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The New Irritant in United States-Pakistan Relations: The Harpoon Skirmish

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Abstract

The *New York Times* report on 30 August 2009 on Pakistan's illegal modification of "United States-supplied Harpoon missiles to expand its capability to strike land targets" has become a source of tension between the United States and Pakistan. While the Pakistanis have rejected this claim, it has raised concerns in Washington and New Delhi. This brief argues that the latest dispute could delay or even derail the United States' legislation to provide aid to Pakistan. It concludes that, given the nature of mistrust between the two South Asian neighbours, Pakistan will continue to find ways and means to match India's superiority in weaponry.

Introduction

The recent United States press reports alleging that Pakistan has "illegally modified the United States-supplied Harpoon missiles to expand its capability to strike land targets" (*New York Times*, 30 August 2009) has caused another irritant in United States-Pakistan relations as well as with neighbouring India. Senior American officials claim that this modification can be a potential threat to India.

The Harpoon missile provides the Navy and Air Force with a common missile for air, sea and submarine launches. Its low-level, sea skimming cruise trajectory, active radar guidance and warhead assure high survivability and effectiveness. Once fired, the missile flies to the target location, switches on its seeker, locates the target and strikes it without further action from the firing platform.

Whatever their origin, these missiles would be a significant new entry into Pakistan's military arsenal. They would enable Pakistan's small navy to strike targets on land, complementing the sizeable land-based missile arsenal that Pakistan has developed. That in turn, security analysts suspect, is likely to spur another round of an arms race with India that the United States has been trying unsuccessfully to halt.

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The United States' Position

The United States press reports suggest that the charge which set off the new round of tensions between the two was made in an unpublished diplomatic protest in late June 2009 to Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani and other top Pakistani officials.

The United States administration is reportedly concerned at the speed at which Islamabad is developing a new generation of conventional and nuclear weapons. The United States supplied 165 of these anti-ship Harpoons during the Ronald Reagan Administration as a defensive weapon during the Cold War.

The United States intelligence seemingly detected a test – never announced by Pakistan – on 23 April 2009 that the former claims apparently gave Pakistan this modified weapon offensive capability.

Within two days of the news by the *New York Times*, the United States Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs disclosed that the United States Administration had taken up the matter with Pakistan and that Islamabad had agreed to “mutual inspections” of the weapons system. If the allegations are proven to be correct, the United States Administration officials suspect that Pakistan could be in violation of the United States Arms Control Export Act. Rob Hewson, Editor of Jane's Air Launched Weapons, dismissed the United States' accusations, claiming that testing was part of the efforts by Pakistan to develop a range of conventional weapons that could be fired from the air, land or sea to address “India's much more formidable missile arsenal”.

Pakistan's Denial

Pakistan was quick to react with its Foreign Office spokesperson rejecting the accusation claiming that, “no modification has been made to the missile under reference”. Pakistan's Ambassador in the United States, Hussain Haqqani, vowed to fight back the “periodic efforts to falsely blame Pakistan”. Haqqani, instead, called upon the United States media to help Pakistan secure the assistance it needs to fight terrorism. A senior Pakistani official, speaking to the *New York Times* on the condition of anonymity, also rejected the accusation, claiming that the missile tested was developed by Pakistan, just as it had modified North Korean designs to build a range of land-based missiles that are believed to have strike capability on land targets in India.

India's Reaction

India's outgoing Naval Chief of Staff Admiral Sureesh Mehta, claiming that India has been telling the United States that whatever they gave Pakistan will not be used in self-defence, called the development “against India's national interest”. An Indian government spokesperson said that India is “closely monitoring all the developments bearing on national security” and India “will take necessary steps” towards guarding India's interests.

Earlier, reacting to plans to provide more military aid to Pakistan, the Indian External Affairs Minister, S. M. Krishna said that, “we have told the United States that, particularly in the case of Pakistan, whatever aid in whatever form has been given to them is invariably directed against India and this has been emphatically registered with the United States government”.

Possible Impact on United States-Pakistan Relations

The latest United States accusation comes at a delicate time when the United States Administration is about to ask the United States Congress for a US\$7.5 billion aid package for Pakistan for the next five years. The latest dispute has the potential to delay or possibly even derail the legislation sponsored by Senators John Kerry of Massachusetts and Richard Lugar of Indiana to provide Pakistan with this aid package. An aide to Senator Kerry underplayed the news, saying that “there have been irritants in the United States-Pakistan relationship in the past and there will be in the future”. The United States Congress is expected to vote on the aid package when it returns from recess next month.

Security and diplomatic commentators in Pakistan say that the timing of this accusation fits in the pattern of almost all such aid considerations when Pakistan’s detractors leak information causing difficulties for the aid passage to go through smoothly via the United States Congress. They also argue with some justification, that while making the passage difficult, such out of context disclosures inevitably lead to the addition of several conditions in the aid package, making it possible for the United States Administration to switch off the aid or even extract a heavy price from the rulers in Islamabad, who remain dependent upon American goodwill.

This latest United States-Pakistan spat again highlights the level of mistrust that remains between the two countries. While the United States would like to portray Pakistani armed forces as an increasingly reliable partner in the war against terror both within Pakistan and in Afghanistan, such incidents, if true, indicate that Pakistan’s focus remains on India, which is considered as the main threat to Pakistan’s security by Islamabad.

During the Afghan War of the 1980s and 1990s, the United States turned a blind eye to Pakistan’s covert nuclear programme, allowing the development of nuclear weapon capability. The moment the Soviet forces crossed Amu Darya, the American President refused to certify to the peaceful nature of Pakistan’s nuclear programme to the United States Congress. Military analysts believe that Pakistan wants to use the current United States engagement in Afghanistan to its advantage before time runs out and develop the next generation of weapons to maintain a minimum level of deterrence against India.

Conclusion

Given the nature of mistrust between the two South Asian neighbours, Pakistan will continue to find ways and means to match India’s superiority in weaponry. Both countries will continue to accuse each other of triggering an arms race. Considering the experience, as most Pakistanis believe that the United States has let them down, each country will try to pursue its interests within the relationship for the short- and medium-term at least.

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