

## Denuclearizing terrorism in southern Asia

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Given the bitter history they share, can India and Pakistan be expected to bury their hatchet and smoke the peace pipe? For the past three years, the two countries have been engaged in what they call a “peace process,” which in reality is an attempt to normalize their troubled relations. Pakistan’s continued refusal to have normal trade with India, however, is a reminder that these ties are far from full normalization.

Yet India and Pakistan are currently discussing the Kashmir issue and searching for ways to end two other disputes — one over Siachin Glacier, at the northernmost tip of their border, and the other at Sir Creek, a marshland at the southern edge of their frontier. At the same time, Pakistan-based *jihadist* groups continue to carry out daring attacks deep inside India, from the northern Gangetic plains to the very south.

These terrorist militias, like the Lashkar-e-Taiba or Jaish-e-Muhammed, were fathered by the Pakistani army and intelligence, and continue to have links with the military establishment. For the military establishment, these groups have served as valuable proxies in its low-intensity conflict against India centred on the export of *jihad*. This unconventional conflict has saddled India with the highest incidence of terrorism in the world.

Another important factor in the Indo-Pakistan relationship is the longstanding Sino-Pakistan strategic nexus, which has included clandestine Chinese transfers of nuclear-weapons designs and complete missile systems to Islamabad since the early 1980s. In the strategic triangle of southern Asia, China and Pakistan have been pitted against India.

The borders of India, China and Pakistan actually converge at Kashmir. In fact, the core territorial disputes between India and China, and India and Pakistan, center on Kashmir, which ranks as the world's largest and most militarized zone of contention, with China holding 20% of it, Pakistan 35% and India the remainder 45%. Islamabad's 1963 transfer to China of the trans-Karakoram tract in Pakistani-held Kashmir only added to the complexity of the situation.

However, in the competition between status quoist India and irredentist Pakistan, Kashmir serves merely as the symbol, not the cause, of the subcontinental hostilities, which are rooted in complex factors, including history, religion and the politics of revenge. As Pakistani military ruler Pervez Musharraf himself said just before he grabbed power in the 1999 military coup, Pakistan's low-intensity conflict with India would continue even if a solution to Kashmir were magically found.

For long, Pakistan has waged its unconventional war against India from behind the protective shield of nuclear deterrence. Although Islamabad responded to India's May 1998 nuclear tests with its own tit-for-tat tests, Pakistan developed nuclear weapons much earlier. It is well documented that, with direct assistance from China as well as its own ingenious nuclear smuggling from the West, Pakistan developed nuclear weapons at least a decade earlier.

The 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests brought already-existing capabilities of the two countries out in the open but did not alter in any significant manner military equations or strategic calculations on the subcontinent. It was not an accident that Pakistan began subverting India's security through the export of *jihad* from the 1980s, much before it tested a nuclear device. But after the 1998 tests, Pakistan began overtly employing its earlier-implicit threat of initiating a nuclear first strike if India retaliated to its continued cross-border terrorism. The fact that New Delhi has refrained from attacking terrorist sanctuaries inside Pakistan despite coming under escalating terrorist attacks from Pakistan-based *jihadist* groups has only emboldened the generals in Islamabad to continue their proxy war to bleed India.

The paradox is that Pakistan is both a professed ally in the U.S.-led anti-terror war and a sponsor of terrorism. It is the main sanctuary of the Al Qaeda, Taliban, Kashmiri and other transnational terrorists. While the West constantly worries about terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction, it goes unnoticed that Pakistan has both state-supported terrorists and nuclear weapons controlled by Islamist generals.

Another irony is that the so-called peace process has compelled New Delhi to further soften its stance. Although the only occasions when India and Pakistan have come close to peace have been during the brief periods of democratic rule in Islamabad, New Delhi has played no small role in helping General Musharraf gain legitimacy from the time it invited him out of the blue to a 2001 peace summit. Today, India not only refrains from speaking about the lack of democracy in Pakistan but also, in a major policy reversal, has come to see Musharraf as a

partner against terrorism, even though the regime in Islamabad remains wedded to terror.

India's latest showpiece is an agreement with the Musharraf regime to purportedly reduce the "risk from accidents relating to nuclear weapons." India needs to deepen its engagement with Pakistan at all levels. But confidence building cannot rest on the back of a public-relations gimmick like this accord.

How can any kind of risks be reduced when the Pakistani nuclear weapons are with the military and the Indian nukes under tight civilian oversight? While the Pakistan military has integrated nuclear weapons with its war-fighting doctrine and strategy, India is committed to a retaliation-only posture. Despite global concerns about terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction, the current preoccupation with Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran helps obscure the danger that Pakistan could be one step away from our worst nightmare.

If the Pakistan military didn't know about the nuclear black-market ring run by Pakistani scientists and intelligence and army officials for 16 long years, how can it offer to reduce any "risks," that too from "accidents" (whatever that means)? All that the agreement says is that in the event of an "accident," the concerned state will do what it is supposed to do in any case — "immediately take necessary measures to minimize the radiological consequences" — and, if need be, share "urgent information" with the other side. If any "accident" can be covered up, one can be sure the Pakistan military will do just that. In the case of the far-reaching Pakistani proliferation ring, a single individual, A.Q. Khan, was conveniently made the scapegoat in a charade that saw Musharraf pardon him and then shield him from international investigators by placing him under indefinite house detention. The world has been made to believe that Khan set up and

ran a nuclear Wal-Mart largely on his own. India itself has contributed to the creation of this fable through its references to “the A.Q. Khan ring.”

Of greater consequence for India is the nuclearization of terrorism. Musharraf and his fellow generals would continue to export terror as long as they can play nuclear poker with India. Disabling Pakistan’s potential for nuclear blackmail thus holds the key to forcing it to act against transnational terrorists on its soil. Yet, ever since the scandal over the Pakistani illicit nuclear exports broke, India has chosen not to depict the Pakistan military as a rogue proliferator but rather to give it succour through ostensible nuclear confidence-building talks.

Today, the central issue that will determine regional peace and security in southern Asia is not so much the state of the India-Pakistan relationship as what will be Pakistan’s future. Will Pakistan emerge as a stable, moderate, Muslim state? Or will it sink deeper into militarism, extremism and fundamentalism?

In the absence of open elections and public accountability, Musharraf’s rule has created a pressure-cooker society, giving rise to greater extremism and terrorism. What Pakistan needs is a safety valve — true democratic participation that would empower the masses and allow issues to be decided at the ballot box. To secure enduring peace on the subcontinent, there has to be a return to civilian rule in Pakistan, with the people there getting the freedoms that Indians enjoy.