

# ISAS Brief

No. 140 – Date: 18 November 2009

469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isassecc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassecc@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons: How Safe Are They?

Ishtiaq Ahmed<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

With the assault on the office of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in Peshawar on 13 November 2009, which left at least 20 people dead, including 10 ISI officials, the Taliban-Al Qaeda nexus has once again demonstrated that it is capable of hitting the supposedly well-guarded targets representing the power and authority of the state. A few weeks earlier, they were able to deceive the guards at the entry of the citadel of the Pakistan army, the General Headquarters, in Rawalpindi. On that occasion, more than 40 people were taken hostage, of whom 37 were rescued due to a daring operation by the commandos of the elite Special Services Group.

The Head Office of the Federal Investigation Agency in Lahore was bombed in October this year. A similar attack took place in 2008. Since 2007, attacks have been launched on military, air force and naval personnel and officials. On the other hand, the media also reported that some terrorists had tried to enter the restricted area where the nuclear facilities are located, but they were stopped at the outer security ring.

### Report on Safety and Security of Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons

In his detailed report published in the *New Yorker* dated 16 November 2009 (though it was already made public a week earlier), Seymour Hersh claims that the United States was doing all it could to ensure that Pakistan's nuclear warheads were safe and secure. He referred to United States President Barack Obama's response to a question by a journalist about the safety of those weapons. President Obama reportedly said that the United States wanted to "make sure that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is secure – primarily, initially, because the Pakistan army, I think, recognises the hazards of those weapons falling into the wrong hands."

Some of Hersh's assertions put the Pakistanis in an awkward and deeply embarrassing position. For example, a spokesman for Admiral Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Hersh that Admiral Mullen was deeply involved in day-to-day Pakistani developments and "is almost an action officer for all things Pakistan". However, Admiral

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed is a Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at [isasia@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasia@nus.edu.sg).

Mullen denied that he and General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, or their staffs, had reached an understanding about the availability of American forces in case of a mutiny or a terrorist threat to a nuclear facility. "To my knowledge, we have no military units, special forces or otherwise, involved in such an assignment", Admiral Mullen is reported to have said through his spokesman. The report informs that, for the last three years, the United States and Pakistan have been working very closely on the nuclear weapons issue.

In light of conflicting reports, one wonders who should be believed – the American journalist Hersh, who has suggested that the United States is seeking a greater role in the protection of Pakistan's nuclear weapons from terrorists or the angry refutation by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, General Tariq Majid, who dismissed Hersh's report as sensational and mischievous. He reportedly said that, "We have operationalised a very effective nuclear security regime, which incorporates very stringent custodial and access controls. As overall custodian of the development of [the] strategic programme, I reiterate in very unambiguous terms that there is absolutely no question of sharing or allowing any foreign individual, entity or a state, any access to sensitive information about our nuclear assets" (*The News*, 10 November 2009).

### **Possible Scenarios**

Hersh considered a number of scenarios that could plunge regional and world peace into jeopardy. The most serious was the possibility of a mutiny within the military stationed at the Pakistan nuclear weapon sites. It was based on the assumption that support for radical Islam and sympathy for the Taliban-Al Qaeda ideology could exist even among soldiers and officers stationed in places where the weapons are kept. When Hersh probed that possibility with military officers who he claimed to have spoken to, they rejected such a turn of events. They told him that the personnel working in such places were thoroughly scrutinised and those whose ideological orientation or mindset was suspect were screened out.

Moreover, Hersh was told that the nuclear devices are kept in deep tunnels that can never be detected by spy satellites. Even more importantly, the procedure adopted to make the nuclear weapons operational is exceedingly complex. The different elements and parts of a nuclear bomb are kept apart from one another. In order to use these devices, they needed to be assembled in one place. The procedure has been streamlined and, in case of a war or some threat to national security, a select group of military personnel could quickly make them operational.

### **The United States and Pakistan's Sovereignty**

It may be recalled that a controversy raged in Pakistan recently over the Kerry-Lugar Bill, which was attacked by right-wing media and politicians as an invasion of Pakistani sovereignty. Hersh's report suggests that the Americans are determined to take control of Pakistan's nuclear assets. In one sense, it gives credence to the conspiracy theory that the Americans are out to nullify Pakistani sovereignty and security – the nuclear weapons epitomising sovereignty and security!

It is, therefore, not surprising that it was not only a top Pakistani military officer who refuted the claim that the terrorists could get hold of Pakistani nuclear weapons; Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari, the Federal Minister of Information, Qamar Zaman Kaira, and the Pakistan Foreign Office also issued similar statements. Their standpoint was supported by statements

issued by the United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and the United States' Ambassador to Pakistan, Anne Patterson.

Will this latest controversy subside now that the power holders on both sides are singing the same refrain or will it only adversely affect the United States-Pakistan alliance against terrorism? That remains to be seen.

However, this is not the most interesting aspect of the recent controversy.

The most crucial problem policymakers have to face in the current situation is that the Taliban-Al Qaeda network will not hesitate to try anything to stop the offensive launched against them by the Pakistan military and to force the American and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation forces to pack up and leave Afghanistan. There are good reasons to believe that General Majid is speaking with sincerity that only those which the military has already included in the core group, who, in case of an emergency, will make those weapons operational, can access them unless that core group itself is eliminated. Arguing thus, he assured that it was not possible to reach the nuclear warheads and use them because all precautions have been taken to prevent that from happening.

Rational men in command positions in the Pakistani military who are in charge of the nuclear assets know that if they use such weapons, there would inevitably be a similar retaliation. The destruction and suffering that will follow in such a situation will defy imagination; hence the assumption is that while nuclear weapons are not usable, they guarantee peace. However, from the die-hard Islamist point of view, such reasoning may not carry much persuasive power.

Moreover, no watertight, foolproof guarantee can be provided by any nation or military that some mad men in their midst would never be able to get hold of such weapons and use them. Such a danger is present in all circumstances and, therefore, the Pakistani explanation is convincing on its own merits.

There is, however, no reason to believe that the Americans would not be interested in getting as accurate as possible knowledge about those weapons because, in case the unimaginable happens and hardcore Islamists do manage to get hold of them, regional and world peace would be gravely threatened. Some time ago, Rowan Scarborough, a journalist with *Fox News*, reported that three attempts have already been made by terrorists to get to Pakistan's nuclear assets. Under the circumstances, the United States has a detailed plan to rapidly deploy the Joint Special Operations Command, a super-secret commando unit headquartered at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in Pakistan to take control of Pakistani nuclear weapons in case Pakistan was destabilised and extremists come to power. Some rumours suggest that an elite commando force is already stationed in Afghanistan for such an undertaking.

### **Decline of Pakistan**

It is truly very sad that Pakistan should end up in such a sordid and profoundly dangerous situation. In the mid-1960s, Pakistan was being celebrated as the paragon of economic development that many nations, including South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia keenly studied, but after the 1965 war with India, Pakistan could not return fully to the path of peaceful development and change.

The military defeat at the hands of India in 1971 in the former East Pakistan, which broke away to become Bangladesh, played a most vitiating role in accentuating a belief in the need for an Islamist orientation of the armed forces. Such a mindset reached consummation during the Afghan *jihad* of the 1980s. It set in motion a process that inevitably took it down the path of violent politics, which undermined the social peace within Pakistan and created dangerous situations of a military confrontation with India.

Until the beginning of the 1980s, Pakistan's standard of living was higher than not only India but China as well. Now, China is way ahead and, since 2006, India has also surpassed Pakistan. Poverty, illiteracy and despondency mark the lives of the majority of an otherwise very hardworking and warm-hearted Pakistani nation.

## **Conclusion**

If and when things return to some modicum of normalcy, it would be imperative to consider other options as well to make Pakistan strong and confident through progressive investments in education and economic development. The Americans will have to persuade India and Pakistan to sort out their differences if the arms race in this region is ever to stop. At present, Pakistan's reputation as the most dangerous polity on earth is, unfortunately, likely to persist.

## References

General Tariq Majid, 'Pak N-safety plan', *The News*, 10 November 2009.

Rowan Scarborough, *Fox News*, 14 May 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/05/14/plan-pakistan-teeters-falling-taliban/> (accessed on 19 November 2009).

Seymour Hersh, 'Defending the Arsenal: In an unstable Pakistan, can nuclear warheads be safe', *The New Yorker*, 16 November 2009.

oooOOOooo