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Pakistan's Nuclear Labyrinth and the Future of Democratization

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Pakistan is on the verge of a historic moment. For the first time in its national existence, a civilian government completed a full term of office in March of this year. A caretaker government is now administering the country until new elections are held this May. Many argue that if all goes well, successful national elections and a smooth power transition would help ensure that democratization is progressing in a country which has hitherto been ruled mostly by its generals.

However, democracy or no democracy, one trend which continues to unnerve the international community is Pakistan's nuclear program. The country reportedly has the world's fifth largest nuclear arsenal and it is projected to expand beyond that of France in the next few years. But this vertical proliferation is not only quantitative in nature; it is also qualitative, insofar as Pakistan is slowly but steadily diversifying the fissile base of its nuclear arsenal from uranium to plutonium. Plutonium-based weapons, unlike uranium ones, are more suitable for miniaturization because they require less fissile material. It also allows for both better concealment and swifter movement of nuclear arsenals.

The fact that Pakistan is seeking to increase its stocks of fissile materials—plutonium and uranium—is another disturbing factor. According to the International Panel on Fissile Materials, Pakistan currently has enough fissile materials for 100 to 110 nukes over and above the 80-90 weapons in its nuclear arsenal. Also, once two heavy water reactors under construction at the Khusabh complex reach completion, Pakistan will have the additional capacity to produce enough plutonium for 25 warheads annually. China's assistance in building these reactors underlines its continuing support for perpetuating Pakistan's nuclear standoff with India.

These destabilizing nuclear projects take place amidst a time of unprecedented internal instability. The government presently confronts, at an institutional level, a tripartite standoff between itself, the judiciary and the military, as all three maneuver to protect their interests and maximize leverage over each other. Furthermore, Pakistan's civilian government appears unable to control security in large parts of the country provoking social frustration and political opposition. Growing domestic insecurity highlights the dangers in perpetuating the current governance problems where militant groups are free to operate with apparent impunity, especially in attacking minority religious groups. Sustained political attention to stabilize and incorporate restive areas and populations into the national polity is essential for Pakistan's future prospects as a peaceable, economically growing and cohesive country.

Pakistan also lacks a sustainable fiscal base; a major problem for the government is the extremely narrow tax base within the country. From a population of 180 million, only

Yogesh Joshi, Ph.D Candidate at Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Frank O'Donnell, Ph.D Candidate at King's College London, explain that "The paradox for the international community is that a strong military ensures the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, even when that same force is the biggest obstacle to a lasting democracy."

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768,000 people—less than one percent of the population—paid income tax in 2011. Resolving the weak taxation links between society and the state, as an essential foundation of democratic politics, has to be one of the top reforms for any government. A weak state-society dialectic creates a political vacuum for malignant and destabilizing actors to fill, all too evident in Pakistan. Instead of addressing these issues, the Pakistani polity appears comfortable in moving forward in the expansion of its nuclear arsenal, no matter the cost to society.

Pakistan’s nuclear weapons are no doubt inspired by the logic of deterrence. Pakistani elites believe that they face an existential threat from India, their arch-rival and neighbor. However, the continued build-up of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal cannot be understood from the logic of deterrence alone; Pakistan also coercively utilizes its nuclear arsenal for other means. First, it threatens nuclear retaliation against any Indian attempt to punish Pakistan for its assistance and abetment of terrorism in its territory. By doing so, Pakistan has effectively challenged India’s ability and will to kinetically respond to any state-sponsored acts of terrorism which are planned and supported from inside Pakistan, even though India’s conventional forces are quantitatively and qualitatively superior to those of Pakistan. Secondly, Pakistan’s growing nuclear arsenal provides it with strategic heft internationally: 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 well-being. Generous donations and grants from the International Monetary Fund and the United States are influenced, in part, by the fear of a nuclear Pakistan disintegrating.

However, beyond strategic considerations, the curious fact is that Pakistan’s growing nuclear arsenal is also influenced by the internal power struggles between civilian elites and members of the military. The paradox for the international community is that a strong military ensures the safety of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal, even when that same force is the biggest obstacle to a lasting democracy. The military understands this dynamic, and leverages its custody of nuclear weapons to interfere in domestic politics. There can be little doubt that as Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal increases, the role of the military will only become more pronounced. This tendency threatens the ultimate potential of Pakistan’s democratization.

It is not without reason that President Barack Obama considers Pakistan to be the single biggest threat to US national security. However, Washington’s ability to force Pakistan to do a course correction is extremely limited. The blowback from the Kerry-Lugar bill, which contained several conditions in return for US aid, encountered in Pakistan is a case in point. Secondly, Islamabad has fundamentally lost faith in the United States after the US-India nuclear deal was signed without a similar agreement being offered to Pakistan. Lastly, the perception of a declining United States and a rising China has taken a strong hold in the Pakistani narrative. The most recent case in point is the commencement of construction on the Iran-Pakistan pipeline.

The champions of democracy in Pakistan should therefore remain extremely wary. As the Arab Spring has revealed, democracy is no miracle cure for long held societal animosities. However, Pakistan’s government must at least prioritize expanding the tax base to reconnect the state to society. Only from this process will the state develop sustainable domestic resources for its existence, which will also inherently raise the comparative costs of nuclear arsenal development as an alternate strategy for state survival. Building the state’s fiscal base would also likely reduce the domestic appeal of nuclear weapons, as public policy became more reflective of social needs rather than primarily those of the military. Washington should emphasize this point to Islamabad, encouraging these state consolidation efforts as essential for Pakistan’s internal and external security.

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