

The Security of Nuclear Weapons Challenges for South Asia and the Muslim World

The apprehensions that nuclear weaponry might fall into undesirable hands are growing. President Barack Obama of the United States has given leadership in bringing the issue to the fore in the just-concluded Washington conference. With the forthcoming changes in the US Administration, greater responsibility will devolve on to the international community in this regard. The imminent Summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Turkey should take up the cudgels in this matter in real earnest. This would bring credit to the leaders of the Islamic world in their countries, and beyond.

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

The fourth Nuclear Security Summit in Washington is over. This could also spell the end of the American initiative to keep the nuclear genie, now out of the bottle, under control. President Barrack Obama had made non-proliferation and nuclear safety a major pillar of his external policy. Like in most things, he did not achieve all that he set out to do. But a modicum of success is indeed owed him, given that over the last four year period, coinciding with his second term, twelve states, including his own, France and Russia have decreased their stocks of weapon-grade nuclear materials. One country, Uzbekistan, has removed the total amount altogether. This score is somewhat tempered by the fact that the UK, Japan , the Netherlands,

¹Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The author, not ISAS, is liable for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

North Korea and Pakistan would see their levels either plateau or rise. Of course, what also led these States to do what they did, was not necessarily to please Obama, but because they assessed this policy to be in consonance with their perceived national self-interest.

Indeed in the overall area of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament what is clearly discernible is that States will or will not acquire nuclear weapons depending on whether they see that particular decision advancing their security. India and Pakistan acquired them, for they viewed the decision as positive in security terms in 1998, and North Korea is poking their fingers into the world's eyes relentlessly to prove that point. Iran, South Africa and some Central Asian states have decided that acquisition of nuclear weapons, at least for now, is not worth the costs. Over 50 leaders who gathered for the meeting in Washington did not think differently, collectively or individually. In other words, the deliberations would have done nothing to persuade them one way or the other. But there was one take-away that all must have shared. It was the horrendous consequences of nuclear material falling into undesirable hands of non-state actors. There were two notable absentees: Vladimir Putin of Russia and Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, partly because of domestic or regional circumstances, and partly because they might have thought they have heard it all before. But this is not to say they do not share the apprehension of the major take-away from the Conference.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India was there. Apart from his favourable predilections for travel, he needed to make two points: the threat of nuclear terrorism requires concerted global approach (translation: the task of preventing any Pakistani extremist incursion aimed at Indian nuclear installations devolve on the international community), and that India should be provided membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), by the time its plenary meets in June. Pakistan, which has reportedly the fastest growing nuclear arsenal in the world and which has now turned to tactical nuclear weapons as a buttress to deterrence, has always opposed supply of fissile material by the NSG to India. Nuclear fuel, made available for purely peaceful purposes, it might still release domestic production to be diverted to weaponry. This is the reason why almost single-handedly it has held up a Treaty on Fissile material in the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. Pakistan also wants to get into the NSG, and is said to have the assurances of China's veto on India's entry, if India tries entry alone. So politics in this regard is likely to hot up soon.

There exists at this time deterrence in the form of an “ugly stability” in South Asia. Also, at least for now the weapons in both countries are fairly secure. Raj Chengappa, a security analyst, states that a series of half a dozen safety –locks, presumably based on ‘permissive action links’(PAL) technology - ensure that the devices can only be used when desired. In most cases the fissile core is separated from the war-head casing, though the separation naturally cannot be so great as to degrade the perceived capability of swift action. Such separation is also not possible in submarines where, of necessity, all components of a nuclear device need to be stored in close and confined proximity. Pakistan has claimed ‘layers and layers of protection’. The country has also separated triggers from warheads, and dispersed storage sites, though this is more designed to avert total elimination by an adversarial first strike than security from non-state actors. While Pakistan has reportedly turned down a US offer of PAL technology, recently US Secretary of State for Nuclear Security, Rose Gottemoeller gave the country a good chit for ensuring nuclear security in a befitting manner.

The US has the technology to afford greater security to nuclear weapons. An example is the ‘enhanced nuclear detonation safety system’ (ENDS). But it is usually chary of sharing these lest this appears to be approving of proliferation. This essay argues that it will become increasingly difficult to effectively end proliferation. Therefore, the US should be generous in the offer of this technology, including persuading those to accept who are unwilling to do so. Indeed, American politics right now point to a situation where the tendency for ‘isolationism’ is becoming manifest. American leadership of global issues depend on acceptance by others, and usually linked to higher moral standards. If some key current politicians leave any impact on US public opinion, the perception by others of the requisite moral standards to lead may erode.

In that case, in the area of nuclear safety, responsibility would devolve on other international organizations. The United Nations Security Council already has a Resolution, 1540 (2004) addressing the issue. A new Secretary General will take office next year and he/she must make this a priority thrust area. Another notable global forum of concern should be the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) with its membership of 52 countries. Turkey will host its 13th Summit in Istanbul during 10-15 April, 2016. It is essential for the OIC leaders to come up with a strong resolution in this connection, given the burgeoning interest of the ‘Daesh’ in the acquisition of this capability. The resolution could buttress elements of UNSC 1540 and

commit additional resources. This will render the leaders of the Muslim world great credibility, not just within their countries, but also much beyond.

.