

# ISAS Brief

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## **The South Asian Nuclear Genie: Out of the Bottle, It can be Useful**

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When the South Asian nuclear genie got out of the bottle in May 1998, with both India and Pakistan overtly conducting nuclear tests, there was much consternation, in particular, at the Conference on Disarmament. A permanent forum of the United Nations based in Geneva, the Conference on Disarmament is the only inter-governmental negotiating forum on disarmament. The author was then the Bangladesh Ambassador to this body.

Being a regional member of the Conference of Disarmament, the current nuclear-weapon states (NWS) expected Bangladesh to lead off the protests. Instead, Bangladesh urged calm upon the outcry. After all, India and Pakistan were not the first two countries to have nuclear weapons but rather the seventh and the eighth (after the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China and Israel) and there was no reason to believe that these would be any less safe in the hands of heirs to an ancient civilisation. Also, neither party had signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and, as such, no commitments were broken. To date, it appears that Bangladesh's confidence has not been misplaced.

This does not mean, however, that the situation does not warrant careful monitoring and a modicum of wariness. After all, the South Asian region has seen a number of wars in recent times and has widely been acknowledged as a flash point. It is also true that the more the weapons spread, both horizontally and vertically (that is, both in terms of the number of countries, and in the improvement in technology and fresh additions to existing arsenals), mathematically, the chances of usage will rise. It is a matter worth noting that while the NWS opposed the spread of nuclear capability horizontally, they were continually adding to their armouries and sharpening precision, thereby engaging in vertical proliferation all the time. Bangladesh believed then, as it does now, that the global community must accept the realities on the ground and try to create a framework that would preclude the occurrence of a nuclear mishap.

Between India and Pakistan, the Indian capabilities are, not unexpectedly, greater. While the actual size of the Indian stockpile is debatable, it is generally estimated to be between 45 and 100 warheads, 75 percent of which are reportedly maintained in assembled form and the

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balance in unassembled form. However, India has the capacity to rapidly expand the arsenal as some suggest it is already doing. According to some reports, Pakistan has approximately 60 warheads and counting. For enhanced security, these are stored unassembled, with the fissile core separated from the non-nuclear explosives, and all components are distinct from delivery vehicles. While Pakistan has used mostly highly enriched uranium for its weapons, it also continues to pursue the production of plutonium.

India's delivery capability is by far superior. It is also necessary to be so because, apart from Pakistan, China has also to be factored into the calculations, for which long-distance ballistic missiles are an appropriate system. Besides, many in India see this as an appendage to its perception of being a global military power, just like its aspirations of being a blue-water navy.

Former Indian President, Dr Abdul Kalam, led the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme for a comprehensive range of missiles that are capable of hitting near, distant and varied targets. Some of these are *Agni* (surface-to-surface missiles), *Akash* (surface-to-air missiles), *Trishul* (surface-to-air missiles) and *Nag* (anti-tank missiles). While India currently lacks ballistic missile submarines, it is looking to becoming a 'Triad' country soon, with nuclear capability on land, air and sea. It has sufficiently adequate aircrafts to take on closer-at-hand Pakistani targets.

Pakistan is less ambitious and disavows great power aspirations, though it is pleased to be seen as a powerful regional state actor. Unlike in the Indian case, China is not a factor in the Pakistan nuclear equation. It is, in fact, widely believed that Pakistan had considerable Chinese assistance in the development of its nuclear weapon potentials. For these reasons, a less advanced delivery system suffices for its purpose. It has nuclear-capable F-16 aircrafts which have been retrofitted for the purpose. Also, the medium-range *Ghauri* missiles, which, according to such Pakistan's scientists as the now-disgraced Dr A. Q. Khan, would be preferable for targets in India because of the possible fallout effects for Pakistan of shorter range missiles. By the way, Pakistan also possesses these shorter-range missiles.

Incidentally, the naming of the missiles were said to reflect historical rivalry between the two countries. The *Ghauri* is named after an early Muslim Afghanistan conqueror of India whereas the indigenous Hindu prince who gave him battle was called *Prithvi Raj*. The term *Prithvi* also means 'earth'. It is worthwhile mentioning that Pakistanis take some pride at the perceived heightened prestige of their country being the only Muslim nation with the capability and, at one time, the late Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, looking into the future, called it the 'Islamic bomb'.

India has a publicly-pronounced nuclear doctrine, stated albeit briefly, in a document published by the Indian External Affairs Ministry in January 2003. It says that India seeks 'minimum credible deterrent'. Of course, given a wider spread of potential adversaries, the expression assumes a different capability than is the case with Pakistan, whose officials expound the same principle. In other words, India would require greater firepower. The Indian position is reflected in the following elements:

- a) 'no first use' and 'no use' against a non-nuclear weapon state unless there is a major attack against Indian forces using biological or chemical weapons;
- b) civil control by the Prime Minister; and

- c) nuclear retaliation against a first strike which is massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage.

The Indian Nuclear Command Authority is composed of a Political Council chaired by the Prime Minister and empowered to authorise the use of nuclear weapons, and an Executive Council chaired by the National Security Advisor. The arsenal is generally believed to be well protected.

Given the overwhelming conventional superiority of the Indian armed forces, Pakistan eschews the 'no-first-use' doctrine. The Pakistani posture is somewhat akin to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's 'trip-wire' principle during the Cold War, that is, nuclear retaliation would follow if the Warsaw Pact tanks or forces 'tripped the wire' by rolling into West Germany. Indeed, Pakistan does not have a declared doctrine following the logic that the ambiguity would enhance deterrence. However at a lecture in Monterey, California, in November 2006, the Director-General of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division, Lieutenant-General Khalid Kidwai, said that Pakistan would always act with 'restraint and responsibility'. He added that the four salient features of its policy would be:

- a) deterrence of 'all forms of external aggression' (which means including conventional attacks);
- b) ability to deter a counter-strike against strategic assets;
- c) stabilisation of strategic deterrence in the South; and
- d) conventional and strategic deterrence methods.

On 4 June 2002, then-President Pervez Musharraf, in fact, stated that, "The possession of nuclear weapons by any state obviously implies they will be used under some circumstances". In Pakistan, decision-making with regards to its use can only be undertaken by the 10-member National Command Authority, chaired by the President but with a sizeable representation from the armed forces. It should be stated, though, that President Asif Ali Zardari stunned the Pakistani establishment in November 2008 by speaking of a 'no first-use' posture. However, Lieutenant-General Kamal Matinuddin, a leading defence analyst, said the remarks were made 'off the cuff' and the President was apparently 'not fully informed' or 'completely aware of' Pakistan's stated doctrine.

Pakistan is striving to achieve a 'second strike capability' which basically refers to the capacity to absorb a 'first strike' and still be able to retaliate massively. Theoretically, if the entire arsenal is vulnerable, it could invite a pre-emptive attack. Thus, it is trying to disperse and conceal its weapons and, in future, when it acquires the capability, it is likely to move them into submarines.

Indeed, it is said that after the September-11 attacks in the United States, then-President Musharraf ordered the redeployment of the arsenal to 'at least six new locations'. It is noteworthy that neither Pakistan nor India has any defence shield that would be considered strategically destabilising. Pakistanis feel the nuclear balance between the two countries would remain unstable until the equilibrium is reached by Pakistan acquiring a matching 'second strike capability'. Meanwhile, India beefed up its 'second strike capability' when, in November 2008, it tested a new generation ballistic missile, *Shaurya*, a 600-kilometre range

sub-surface weapon which can be easily concealed from detection launched. An earlier acquisition was *BrahMo*, the product of a joint-venture with Russia. It the world's fastest cruise missile and it can also be launched from submarines. There is an on-going project called the Advanced Technology Vessel, costing US\$3 billion, which aims to build, for the future, five nuclear-capable submarines. It also has plans for the K-15 ballistic missiles which can be nuclear-tipped and submarine-launched.

While both countries so far have behaved most responsibly, there are two dangers beyond the rim of the saucer. One is that deterrence is stable when the damages caused by its failure are perceived to be unacceptably high but if the technology reaches to such a point of sophistication that specific 'hard' targets such as military installations can be taken out by precise weapons or by small-yield so-called 'battlefield' or 'theatre' devices, then the propensity to use these weapons would increase. This would be in line with the 'Schlesinger Doctrine' of the mid-1970s when the United States' Defense Secretary, James Schlesinger, floated the idea that a nuclear war was 'fightable and winnable' by 'selective targeting'. This would be an unstable development and must be addressed by constant sharing of information and by forgoing destabilising vertical escalation. The other danger, seen as more pronounced in the case of Pakistan, is that of the weapons falling into the 'wrong hands' such as those of terrorists or fundamentalists. Pakistan has been arguing strongly that there are 'layers and layers' of protection against such an eventuality though it reportedly turned down a United States' offer of Permissive Action Links, a system to further control detonation. That the arsenal is 'absolutely' secure and under a very tight command and control mechanism was also stressed by former Pakistani National Security Advisor, General Mahmood Durrani, at a recent seminar at the Institute of South Asian Studies in Singapore. Also, United States officials such as former Deputy Secretary of State, John Negroponte, have expressed satisfaction to the United States' Congress on the standards of safety and security of the weapons.

Optimists hope that the possession of nuclear capabilities by both India and Pakistan, which in any case is a given reality for all times unless there is a dramatic breakthrough in disarmament, will preclude another major war between the two countries. Former Indian Army Chief, General Shankar Roychowdhury, said in a seminar in New Delhi in March this year that Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons prevented India from attacking it on two occasions – one after the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament and the other after the Mumbai mayhem. Be that as it may, while conventional conflicts of some intensity cannot be entirely ruled out, it is clear that no level of even conventional conflict can provide a significant victory to either side. If that be so, the only rational corollary is collaboration between the two countries.

There is obvious necessity for confidence-building measures on the nuclear front. This can and should be spread to other areas across a broader spectrum of issues such as terrorism since the perceived threat from it, including on the nuclear front, are mutually applicable. Despite the fact that the nuclear genie is out of the bottle in South Asia, it can be tamed and controlled, and even pressed into the service of peace. The leaderships of both India and Pakistan must realise that they have a Hobson's choice (no choice) in this regard and Track II must relentlessly keep pointing it out to them.

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