

## Addressing Pakistan's Atomisation

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## **Summary**

Recent milestones in Pakistan's nuclear arsenal expansion coincide with a growing governance crisis in its domestic politics. New efforts from Pakistan's elected government to robustly anchor the social base of the state could create resources for strengthening civilian governance and the underlying social fabric. This could in turn provide a strong foundation for eventual domestic decisions to restrain Pakistan's military nuclear ambitions. Nuclear force development is at present an attractive means for Pakistan to attract international political and financial assistance, while salving the paranoias of its security establishment. Improvement in the state-society relationship could reduce the domestic appeal of endless nuclear expansion as other, more sustainable, resources become available to the state for building economic growth and security. In the wake of national elections this spring, Pakistani politicians should be considering ways to advance this objective when in office.

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## Atomic Aspirations

Pakistan has embarked on a route of vertical proliferation of nuclear weapons hitherto unseen anywhere else in the world. While all states and especially the big two – the United States and Russia – are reducing their nuclear arsenals, Pakistan is making concerted efforts to increase both the quantity and quality of its nuclear and missile capabilities. According to reports by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists and US Congressional Research Service, Pakistan has the world's fifth largest nuclear arsenal and is projected to expand beyond that of France in a few years.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, Pakistan has graduated from the less sophisticated uranium-based weapons design to more miniaturised and lethal plutonium-based warheads. Pakistan has also reportedly mastered the art of fission-boosted fusion devices, while it may have supplied the device design for a recent nuclear test conducted by North Korea.<sup>2</sup> If that is the case, a Pakistani thermonuclear capability may not be far behind.

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<sup>1</sup> Kristensen, Hans M. and Norris, Robert S. (2011), "Nuclear Notes: Pakistan's Nuclear Forces, 2011", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, available at <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/features/nuclear-notebook-pakistans-nuclear-forces-2011>; Kerr, Paul K. and Nikitin, Mary Beth (2013), "Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons: Proliferation and Security Issues", Congressional Research Service, available at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL34248.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Karnad, Bharat (2011), "NoKO/Pak H-Bomb test superior to India's S1", SecurityWise, available at <http://bharatkarnad.com/2013/02/12/nokopak-h-bomb-test-superior-to-indian-s-1/>. Though Karnad's claims might be exorbitant, many analysts the world over see a proliferation pattern flowing from Pakistan to North Korea. See Albright, David (2013), "North Korean Miniaturization", 38North, US-Korea Institute, School of Advanced International Studies, John Hopkins University, available at <http://38north.org/2013/02/albright021313/>. Even officials of the Indian Government, immediately after the February 12 tests by North Korea, made similar allegations. See Bagchi, Indrani and Parashar, Sachin, "India sees Pakistani Hand in North Korean Nuclear Tests",

However, what is more disturbing for the world community is Pakistan's drive to acquire and store more and more weapon-useable fissile materials. According to the International Panel on Fissile Materials, Pakistan, on top of the 90 to 110 warheads which it currently has in its nuclear inventory, has acquired fissile material for an additional 100 warheads, taking its overall nuclear capability to well over 200 weapons. Fissile material for a further 25 to 27 warheads may also be generated by the two new plutonium-based reactors being constructed by China at the Khusabh complex.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore not without adequate reason that *Reaching Critical Will*, an international NGO working on nuclear disarmament, has estimated Pakistan's nuclear costs to be around \$2.5 billion annually.<sup>4</sup>

This vertical proliferation is accompanied by an ever-increasing capability in delivery vehicles. Pakistan today boasts of a plethora of missiles which can even put its nuclear arch-enemy India to shame. Whereas India has been notably slow in building missile delivery vehicles despite embarking on a comprehensive missile development programme in 1983, Pakistan has developed an impressive spectrum of missiles in the last two decades. Its medium-range ballistic missiles have a maximum range of 2500 kilometres, able to strike anywhere in Indian territory. Unlike India, which is slowly commissioning its Agni series of medium-range missiles for military use, Pakistan has already completed this task. In other words, Pakistan is much more operationally prepared for deterrent emergencies than India.

Furthermore, Pakistan has developed missile capabilities for delivering low-yield, very small nuclear warheads (also known as tactical nuclear weapons) with the demonstration of its Hatf series of short-range missiles.<sup>5</sup> What this augurs is that not only is Pakistan ready to deter India's nuclear weapons by the logic of punishment, it is also preparing itself to deter India by the logic of denial - any benefits accruing from Indian conventional military forays into Pakistani territory would be denied by the use of small battlefield nuclear weapons.

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Times News Network, available at [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-02-13/india/37078312\\_1\\_functional-nuclear-warhead-nuclear-test-clandestine-proliferation](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-02-13/india/37078312_1_functional-nuclear-warhead-nuclear-test-clandestine-proliferation). Some analysts also see similarity in the nuclear testing techniques of North Korea and Pakistan. See Pabian, Frank V. and Hecker, Siegfried S. (2012), "Contemplating a third nuclear test by North Korea", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, available at <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/features/contemplating-third-nuclear-test-north-korea>.

<sup>3</sup> Country Reports, International Panel on Fissile Material, available at <http://fissilematerials.org/countries/pakistan.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Acheson, Ray (eds.) (2012) *Assuring Destruction Forever: Nuclear Weapon Modernization around the World*, Reaching Critical Will, available at <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/news/latest-news/5713-new-publication-from-rcw-on-nuclear-modernization>.

<sup>5</sup> Joshi, Shashank (2013), "New Year, New Problems? Pakistan's Tactical Nukes", *The Diplomat*, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2013/01/02/pakistans-new-nuclear-problem/>.

## Understanding Pakistan's Nuclear Logic

The fact that Pakistan sees its nuclear weapons as a cheap and affordable way to ensure its national security is not surprising at all. All nuclear weapons states procured nuclear weapons and sustained their nuclear arsenals with the same intention in mind. Pakistan is clearly motivated by increasing discrepancies of military capability and economic strength between itself and India. High levels of economic growth in the last two decades have catapulted India into a select group of states with system-influencing capabilities. This economic growth has also fuelled a high level of military modernisation. For Pakistan's military leaders, this up-gradation of India's military capabilities, combined with aggressive military doctrines such as the "Cold Start" – a strategy comprising of limited blitzkrieg thrusts inside Pakistan to occupy small areas of its territory before any resistance could be mobilised – is a strategic nightmare. Nuclear weapons, especially given Pakistan's dire fiscal position, provide an easy way out of the difficult situation of balancing India weapon to weapon. There is also one other advantage: by linking the conventional to the nuclear, Pakistani strategists have been able to seed the kernel of doubt in India's leadership of the political utility of any kind of use of force against Pakistan, insofar as it could lead to a nuclear exchange.<sup>6</sup>

The growth of nuclear weapons in Pakistan is also linked to the pursuance of strategic technologies by India and the latter's acceptance in the mainstream of advanced nuclear technology states. Pakistan feels or at least rationalises that the deterrent value of its nuclear arsenal is undermined by India's ballistic missile defence (BMD) programme. In other words, if an Indian BMD system were to be deployed, India would be less concerned about the use of nuclear weapons by Pakistan and hence will become relatively more aggressive; a situation Pakistan wants to avoid at all costs.<sup>7</sup> One way to do this is to increase the nuclear arsenal so that India's BMD could be overwhelmed. The Indo-US nuclear deal, on the other hand, allowed India to import both nuclear material and technology from other states. For Pakistan, this allows India to embark on a path of massive vertical proliferation as its domestic sources of uranium could now be channelled to weapons laboratories rather than its energy producing nuclear reactors; under the deal India can import uranium from other nuclear supplier states for energy purposes.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Khan, Feroz Hasan and Lavoy, Peter R. (2008), "Pakistan: The Dilemma of Nuclear Deterrence", in Alagappa, Muthiah (eds.) *The Long Shadow: Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Asia*, Stanford University Press: Stanford.

<sup>7</sup> Joshi, Yogesh and Sinha, Alankrita (2012) "India and Ballistic Missile Defence: From Practice to Theory", *Nuclear Notes*, 2 (1): 25-31. available at [http://csis.org/files/publication/120529\\_Spies\\_NuclearNotes2\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/120529_Spies_NuclearNotes2_Web.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> The former Pakistani Ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament made this linkage during the discussions on the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty. "Pakistan warns against India Nuclear Support", *The Dawn*, 25 January 2011. Available at <http://dawn.com/2011/01/25/pakistan-warns-against-india-nuclear-support/>.

Although the above security rationales are used by the Pakistani government to justify nuclear force development, what is disturbing is that it treats nuclear weapons not only as a deterrent to ensure its national security. It also is increasingly using these weapons as mechanisms to coerce other states in realising its national aspirations.

Without taking into account the coercive role of nuclear weapons in Pakistan's strategic calculus, the logic of its expanding nuclear arsenal is difficult to grasp. First, nuclear weapons allow Pakistan to keep the option of assimilating Kashmir into its fold even when, conventionally speaking, the power of the Indian state continues to grow in comparison to Pakistan's. This strategy also allows Pakistan to continue its support for armed insurgencies in India, especially in the troubled region of Kashmir. By claiming that any use of force at the conventional level would lead to the use of nuclear weapons, Pakistan has been able to thwart any attempts by India to sanction its support to the terrorists in Kashmir, as well as in India's troubled north. Paul Kapur has called this situation the instability-instability paradox.<sup>9</sup> Pakistan's implicit threat to turn any bilateral tensions over Kashmir into a nuclear crisis also aims to compel international involvement in the Kashmir issue that it desperately seeks in order to counterbalance Indian conventional advantages. The growth in numbers of nuclear weapons clearly sends a signal that Pakistan is still far from detaching itself from the cause of annexing Kashmir.

Second, Pakistan's nuclear arsenal provides it with a strategic leverage in a context of domestic chaos and poor economic performance. Pakistan's international profile has taken a beating in the last two decades because of its record in exporting nuclear technology to rogue states and terrorism to more stable and prosperous states. In such a scenario, the threat of nuclear weapons in the hands of a state whose authority is rapidly deteriorating poses a significant challenge to the world community and, therefore, creates a special global interest in the country's overall wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, this provides Pakistan a similar strategic heft that it enjoyed during the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan and during the war against al-Qaeda. And as the US troops in Afghanistan make their final exit by the end of next year, this strategic calculus will become more pronounced in Pakistan's foreign policy strategy. The government is gradually realising the limits of its influence in Afghanistan as the 2014 handover approaches, and the recent accord by President Zardari and President Karzai can be seen as a Pakistani attempt to

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<sup>9</sup> Kapur, Paul S. (2007), *Dangerous Deterrent: Nuclear Weapons Proliferation and Conflict in South Asia*. Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Joshi, Yogesh "Understanding Pakistan Nuclear Rationale" (May 2011), *ISN International Relations and Security Network Insights*, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich, available at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/ISNInsights/Detail?lng=en&id=129548&contextid734=129548&contextid735=129547&tabid=129547>.

bargain for leverage with its neighbour.<sup>11</sup> The weakness of other strategic tools at Pakistan's disposal, as is becoming increasingly apparent to its security establishment, will encourage continued reliance on its nuclear backstop. Continued nuclear expansion to compel international largesse in financial assistance and political conciliation, rather than efforts to address the deeper causes of Pakistan's security concerns, thus appears set to continue.

Pakistan's increasing nuclear capabilities are also a result of the power struggle within the domestic political structure, especially between the civilian leadership and their military counterparts. Curiously, in the eyes of the international community, which otherwise views the Pakistan army as an obstacle to the nurturing of democracy in the country, the security and safety of nuclear weapons could only be ascertained by a strong military.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the Pakistan army understands fully well that nuclear weapons and their custody legitimises its continued interference in domestic political affairs. And as the arsenal grows both in numbers and lethality, the role of the military would become more and more entrenched in the system. An expanding nuclear force would eventually lead to the nuclearisation of Pakistan's polity and civil-military relations, as the nuclear force demands an increasing proportion of the state budget and crowds out other public policy needs.

However, the dangerous side of this dynamic is the fact that unlike in other states with nuclear weapons, the military in Pakistan overpowers the civilian leadership on the issue of nuclear weapons and their potential use or the threat of use. Kargil and Operation Parakram are cases in point where the military, either independent of or even sometimes in conjunction with the civilian leadership, issued clear nuclear threats.

Curtailing the military's growing dominance of public policy, with the nuclear force a core military means toward this end, is not an easy undertaking for the elected civilian government. However, the consequences of permitting the current trajectory to continue – threatening the prospects for Pakistan's economic development, state consolidation, and social peace by diverting resources to the military nuclear programme – are becoming increasingly visible. Building a stronger state-society connection offers the best means to reverse this process. The domestic problems presently facing the elected government underline the urgency of this task.

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<sup>11</sup> *The Economist*, "A Decent Interval", February 9, 2013, available at <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21571436-pakistani-co-operation-hints-peace-afghanistan-decent-interval>.

<sup>12</sup> Kerr, Paul K. and Nikitin, Mary Beth (2013), "Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons: Proliferation and Security Issues", Congressional Research Service available at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL34248.pdf>.

## Domestic Frictions

Pakistan's destabilising nuclear projects take place in a context of unprecedented internal instability. While managing the multilateral tensions generated by Pakistan's vertical nuclear proliferation, the government must also contend with the ambivalence of the judiciary and military toward its own survival, weakening economic prospects, and growing domestic insecurity. Developing realistic measures to target these sources of Pakistan's wider security morass should be a primary concern for the government. Progress on these fronts, in improving Pakistan's overall security perceptions, is also necessary for efforts to limit Pakistan's nuclear expansion to succeed.

The government presently confronts, at an institutional level, a tripartite standoff between itself, the judiciary and the military, as all three manoeuvre to protect their interests and maximise leverage over each other. At the societal level, it appears unable to control security outcomes in large swathes of the country, stimulating social frustrations and opposition. The state is further distanced from society by the loose social moorings of its fiscal base, hindering the emergence of a strong taxation-and-representation dialectic in legitimising state activities. A strong effort from the government to address these issues would likely reduce the domestic appeal of nuclear weapons, as other methods of state consolidation became available to it and public policy became more reflective of social needs rather than primarily those of the military.

To give a picture of the current domestic context, the Qadri episode of January 2013 encapsulates the present governance difficulties in Pakistan. Muhammed Tahir ul-Qadri, an enigmatic Sunni cleric, organised mass protests in Islamabad demanding the dissolution of the government and parliament; involvement of the army and judiciary in forming a caretaker administration; and for the caretaker administration to pass electoral reform laws guaranteeing fair elections. A day after Qadri's protests began, the Supreme Court launched its latest broadside against the government, ordering the arrest of Prime Minister Ashraf for refusing to reopen a corruption case against President Zardari. After a few days of paralysis, the government agreed for Qadri to play a role in naming members of the eventual caretaker administration before national elections this spring. Throughout this crisis, the military maintained an ominous silence.<sup>13</sup>

The agreement with Qadri represented a short-term patch that does little to improve the underlying conditions of political instability. Qadri was rewarded with an official advisory role in forming the caretaker administration, a status he obtained through media self-aggrandisement rather than the democratic electoral influence he ostensibly supports.

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<sup>13</sup> Jahanzeb Aslam, "Pakistan and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Week", *Foreign Affairs* website, January 15 2013, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/135958>.

Rumours abounded of military support, implicit or explicit, for Qadri in the service of weakening the civilian government.<sup>14</sup> The Supreme Court arrest warrant, compounding the crisis, emanates from a broader campaign by the judiciary to erase the stain of its collusion in legitimising the Musharraf dictatorship, and to demonstrate its independence by opposing most activities of the elected government.<sup>15</sup> New efforts by the elected government to communicate the risks of continued destabilising brinkmanship to the military and judiciary are needed to prevent such episodes recurring.

This political instability coincides with growing domestic insecurity. The Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Sunni extremist group, at one time linked to the military intelligence services, appears free to threaten the Hazara Shia community in Quetta with impunity. The group issued a letter in 2012 demanding that all Hazaras leave Quetta by the end of the year or face death, and seems intent upon carrying out its promise. A snooker hall bombing on January 10 killed 96 people, mainly Hazaras, adding to the 400 Pakistani Shias who died last year in various domestic terrorist attacks. A second bombing on February 16 claimed at least 80 lives. The recent detention of the group's leader, Malik Ishaq, appears a half-hearted gesture by the state to suggest that it is responding to societal concerns.<sup>16</sup>

Internal tensions abound. Federal rule and a greater military presence have been established in Balochistan. The Provincially Administrated Tribal Areas, hosting militant groups affiliated to the Pakistani Taliban, also remain restive. The situation has degraded to the extent that the military is evincing increasing interest in subconventional warfare as necessary both to pacify unstable areas and protect its own institutional position as the defender of Pakistan's territorial cohesion. As an army officer commented to a Pakistani newspaper, "Pakistan's armed forces were trained for conventional warfare but the current security situation necessitated the change...Forces fighting on the front-line in the tribal regions are now being trained according to the requirements of subconventional warfare."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Arif Rafiq, "Coup Season", *Foreign Policy* website, January 16, 2013, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/01/16/coup\\_season\\_pakistan\\_Tahir\\_ul\\_Qadri](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/01/16/coup_season_pakistan_Tahir_ul_Qadri).

<sup>15</sup> Aqil Shah, "Derailing Democracy in Islamabad", *Foreign Affairs* website, January 17, 2013, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/135009>.

<sup>16</sup> Asad Hashim, "Pakistan's Hazara Shias Living Under Siege", *AlJazeera* website, January 18, 2013, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/2013117124512947691.html>; Declan Walsh, "Sunni Leader Arrested Over Sectarian Attacks in Pakistan", *New York Times*, February 22, 2013, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/23/world/asia/sunni-leader-arrested-over-sectarian-attacks-in-pakistan.html?\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/23/world/asia/sunni-leader-arrested-over-sectarian-attacks-in-pakistan.html?_r=2&).

<sup>17</sup> The Express Tribune staff, "New Doctrine: Army Identifies 'Homegrown Militancy' as Biggest Threat", *The Express Tribune*, January 3, 2013, available at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/488362/new-doctrine-army-identifies-homegrown-militancy-as-biggest-threat/>.



However, a military-only strategy will only go so far in this context. Sustained political attention to prioritise stabilising and incorporating restive areas and populations into the national polity, and halt this tearing of the social fabric, is essential for Pakistan's future prospects as a peaceable, economically growing and cohesive country.

## Improving the State-Society Relationship

The Pakistani state also lacks a sustainable fiscal footing. Pakistan has not met its budget deficit target of 4.7 per cent of GDP since 2008-9, running an average deficit of 6.65 per cent since then. To plug the gap, the government mainly borrows from the central bank and commercial banks, driving up inflation. A further problem is the extremely narrow tax base. In a population of 180 million, only 768,000 people – less than one per cent – paid income tax in 2011.<sup>18</sup> The Pakistan Business Council laments that “Pakistan's narrow tax base and largely undocumented economy are twin problems that have constrained the economic development for the past six decades”.<sup>19</sup>

To extend the tax base, the government is suggesting a widespread amnesty, with a donation of \$400 enough to forgive outstanding tax liabilities and reduced tax assessments for the first two years.<sup>20</sup> This and other creative initiatives to resolving the weak taxation links between the society and state, as an essential foundation of democratic politics, should be pursued by the administration. A weak state-society dialectic creates a political vacuum for al-Qadri and other malignant actors to fill.

Instead of addressing these issues, the Pakistani polity appears comfortable to permit the seemingly endless growth of its nuclear force. Nuclear expansion compels the international community to offer political and financial aid to Pakistan to bridge its internal contradictions. This dependence is unsustainable, as Pakistan's domestic problems deepen. Proceeding in this direction will entail continued nuclearisation and the erosion of the ability and will of the elected government to resolve the social and fiscal problems that threaten Pakistan's cohesion.

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<sup>18</sup> Imran Ali Kundi, “Govt May Revise Up Deficit Target”, *The Nation*, January 4, 2013, available at <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/business/04-Jan-2013/govt-may-revise-up-deficit-target>; *The Economist*, “Plugging Leaks, Poking Holes”, December 8, 2012, available at <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21567999-who-will-pay-pakistans-state-plugging-leaks-poking-holes>.

<sup>19</sup> Pakistan Business Council, “General Economic Initiatives and Advocacy”, Pakistan Business Council website, 2013, available at <http://www.pbc.org.pk/initiative/broadening-of-tax-base.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Anna Yukhananov, “Pakistan Needs Broader Tax Base, Fewer Subsidies: IMF Board”, *Reuters* website, November 29, 2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/assets/print?aid=USBRE8AS12N20121129>.

The administration should initiate efforts to reconnect the Pakistani state to society, including: improving domestic security and making it more responsive to local concerns; highlighting to the military and judiciary the destabilising consequences of perpetuating a tripartite standoff with the administration; and expanding the tax base. Only from this process will the Pakistani state develop the domestic resources for national survival that raise the comparative costs of nuclear arsenal development as an alternate strategy for resource accrual. This eventuality would provide the firmest foundation for a future Pakistani strategy involving nuclear restraint to take root.

Bold ventures from the administration are required to start this process, and Pakistani politicians should be considering options along these lines to implement following the national elections this spring. If the civilian administration finds the political will to implement these measures, the atomisation of Pakistan's institutions and society can be gradually reversed.