Policy Forum 01-04A: Nuclear Insecurity in South Asia

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Nuclear Insecurity in South Asia

By Ahmad Faruqui

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I. Introduction

This essay was contributed by Ahmad Faruqui, Defense and Energy Economist at EPRI, based in

Palo Alto, California. He is currently working on a book entitled "The Price of Strategic Myopia: Reforming Pakistan's Military."

Disputing a recent article by a US Naval officer, Faruqui writes that Pakistan has some legitimate security concerns regarding India. He reviews the history of the Indo-Pakistani conflict, including the roles played by Russia and the United States. He concludes that nuclear weapons have not increased security for either country, and that both need to reduce their expenditures on armaments and instead concentrate on human development.

II. Essay by Ahmad Faruqui

Nuclear Insecurity in South Asia
Ahmad Faruqui

In a recent article that appears in the respected US military publication, Joint Forces Quarterly (June 2000 issue), Commander Kenneth R. Totty of the United States Navy writes about the nuclearization of the South Asian subcontinent. He argues correctly that domestic policies and a relentless drive for regional hegemony have driven India to acquire nuclear weapons, and that Pakistan is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons as long as its archrival India has them.

However, he then proceeds to make two assertions that are not supported by the history of that troubled region, which is home to one-fifth of humanity. First, that Indian foreign policy is non-aligned, and that much of the half-century old conflict between India and Pakistan is due to Islamabad's obsession with its powerful neighbor. Second, that the average Pakistani thinks India wants to destroy Pakistan and absorb it as a province of India. He argues that adding more than 140 Muslims to the population of India would be against India's security interests.

The fundamental premise underlying Totty's assertions is that Pakistan's sense of insecurity is irrational and the cause of the political instability in South Asia. This is incorrect. At partition in 1947, about a third of the 400,000-strong British Indian Army opted to join Pakistan, in proportion to the population of undivided British India that was going to be in Pakistan. The British asked India to provide Pakistan with its proportional share of the arms and ammunition. However, Indian leaders blocked the shipment of most of this equipment, and some openly spoke of the need to annul the partition of British India. This created a grave sense of insecurity in Pakistan, and drove the Pakistanis to join security alliances with the United States in the mid-fifties.

India also sent its 1st Armored Division into the large princely state of Hyderabad whose Muslim ruler did not want to join India, and annexed this state into the Indian Union. This was contrary to the principles that India had used to justify the accession of Kashmir to India, whose Hindu ruler wanted to join the Union, but whose Muslim population was not given the right to self-determination.1

In the aftermath of its disastrous border war with China in 1962, the United States and Britain rushed large quantities of sophisticated arms and ammunition to India. The United States asked Pakistan to not use this opportunity to initiate military action in Kashmir, and Pakistan complied with this request. India raised six mountain divisions with this equipment that would be used to defend it against a future Chinese invasion. Pakistan had expressed serious concerns about the supply of arms and ammunition to India, and argued that China was in no position to carry out an invasion across the Himalayas. Moreover, invasion of other countries was inconsistent with Chinese foreign policy objectives. Pakistan argued that the new army formations would ultimately be used against Pakistan.

In 1965, several of these mountain divisions saw action against Pakistan. They did the same in 1971, with much greater impact. India exploited Pakistan's difficulties in its eastern province in 1971 to dismember that country and create Bangladesh. Senior officers within the Indian high command wanted to destroy the Pakistani military on the western borders, but were prevented from so doing by strong American political pressure. The mountain divisions are now deployed by India in Kashmir to fight the insurgency that has claimed more than 50,000 lives. Much of this insurgency is home grown and dates back to 1989.

India's strong military ties with the former Soviet Union have turned its "non-alignment" policy into a slogan. It signed a 30-year treaty in 1971 with the USSR, and has just renewed it with Russia for another 30 years. It has entered into a $3 billion military agreement with the Russians for the joint production and marketing of sophisticated military hardware including state-of-the-art T-90 main-battle tanks and SU-30 MKI long-range fighters.2 Its airforce contains hundreds of MiG-21, MiG-23, MiG-25 and MiG-27 fighters, several of which have been produced under Soviet license in Indian factories. Russia is also providing the aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov free of charge to India, since it is buying the MiG-29 fighters that will go with it and paying for the carriers' refurbishment. India is also considering the acquisition and potential production of nuclear submarines from Russia, and has earlier operated a Russian nuclear submarine, Charlie, that was leased from Russia.

Pakistan is painfully aware that the Indian Strike Corps, heavily armed with Russian weapons, remains poised in Rajasthan to cut the narrow Pakistani landmass into two. Prithvi surface-t--surface missiles, deployed with Indian army units along the Punjab border, can cause havoc among Pakistani forces further north. Neither can Pakistan ignore the political signal contained in the location of India's nuclear weapons testing site at Pokharan, less than 100 miles from the border. Thus, it is not surprising that Pakistanis live in fear of India.

Unfortunately, nuclear weapons have not improved the security of either Pakistan or India, since both countries now live in mortal dread of each other. As noted by Stephen Van Evera, the greatest threat to many countries comes from their exaggerated perceptions of insecurity that often cause them to respond with counterproductive belligerence.3

Both countries would be better off by reducing their military expenditures, and diverting their resources to human development. Most of their people live under conditions of abject poverty, in 700,000 villages, on a per capita income of less than $500. Spending a billion dollars on an Agosta-class missile-equipped submarine, or $40 million on a SU-30 nuclear-armed fighter, makes it that much more difficult to reduce poverty and illiteracy in the region, much bigger threats to the long-term security of a subcontinent that is prone to ethnic, sectarian, religious and ideological violence.4

1 Alastair Lamb, Contemporary South Asia article 2 Financial Times, December 13, 2000. 3 Stephen Van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War," International Security, Spring 1998. 4 Ahmad Faruqui, "Beyond Strategic Myopia in South Asia," Strategic Review, Winter 2001, forthcoming.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

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