
Bush, Pakistan And The Bomb

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Introduction

The dastardly assassination of Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister of Pakistan, by terrorists has exposed once again the fragility of that country's polity. Of course, assassinations of political leaders have taken place in other parts of the world, including India. But, if Pakistan's case is being prominently highlighted all over the world, it is mainly because unlike other countries fighting terrorism, Pakistan's capacity to fight terrorism is being questioned everywhere. And when the world is not sure of its capacity to fight terrorism, it is but natural that there are legitimate concerns over Pakistan's unity and integrity and the consequent implications.

Since September 11, 2001, Pakistan has received nearly 10 billion

dollars from the United States alone under some heading or the other to fight terrorism. That is what the *Los Angeles Times* reported recently. But the Musharraf regime has not spent that money properly. American reports, published over the last two months, make it obvious that Musharraf has misused the US aid and spent it in modernizing arms and ammunitions that are essentially targeted at India. Citing unidentified government and military officials, a recent *New York Times* report said much of the financial aids were channeled to weapons systems designed to counter India, not al-Qaeda or the Taliban, and to pay inflated Pakistani reimbursement claims for fuel, ammunition and other costs.

Deliberate diversion

The US aid was supposed to strengthen Pakistani paramilitary

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force, known as the Frontier Corps, so that it faced adequately al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in the region bordering Afghanistan. The aid was meant for having sophisticated rifles and grenade launchers. Frontier Corps, it may be noted, consists of nearly 80,000 troops and half of them is based in tribal areas. But these troops, it now appears, are ill-equipped and ill-trained in counter insurgency tactics. So much so that three months ago, Islamic militants captured dozens of fighters from the Frontier Corps and paraded them before Western journalists, the latest in a series of embarrassing encounters. Further demoralizing has been the August 30(2007) capture of about 250 troops, most of them members of the Frontier Corps, who surrendered without a fight to the al-Qaeda and the Taliban fighters. Since then Frontier Corps soldiers being captured and then released after hard bargainings with the Pakistani authorities (which involves freeing of the captive militants from the Pakistan side) has become a regular feature.

The Defense Security Cooperation Agency, which oversees U.S. weapons transfers, recently said that shipments to Pakistan since the Sept. 11 attacks had included some

equipment that could be useful in pursuing militants in the tribal areas, including 4,000 radios and 12 refurbished attack helicopters. But even those items went to the regular army, the agency said, and are unlikely to be shared with the Frontier Corps. The majority of Pakistan's purchases have been of items that would be difficult to deploy in counter insurgency fights, including harpoon missiles designed to sink warships, F-16 fighter jets, maritime surveillance aircraft and refurbished howitzers that have to be towed into position. All this has resulted in a situation that the arms imbalance between an under-equipped Frontier Corps and al-Qaeda/Taliban has been accentuated rapidly in the latter's favour. No wonder that al-Qaeda and the Taliban have regrouped so spectacularly in the region.

Lack of genuineness

Of course, the Musharraf regime's sincerity in really fighting the al-Qaeda/Taliban has always been questioned by the international community from time to time. All told, there have been competing priorities of the United States and Pakistan with regard to fighting terrorism. That was why plans to build up the Frontier Corps have not

been universally supported by U.S. military officials. Loyalties within the corps are thought by many observers to be divided. Members are recruited mainly from Pashtun tribes with long-standing mistrust of outsiders. Though many of these tribes reject militant ideology, and have suffered hundreds of casualties in the fighting, among them are also in considerable number devoutly religious who feel some degree of sympathy for the Islamists' cause.

Secondly, the Musharraf regime had given substantial military support to the Taliban in the years leading up to the September 11 attacks, sending arms and soldiers to fight alongside the militant Afghan movement, according to newly released US official documents. In fact, Pakistan was one of the few countries that had official diplomatic contacts with the Taliban regime. It has always been the practice for every government in Islamabad to engage with the government in Kabul so as to keep the vexed territorial issue in the Pushtun-speaking tribal areas under control and maintain the so-called Durand line as the effective boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the line the Afghans do not consider to be relevant any

more. Besides, Pakistan also wants a pliant Afghanistan so as to provide it what is called strategic depth against its "eternal enemy" India.

It is to be noted that the US State Department had prepared a briefing paper, dated January 1997, that said, "For Pakistan, a Taliban-based government in Kabul would be as good as it can get in Afghanistan. Many Pakistanis claim that they detest the Taliban brand of Islam, noting that it might infect Pakistan, but this apparently is a problem for another day." Similarly, according to Barbara Elias, a National Security Archive researcher in the US, "the documents illustrate that throughout the 1990's the ISI [Pakistani intelligence] considered Islamic extremists to be foreign policy assets. But they succeeded ultimately in creating a Pakistani Taliban. Those years of fuelling insurgents created something that now directly threatens Islamabad." One cannot but agree with her more.

Now President Musharraf is openly lamenting the spread of Taliban extremist influence in Pakistan. He may be right that one of such elements killed Benazir. But then, he is partially responsible for the mess. If it is beyond his control to deal with the fundamentalists in

his country, there are legitimate reasons to believe that his security forces – civilian police and the military – do have such extremist elements in their ranks.

The nuclear danger

And this brings the more horrendous prospect under consideration. Pakistan is no ordinary country. It has nuclear weapons. What will happen if these weapons fall into the hands of the fundamentalists who have infiltrated the Pakistani security? This question is haunting, among others, the Americans the most. Bush administration officials have been talking privately that if the chaos in the streets of Pakistan worsens, or al- Qaeda exploits the moment, Pakistan's government could become distracted from monitoring scientists, engineers and others who, out of religious zeal or plain old greed, might see a moment to sell their knowledge and technology. To compound these worries, there has been that episode A Q Khan, the so-called father of the Pakistani bomb, who was clandestinely – that is what President Musharraf told the international community – engaged in selling nuclear and missile material to a host of countries.

According to a revealing report in the *New York Times* on November 19(2007), over the past six years, the Bush administration has spent almost \$100 million clandestinely to help Musharraf secure his country's nuclear weapons. The aid, buried in secret portions of the federal budget, was paid for the training of Pakistani personnel in the United States and the construction of a nuclear security-training center in Pakistan, a facility that U.S. officials say is nowhere near completion, even though it was supposed to be in operation in 2007.

The paper says that a raft of equipment - from helicopters to night-vision goggles to nuclear detection equipment - was given to Pakistan to help secure its nuclear material, its warheads, and the laboratories that were the site of the worst known case of nuclear proliferation in the atomic age. In a way, the American connection with safeguarding Pakistani nukes has been admitted by the Musharraf regime. In 2006, the Pakistanis sent Lieutenant General Khalid Kidwai, whom Musharraf had put in charge of nuclear security, to Washington. In briefings for officials and reporters, he maintained that the era of Khan was "closed." He also acknowledged receiving

“international help” as he sought to assure Washington that all of the holes in Pakistan’s nuclear security infrastructure had been sealed.

The American programme to safeguard Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal was created after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, when the Bush administration debated whether to share with Pakistan one of the crown jewels of American nuclear protection technology, known as “permissive action links,” or PALS, a system used to keep a weapon from detonating without proper codes and authorizations. A variation of this technology has already been shared with France and Russia. The debate over sharing nuclear security technology began just before the then Secretary of State Colin Powell was sent to Islamabad after the Sept. 11 attacks, as the United States was preparing to invade Afghanistan. The reasoning was that Americans feared that once they headed into Afghanistan, the Taliban would be looking for these weapons.

However, in the end, the Bush administration decided that it could not share the PALS with the Pakistanis because of legal restrictions. While many nuclear experts in the federal government

favoured offering the PALS system because they considered Pakistan’s arsenal among the world’s most vulnerable to terrorist groups, some administration officials feared that sharing the technology would teach Pakistan too much about American weaponry. In fact, the same concern had prevented the Clinton administration from sharing the technology with China in the early 1990s. As a result, the alternate plan of helping the Pakistanis to secure their nuclear weapons themselves took shape and so far the Bush administration has paid the Musharraf regime \$1 billion dollar for the purpose, 1 percent of the roughly \$10 billion in known American aid to Pakistan since the Sept. 11 attacks.

Now that concern about Musharraf’s ability to remain in power has been rekindled, so has the debate inside and outside the Bush administration about how much of the programme has been accomplished, and what it left unaccomplished. While U.S. officials say that they believe the arsenal is safe at the moment, and that they take at face value Pakistani assurances that security is vastly improved, in many cases the Pakistani government has been reluctant to show U.S. officials how

or where the gear is actually used. That is because the Pakistan establishment does not want to reveal the locations of their weapons or the amount or type of new bomb-grade fuel the country is now producing. In addition, the Pakistani officials are suspicious that any American-made technology in their warheads could include a secret "kill switch," enabling the Americans to turn off their weapons in case they decide to do so.

American helplessness

All this notwithstanding, the fact remains that no American administration has dared to take any coercive measure against Pakistan. Pakistan has been, indeed, a disenchanted ally of the United States in every sense of the term. Reputed public opinion poll agencies have repeatedly pointed out that after Egypt, Pakistan is the country where one finds maximum resentment against the United States. And yet every American regime has continued the practice of offering economic and military incentive to Pakistan in some form or the other.

Enough material has come to the light in recent years to suggest that the Bush administration knew all

along the activities of A Q Khan in selling nuclear and missile technologies to North Korea, Iran and Libya. But when after September 11, 2001, Pakistan's then intelligence chief, Lieutenant General Mahmood Ahmed, was summoned to meet with Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, in Washington, he was given the option - "whether Pakistan would like to be with the US 100 percent or against 100 percent". As has been revealed by Jonathan Schell, the author of *The Seventh Decade: The New Shape of Nuclear Danger*, General Ahmed promised to be 100 percent with the US and cooperate in assailing Afghanistan's Taliban regime, which, as has been pointed out above, had long been nurtured by the Pakistani intelligence services in Afghanistan and had, of course, harbored Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda training camps.

The Bush doctrine

Schell makes sense when he says that Pakistan had every reason to take a sigh of relief with the American offer. Because conspicuously missing in that offer was any requirement to rein in the activities of A. Q. Khan, the "father" of Pakistan's nuclear arms, who had been clandestinely hawking

nuclear-bomb technology around the West Asia, North Africa and Northeast Asia for some years. As Schell says, "Musharraf decided to be 'with us'. But, as in so many countries, being with the United States in its Global War on Terror turned out to mean not being with one's own people. Although Musharraf was already a dictator, he now took the politically fateful step of very visibly subordinating his dictatorship to the will of a foreign master.....Bush proposed what was, in fact if not in name, an imperial solution. In the new dispensation, nuclear weapons were not to be considered good or bad in themselves; that judgment was to be based solely on whether the nation possessing them was itself judged good or bad (with us, that is, or against us)".

But then, Schell is little unfair on the Bush administration when he says: "That (Bush) doctrine constituted a remarkable shift. Previously, the United States had joined with almost the entire world to achieve nonproliferation solely by peaceful means. The great triumph of this effort had been the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, under which 183 nations, dozens quite capable of producing nuclear weapons, eventually agreed to

remain without them. In this dispensation, all nuclear weapons were considered bad, and so all proliferation was bad as well. Even existing arsenals, including those of the two superpowers of the Cold War, were supposed to be liquidated over time. Conceptually, at least, one united world had faced one common danger: nuclear arms. In the new, post-9/11 dispensation, however, the world was to be divided into two camps. The first, led by the United States, consisted of good, democratic countries, many possessing the bomb; the second consisted of bad, repressive countries trying to get the bomb and, of course, their terrorist allies".

American duplicity

Shell is, perhaps, oblivious of the fact that as far as Pakistan's endeavour at becoming a nuclear power was concerned, various acts of omission and commission on the part of every US administration since the time of President Jimmy Carter helped Pakistan realising its goal. As the recently published book, *Deception: Pakistan, the United States and the Global Nuclear Weapons Conspiracy*, authored by British journalists Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark, reveals, it was, indeed, the

American money with which Pakistan manufactured its nuclear bombs!

Remarkably, the same Afghanistan factor has been cited by every American President for overlooking Pakistan's quest for nuclear weapons. Earlier, it was the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan that prompted Carter, Ronald Reagan and George Bush (senior) to give nearly \$4 billion military and economic aid to Pakistan in return for its help to train and assist the resistance forces – ironically, consisting of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden – against the Soviets in Afghanistan. And bulk of this aid was diverted by Pakistan's the then military dictator, General Zia-ul Haq, to A Q Khan's laboratory so that Khan could procure clandestinely material and technology for nuclear enrichment from the Western markets. And all that was taking place with the American intelligence knowing every detail of Khan's activities.

As Levy and Scott-Clark write in what is arguably the best detailed account, as of today, on the making of Pakistani nukes: "As Pakistan's bomb programme burgeoned, it became increasingly difficult to keep a lid on it. What started as pragmatism (a go-getting kind of

deal-making, steeped in the optimism Reagan brought to a depressed post-Carter Washington) rapidly bloomed into a complex conspiracy, with State Department officials actively obstructing other arms of government which could not but fall over intelligence about Pakistan's nuclear trade. Evidence was destroyed, criminal files were diverted, Congress was repeatedly lied to, and in several cases, in 1986 and 1987, presidential appointees even tipped off the Pakistani government so as to prevent its agents from getting caught in US Customs Service stings that aimed to catch them buying nuclear components in America".

Conclusion

In sum, we have an unprecedented case where the US, a great democratic country championing the causes of democracy and nuclear non-proliferations, not only helping the authoritarian rulers of Pakistan and their endeavour to make nuclear weapons but also assisting them – which the present Bush administration has been doing over the last few years – so that their regimes remain in tact and nuclear weapons really secure.

Pakistan must be one of the rarest of rare cases where despite not

sharing any of the ideals that the US, otherwise, champions, it has managed to extract the best possible benefits from the world's lone super power. Islamabad and Washington have had nothing in common either politically or economically and much less socially. As a country, which has been ruled mostly by military or military-backed leaders, Pakistan cannot be said to be a country to be ideally befriended by the US. Economically, too, there has been very little in common between Pakistan and the United States. And socially, while Pakistan was churned

out of communal discords as a nation of Muslims, the US has had a fiercely guarded secular society.

And yet, Pakistan must be among the few countries, perhaps second to Egypt, which has managed maximum US military and economic assistance. Earlier, it was the Soviet fear and now it is the nuclear uncertainties that explain the American behaviour. In terms of power-capabilities, Pakistan may be a mouse and the United States a lion. But it is the mouse that is roaring all the time. ■