

# South Asia's Increasing Nuclear Capabilities

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HASINI LECAMWASAM, APR 15 2013

### South Asia's Increasing Nuclear Capabilities: Cause For Celebration or Alarm?

South Asia is a region consisting entirely of developing nations defined by their chronically insecure economies and the resultant inability to satisfactorily support the needs of their populations. This fact, however, has not curbed the region's incessant quest for nuclear assets. This tendency is detrimental to South Asia in particular because the region has an alarming inclination towards violence as was demonstrated in conflicts between *inter alia* India-Pakistan, Pakistan-Bangladesh, India-Bangladesh, and Pakistan-Afghanistan.

#### Indian Nuclear Potential

Though nuclear capabilities do not necessarily connote military agendas, the very fact of possessing nuclear ability naturally stirs concern due to its security implications. As such, India's nuclear strategy has spawned a wave of unease in the region given the subcontinent's rather obvious designs for regional primacy.

However, Indian nuclear potential is, at least ostensibly, more energy-oriented than militarily inclined. India's staggering population of 1.22 billion requires a total per capita energy consumption that records an annual average of roughly 400 to 700 kWh that the state has trouble facilitating. The Indian electricity sector suffers from "large power shortages, inadequate access coverage, and financially crippled electricity companies...India's electricity generation is dominated by inefficient coal – which constitutes about 53 percent of the generation capacity..." (Rao, et al. 2009). Nuclear power plants are a handy addition to the Indian energy industry in this context.

The proposed nuclear power plant in Kudankulam, Tamil Nadu, is only one step taken towards satisfying the energy demand in India by way of nuclear energy. The Indian government is reportedly planning to expand its nuclear capabilities to be able to afford one quarter of the country's energy demands by 2050. However, Kudankulam seems to have attracted a considerable amount of trouble to India. On the one hand, Sri Lanka, India's immediate southern neighbour, is creating a ruckus about the possible consequences of a nuclear emergency that might very well affect her given the close proximity of the two countries. Underpinning Sri Lanka's concerns are of course political grievances stemming from India's domestic power play that resulted in India voting against the island at the controversial UNHRC session that was held in March 2012. On the other hand, factions of India's own population are fiercely resisting the setting up of nuclear establishments due to their lack of faith in the Indian government's capability to effectively handle nuclear waste since "...many doubt that India – with its bizarre infrastructure and often chaotic organization – can keep the technology under control" (Wagner, 2012).

Notwithstanding the mounting energy demand, India's nuclear interests are not completely devoid of military objectives. The subcontinent, possibly in preparation of a probable clash with either China or Pakistan, and also as a means of showcasing Indian might to the outer world, has officially tested six missiles belonging to the 'Agni' missile range through the period from 1989 to 2012. The move served the intended purpose and more. While India was able to test her nuclear muscle and exhibit to the world the same, she also spooked her neighbours, specifically Pakistan, into developing their own nuclear arsenals.

#### Pakistani Nuclear Arsenal: Survival or Competition?

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Pakistan, India's notorious adversary, has strived to rival India in terms of nuclear abilities ever since India tested her first nuclear device in 1974. As is commonly known, Pakistan was the pawn US had in South Asia to check the possible expansion of Socialism through India, who, despite her proclaimed non-alignment, was in fact obviously pro-Socialist. The young and acutely vulnerable nation of Pakistan saw little reason in discouraging US advances that could render her the economic and military stability she so critically needed to protect herself from her very hostile and very large neighbour. The US provided lush economic grants to Pakistan in order that her objectives may be achieved, while the latter used them to fatten her conventional weapon store and launch its nuclear counterpart. Naturally once the US learnt the ends her money was serving, she imposed economic sanctions on Pakistan, albeit the damage was already done.

Pakistan's need for nuclear assets, it could be persuasively argued, was one that was initially necessitated by India's experiments with nuclear devices and, as such, primarily concerned itself with the survival of the young nation of Pakistan. Especially in light of the fact that India's conventional forces were mightier than Pakistan could ever aspire to become given the lack of human resources, the latter was compelled to devise an effective way to counter a possible Indian offensive. Nuclear weapons, thus, proved to be a tool for survival not only because it was expected to assail India in an actual military confrontation, but also because it kept the subcontinent at bay for fear of Mutual Assured Destruction, not unlike that during the Cold War, albeit of a considerably lesser scale. However, Pakistan's initial need for survival today seems to have escalated to an arms race with India. If speculation is to be accommodated, Pakistan today has already exceeded Indian nuclear capacity and is even showing signs of substituting England as the fifth greatest nuclear power in the world with "...more than 100 deployed nuclear weapons, an increase of nearly 40 percent in two years" (Williams, 2011).

That Pakistani nuclear power is not checked by any significant nuclear weapons regulation treaty because she has not ratified said treaties, and that Pakistan does not abide by the no-first-strike doctrine should be seriously considered because these factors, coupled with the country's ascend in the ladder of nuclear powers, might generate a substantial amount of paranoia in India that could build up to an arms race and possibly even a nuclear war.

## Regional Implications

The enduring grudge between India and Pakistan that dates back to the days of the Indian partition, coupled with South Asia's characteristic tendency of resorting to violence as a first option, make nuclear ownership of these two countries an imminent peril to the region. What is more, Pakistan's ambitious nuclear agenda is now drawing a not-so-unwilling Sri Lanka into the brewing nuclear whirlwind in South Asia. Evidently, "Pakistan is all set to begin consultations with Sri Lanka to help set up a nuclear power plant in Trincomalee's Sampur" (Shukla, 2012). A hurt and frustrated Sri Lanka, so rendered by the outcome of the recently-concluded UNHRC session, in all probability is very enthusiastic about the proposed venture, not so much because of the economic benefits it will bring about as it is because of the opportunity this new partnership presents to avenge the isolation she suffered at the hands of India at said session. A nuclear arrangement with the subcontinent's arch rival will amount to a slap on the face of India and, as such, an effective and worthy retaliation. In light of this development, one cannot help but be concerned whether a possible nuclear arms race will play the contending interests of South Asian countries against each other and bring about the ultimate decline of the region.

Added to this impending disaster is the more immediate issue of deviating state capital away from poverty alleviation. Nuclear politics does not come cheap and the ethical question as to whether South Asia should be prioritizing regional power play over the issue of chronic poverty persistent in almost all member countries naturally arises. Ejaz Ghani, in his article *The poor half-billion: What is holding back lagging regions in South Asia?*, aptly calls the region a "depressing paradox" where luxury and absolute poverty co-exist, mocking the astounding growth South Asia has achieved in the past few decades. Ghani presents an account of the two dimensions of Asia in existence, labeling one "Asia shinning" and the other "Asia suffering". The latter, he explains, "is doing no better than many Sub-Saharan African countries" (Ghani, 2011). In the context of this glaring fiscal deficit, it would be morally questionable for South Asian governments to invest state capital in nuclear projects not intended to serve energy purposes.

Existing and emerging contenders of the South Asian nuclear struggle should also take into account their rather

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characteristically cluttered administrations which lack the efficiency and organization required to run an operation of the magnitude of nuclear establishments. The Fukushima nuclear disaster that happened in March 2011 was supposed to have snapped some sense into these states, which evidently did not happen. It is only sensible to be more cautious than ever because if the sleek and sophisticated administration of a highly industrialized nation such as Japan could not successfully handle a nuclear emergency, it will be quite unrealistic to expect that South Asian administrations will be able to do so.

However, concerns regarding South Asian nuclear capabilities stem more from their security implications than anything else. The diametrically opposed interests of India and Pakistan mean that the two countries will pursue their strategies individually, both when accumulating nuclear assets as well as securing regional alliances. Especially Pakistan, to compensate for her inferior physical volume compared to India, will seek regional coalitions more actively, using her increasing nuclear capacity as alluring bait. India's continued aggression towards her neighbours, demonstrated in countless border disputes and other issues, will make Pakistan's efforts less strenuous. This in turn means that in the event of a nuclear confrontation, the number of stakeholders will significantly increase. The wobbly economies of South Asia do not require a blow too large to become permanently crippled, and the consequences of an event of the magnitude of a nuclear war need not be explained, not to mention the demographic cost. It is therefore imperative for all South Asian states to appreciate that compromising regional solidarity will amount to compromising the interests of individual states.

The suggestion is not for India and Pakistan to reconcile their interests, but to think of more feasible solutions for the emerging nuclear crisis. Alternatives towards this end can include *inter alia* ratifying treaties that will effectively check the building, testing, propagation, and usage of nuclear weapons, integrating regional countries to increase mutual dependency so that individual action will have collective effect, and therefore will make regional states more active and vocal regarding the conduct of other states, and establishing a regional judicial system as a check against arbitrary action that will be detrimental to the region as a whole.

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