons on its soil.

Israel's strong capability in nuclear weapons, delivery systems, and anti-missile defensive systems and space-based platforms, make it more than a match for Pakistan in terms of nuclear deterrent.

However, the development of miniature warheads makes it possible for these to be smuggled and delivered by unconventional means, including by hard core terrorist elements. Such action could be denied by the Pakistani state, as happened with the Mumbai attacks. Here is where the real menace of Pakistan's nuclear programme lies.

Extremist elements such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and supporters of Al Qaeda have steadily eaten into the vitals of the Pakistani state. They have also infiltrated the military establishment, and have spread out into Pakistan's heartland.

The recent brazen killings of moderate political figures, the violent reactions to Osama Bin Laden's killing, and the daring attack on PNS Mehran naval base near Karachi, are a stark warning of things to come.

NON-STATE ACTORS

However confident the Pakistan military might be over security of nuclear materials and warheads, there is a very strong motivation and incentive for non-state actors to acquire a few nuclear weapons. This can be prevented by increased security, or by storing the warheads in disassembled and dispersed form. But this does not seem possible given the tensions with India and the nuclear deterrent scenario existing between China, India and Pakistan.

Indian policy makers should look at possible scenarios involving use of nuclear weapons by Pakistan against Indian targets, and take steps to protect its civil population. Even very basic civil defence measures against nuclear attacks can reduce civilian casualties and suffering considerably. However, there is no sign of any concrete measures being taken by the government in this direction.

With the rapid increase and sophistication and build up of nuclear warheads with the military establishment in Pakistan, there is always a risk that such devices may fall into the hands of non-state actors, or renegade extremist actors working for their own agendas within the state organs.

The international community would do well to consider how to deal with such a threat.

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