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Dealing with Pakistan's Nuclear Breakout

What is the best way to bring Pakistan into the non-proliferation fold?

By Julian Schofield
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The 2003 conquest of Iraq, disintegration of Syria, and recent nuclear deal with Iran has seemingly pushed the nuclear non-proliferation frontier to Pakistan. There is concern that at current rates of production, within ten years Pakistan will have the world's third largest nuclear arsenal, from a count of approximately 70 boosted-fission warheads in 2008, to more than 500, and with sufficient range to reach Israel and Turkey. There is a temptation, as part of the next step to roll back nuclear proliferation, for the West to isolate Pakistan as it did with Iraq, Iran and North Korea in the 1990s.

Pakistan's current weapons grade fissile material production is four times India's, and Pakistan is more determined to concentrate these resources into warhead production. It possesses four operational production reactors at Khushab collectively able to manufacture 25 to 50 kg of plutonium every twelve months, which, combined with Pakistan's ongoing highly enriched uranium (HEU) production with 20,000 centrifuges at Kahuta, gives it the capacity to produce between 14 to 27 warheads annually. Refinements at the Khushab site may double this total. India by contrast can manufacture between two and five nuclear weapons in the same period. This pace has continued unabated since 1998, and has received further stimulus from recent Indian-U.S. nuclear material agreements.

Turning international attention and pressure on Pakistan to compel it join the non-proliferation regime will not succeed. The 1968 Non-Proliferation treaty (NPT) is often advertised as a collective security framework to limit the spread of nuclear weapons. In fact, it was a bargain between two great powers, the U.S. and the USSR, to jointly promise not to permit the proliferation of nuclear weapons to their allies. In particular, Moscow was concerned that West Germany would acquire an independent nuclear arsenal. Moscow and Washington conceded their failures to reign-in China, France or Israel, and the USSR accepted the NATO framework for the sharing of U.S. nuclear weapons, including with West Germany. Huge arsenals maintained general deterrence against new nuclear weapons programs, as well as extended deterrence to insecure allies, and the deal proved a great success in arresting proliferation. With the end of the Cold War, the U.S. extended the principles of the NPT in order to neutralize former Soviet client-states.

The outlines of a second grand bargain took place between China and the U.S. in the 1990s, with China imposing firm export controls on dual-use technology to the developing world. China agreed to cut-off Iran, but was determined to maintain its relationship with Pakistan, on which it depends to draw-off Indian security efforts. Pakistan's nuclear weapons program has, since 1974, received important assistance from China, including warhead designs, HEU, scientific testing and training, and missiles technology and production capacity. Although China has reduced its support to Pakistan, primarily because the latter has attained an adequate level of strategic self-sufficiency to deter India, this could be reversed promptly if India were to obtain some technological breakout capacity.

Any new great power bargain to contain Pakistan will be imperiled by the interests of three pivotal states. China will not reign in Pakistan unless India emulates Pakistani disarmament. India will not submit to any arrangement that puts it into a separate class from the great powers. Saudi Arabia will continue to provide financial, energy and diplomatic support to Pakistan to offset Israel or a future Iran, Egypt, or Turkey. Isolating Pakistan will push it closer under a Chinese strategic nuclear umbrella. U.S. threats to facilitate the countervailing nuclear armament of Japan, Australia or South Korea are incredible because they would cause as much difficulty for the U.S. as China. Even if Pakistan never joined a formal alliance with China, and did not further contribute to nuclear proliferation, its regionally destabilizing arsenal would continue along its current maximal growth trajectory. However, to put the arsenal into correct perspective, Pakistan's will consist primarily of fission or boosted-fission weapons (15 to 50 kiloton yields), but will likely not include mass-produced fusion warheads (megaton range) for at least two decades. Its delivery systems consist of medium range aircraft (F-16s, Mirages, and JF-17s) and the mobile Haft and solid fuelled Shaheen series of missiles, which are likely never to be able to target Europe. Despite the significant destruction it could inflict on India's cities, the arsenal would remain regional and strategically insignificant as long as they weren't based outside of Pakistan.

So how should the international community approach the problem of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal? Pakistan is quite vulnerable to economic sanctions, because of an array of ad hoc export agreements providing Pakistani goods access to EU and U.S. markets. But the high priority placed on national security in Islamabad means that Pakistan would not likely be dissuaded by

sanctions, nor has it historically. Furthermore, these trading arrangements sustain an emerging commercial class, which in turn is believed to create the conditions for a more stable democracy.

Another approach is to institutionalize Pakistan's status as a major non-NATO ally. The outlines of a constructive informal alliance should consist of military to military interaction in the form of ongoing strategic dialogues, perhaps through a permanent NATO agency, joint training, but most importantly operational officer exchanges and student positions at staff colleges. Institutionalizing this constructive engagement of Pakistan's military would buffet it against the usual political friction typical of Pakistani-Western relations. Nor are weapons sales necessary to sustain this relationship. However, this arrangement would require political will, as interest in engaging with Pakistan will inevitably decline with the reduced involvement of NATO in Afghanistan.

On the one hand, it seems absurd to establish such close relations with a nuclear-armed state so allegedly unstable, plagued with militant Islamists, and which has also been accused repeatedly of feeding insurgency in Afghanistan and Indian-occupied Kashmir. However, military-to-military contacts are a particularly effective avenue of influence of Western values to the elites of the security state within Pakistan. This could influence everything from democratization to more humanitarian approaches to counter-insurgency. Other less amenable avenues of influence, such as through the mass population, would compete unfavourably with indigenous nationalism and Gulf Arab-funded Islamist movements. The principal national political parties, the PPP and PML-NS, are primarily dynastically run ethnic groupings, and are preferential towards China and Saudi Arabia, respectively. The tribal regions are under active suppression, and the poorest regions of Pakistan, while open to foreign aid efforts, are politically marginalized. The military elite are the most effective and representative national organization in Pakistan, technocratic, and committed to socio-economic development.

The Western disinclination to engage with Pakistan has a lot to do with its caricature as an illiberal and religiously extremist state and society. Pakistan certainly has a great many socio-economic developmental challenges, including entrenched rural feudalism, mistreatment of minorities, and a heavy-handed approach to governance in the outer provinces. But Pakistan also has many factors in its favor. Its Sufi-based Barelvi variant of Hanafi Islam remains dominant and tolerant, and is the main reason Pakistani religious parties have far less influence in politics than they do in Egypt, Turkey or Indonesia. Democratic political culture in Pakistan is genuine and has widespread support, even within the military. Pakistan has a competent national security bureaucracy, which has preserved stability at the center despite repeated existential challenges. A relationship at this level would draw Pakistan away from Chinese, Saudi and Islamist influence, would facilitate further attempts at dialogue to repair the tragedy that is Indo-Pakistani relations, and reduce the security anxiety that is propelling Pakistan's nuclear build-up.