

Pakistan's nuclear bomb: beyond the non-proliferation regime

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Among the many concerns raised in the wake of the devastating attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC on 11 September 2001 was Pakistan's status as a nuclear power. Some feared that domestic opposition in Pakistan to its role as a 'front-line' state in the US campaign against 'international terrorism' would fuel a deadly coalition between Muslim extremist groups and pro-Islamic factions in the army, giving them access to nuclear weapons.¹ Others were apprehensive that US dependence on Pakistan in the 'war against terrorism' would weaken the global nuclear non-proliferation regime by easing pressure on Pakistan to 'cap' its nuclear programme and freeze the development of nuclear weapons at existing levels.

Either way, there was a growing consensus that changes in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States would resurrect the debate on whether Pakistan could be trusted to act responsibly as a nuclear power given its long history of political instability. It was also reasonable to assume that Western concern about Pakistan's nuclear weapons capability would heighten rather than diminish, and that greater efforts would be made to control Pakistan's nuclear technology in order to prevent its falling into the hands of terrorist organizations. For its part, Pakistan was expected to draw international attention to the military threat posed by India and resist any pressure to renounce the nuclear option. Bridging the gap between these diverging views is likely to be the main challenge facing arms control negotiators in the coming years.

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¹ Gaurav Kampani, 'Safety Concerns About the Command and Control of Pakistan's Strategic Forces, Fissile Material, and Nuclear Installations', Center for Non-Proliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, 28 September 2001 <<http://www/cns.miiis.edu>>. For recent press reports of links between pro-Islamist factions in the Pakistan army and Muslims extremists, see *Guardian*, 18 September and 11 October 2001. For reports of the proliferation of nuclear-related material among Muslim extremist groups along the Afghan-Pakistan border, see *Observer*, 23 September 2001.

Pakistan's nuclear test explosions and their aftermath

In May 1998 Pakistan followed India by 'blasting its way into [the] Nuclear Weapons State category'² amid widespread international condemnation. Since the Indian nuclear tests earlier in the same month, on 11 and 13 May, Western governments, especially the United States, had worked strenuously to persuade Pakistan to exercise restraint and forgo testing. Many had hoped that Pakistan would seize the opportunity of diplomatically shaming India by occupying the moral high ground and choosing not to test.³ These expectations were dashed when Pakistan's then prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, bowed to domestic pressure and authorized the detonation on 28 May of five nuclear devices with an officially estimated total yield of between 30 and 45 kilotons (although US seismological sources set yields well below these figures at between nine and twelve kilotons).⁴ On 30 May Pakistan exploded a sixth nuclear device, which was apparently intended to establish parity with India by taking account of the latter's 1974 explosion of a 'peaceful' nuclear device.⁵

Pakistan's nuclear tests outraged the UN Security Council, which on 6 June 1998 adopted Resolution 1172 calling on India and Pakistan to refrain from further tests and resume their dialogue over the disputed territory of Kashmir. The United States and other Western governments reacted angrily, imposing stringent economic and military sanctions. By the autumn of 1998, however, it was clear that sanctions alone would not be sufficient to ensure Pakistan's compliance with the global non-proliferation regime. In October of that year the United States decided to ease sanctions on Pakistan under the provisions of the India–Pakistan Relief Act (the so-called 'Brownback Amendment'), and in September 2001, lifted all remaining sanctions, albeit in recognition of Pakistan's support for US military strikes against Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, there are persistent Western concerns about Pakistan's nuclear weapons. Foremost among these are Pakistan's refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) or to endorse the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT); the risk of a nuclear war between Pakistan and India over Kashmir,

² Testimony of Karl Inderfurth, US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs in *Crisis in South Asia: India's nuclear tests; Pakistan's nuclear tests; India and Pakistan: what next?*, Hearing before the subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 105th Congress (Second Session), 13 May, 3 June, 13 July 1998, p. 63 (microfiche). The Nuclear Weapons States (NWS) category is based on Article IX. 3 of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which restricts the number of NWS to the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China on grounds that 'a nuclear weapon State is one which has manufactured and exploded a nuclear weapon or other nuclear device prior to 1 Jan. 1967'.

³ Pakistan's prime minister Nawaz Sharif denied that Pakistan had lost the moral high ground by choosing to test, claiming that 'we still have the moral high ground because we didn't start it'. See 'There is no warmth now': interview with Nawaz Sharif, *India Today*, 15 June 1998, p. 37.

⁴ George Perkovich, *India's nuclear bomb: the impact on global proliferation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 433. See also Hilary Synnott, *The causes and consequences of South Asia's nuclear tests*, Adelphi Paper Series, No. 332 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 55–6.

⁵ William Walker, 'International nuclear relations after the Indian and Pakistani test explosions', *International Affairs* 74: 3, July 1998, p. 518.

and Pakistan's alleged involvement in the development of an 'Islamic bomb' programme. These anxieties are sustained by Pakistan's own ambitions, which have remained intact despite Western sanctions. Three broad objectives—national, regional and ideological—have underpinned Pakistan's pursuit of its nuclear weapons programme. The first and most crucial relates to Pakistan's fear of an Indian military attack; and here it is worth emphasising that many in Pakistan regard its nuclear defences against India to be worth the stiffest international sanctions, even as 'a golden chance to help Pakistan shift from dependency to self-reliance'.⁶ The second has been to establish Pakistan as a major regional power on a par with India. Having failed to achieve levels of economic growth commensurate with India's, Pakistan has relied on nuclear weapons as a basis on which to claim parity in regional leadership. The third has been Pakistan's endeavour to project itself as the first Islamic nuclear power, entitled, in some sense, to assume the political leadership of the Muslim world.

Western concerns

Nuclear proliferation

India's nuclear test explosions in May 1998 may have caught many Western governments by surprise,⁷ but few doubted that Pakistan would quickly follow suit. Nevertheless, the prospect of Pakistan crossing 'two thresholds: from an ambiguous to an unambiguous commitment to nuclear arms; and from non-weaponized to weaponized deterrence',⁸ subjected it to strong pressure, especially from the United States, not to respond to the Indian tests. The most immediate worry among many Western governments was that such tit-for-tat tests would seriously undermine the non-proliferation regime,⁹ and prove fatal to the recently negotiated CTBT.¹⁰ Many also believed that the tests would encourage other aspiring nuclear states—including Iran, Iraq, Libya and North Korea—to pursue clandestine nuclear weapons programmes.

Pakistan's growing nuclear capabilities had, of course, long been the object of suspicion in Western media and official circles. Reports as early as 1981 had indicated that Pakistan was well advanced in the development of a nuclear programme; by 1986 Western intelligence sources had concluded that Pakistan had produced enough weapons-grade uranium to manufacture nuclear weapons in

⁶ See 'There is no warmth now', interview with Nawaz Sharif, *India Today*, 15 June 1998, pp. 36–7.

⁷ The chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Jesse Helms, admitted to being 'astonished that the Indian Government was able to catch the US intelligence agency so sound asleep at the switch'. *Crisis in South Asia*, p. 3.

⁸ Walker, 'International nuclear relations', p. 518.

⁹ Wade L. Huntley, 'Alternate futures after the South Asian nuclear tests: Pokhran as prelude', *Asian Survey* 39: 3, May–June 1999, pp. 504–24.

¹⁰ The CTBT, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 1996, required all states to sign and ratify the treaty before it came into force. India's veto of the CTBT and Pakistan's subsequent refusal to sign it, are the main obstacles to its enforcement. Of the five 'legal' NWS, only Britain, France and Russia have ratified the treaty.

as little as two weeks.¹¹ In 1976, the United States adopted the first in a series of anti-proliferation laws aimed at ‘capping, freezing and rolling back’ Pakistan’s nuclear programme.¹² However, their effectiveness was soon blunted by Cold War imperatives, which led the United States to overlook the development of Pakistan’s nuclear programme and abandon its non-proliferation goals in exchange for Pakistan’s cooperation as a ‘front-line’ state during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

With the end of the Cold War the five nuclear powers, especially the United States and Russia, undertook to strengthen the non-proliferation regime and adopt a de facto ‘marginalization [of nuclear weapons] strategy’.¹³ This involved arms reduction by the NWS; consolidation of the NPT; the creation of nuclear-weapons-free-zones (NWFZ); ‘capping’ the Indian, Pakistani and Israeli weapons programmes and imposing trade controls on non-NPT countries. China’s accession to the NPT in 1992 was especially welcome in this regard, as was that of the former Soviet republics with nuclear capabilities (Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine) in 1994.

The 1991 Gulf war and the resulting UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM), which established the extent of Iraq’s arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and its well-advanced nuclear programme, dampened the euphoria by reviving fears of covert proliferation. Of particular concern was the threat posed by so-called ‘rogue’ or ‘terrorist’ states, including Iran, Libya and North Korea, which were suspected of developing nuclear weapons programmes in defiance of their obligations under the NPT. Although Pakistan did not officially feature among this list of ‘terrorist’ states, the US State Department threatened to include it in the early 1990s, bringing its nuclear programme under intense scrutiny.

Pakistan’s lack of technological sophistication and dependence on foreign components for the development of its nuclear programme made it particularly vulnerable to Western, especially American, pressure.¹⁴ In 1991 Pakistan, still

¹¹ For a chronology of Pakistan’s nuclear scorecard during these years see Robert Wirsing, *Pakistan’s security under Zia, 1977–1988: the policy imperatives of a peripheral Asian state* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 110–11.

¹² These included the 1976 Symington Amendment barring US aid to any country that imported uranium-enrichment technology without accepting safeguards determined by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); the 1977 Glenn Amendment, which required the suspension of US aid to Pakistan in the event of Pakistan receiving or exploding a nuclear device; the 1985 Solarz Amendment barring aid to any non-nuclear weapon countries which illegally exported nuclear commodities from the United States for use in a nuclear device and the 1985 Pressler Amendment, which required US assistance to Pakistan to be made dependent upon presidential certification that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear device. It was under the Pressler Amendment enforced in 1990 that the United States first implemented its most comprehensive set of non-proliferation sanctions against Pakistan.

¹³ William Walker, ‘Nuclear order and disorder’, *International Affairs* 76: 4, Oct. 2001, pp. 710–11.

¹⁴ A key participant in US non-proliferation initiatives in South Asia under the Clinton administration observed that ‘While India’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs were well-established and largely indigenous, Pakistan ... relied on equipment and technologies acquired abroad. During this period [the 1990s], the United States and others were trying to halt proliferation by penalizing countries trafficking in dangerous material. Therefore Pakistan was more vulnerable than India to U.S. sanctions.’ Strobe Talbott, ‘Dealing with the bomb in South Asia’, *Foreign Affairs* 78: 2, March–April 1999, p. 115.

reeling from the effect of US sanctions imposed the previous year to curb its nuclear programme, sought to appease its critics by sponsoring a UN resolution to declare South Asia an NWFZ. Although the move was eventually thwarted by Indian and Chinese reservations, it served as a pretext for the United States to renew its non-proliferation initiatives in South Asia.

The Clinton administration, which took office in January 1993, adopted a significantly new approach to nuclear non-proliferation in South Asia,¹⁵ apparently recognizing that nuclear weapons were a reality in South Asia and that their elimination would be gradual. The aim was 'to cap, then over time reduce, and finally eliminate the possession of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery'.¹⁶ One outcome of this policy was an attempt by the United States in 1994 to persuade Pakistan to open its production of fissile material to inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in return for the release of 28 F-16 fighter aircraft, which Pakistan had paid for but been denied after being made subject to the Pressler Amendment in 1990. US officials hoped that, by allowing Pakistan to escape inspection of existing stocks of bomb material, and thereby retain a deterrent, some progress could be made towards slowing the arms race in South Asia. But the initiative was doomed to failure: Pakistan rejected the plan as a threat to its national security and sovereignty. Another US proposal ahead of the NPT extension in 1995, which aimed to ban nuclear testing and impose voluntary curbs on the production of fissile material by India and Pakistan, also collapsed amid hostile press reports in Pakistan warning against any compromise with India on the issue of nuclear weapons. The failure of these initiatives constituted an important signal of Pakistan's intention to challenge the global non-proliferation regime and harden its 'rejectionist' stance on the NPT and CTBT.

Pakistan's adamant position was, of course, substantially boosted by its nuclear co-operation with China. Although formally committed to non-proliferation, China has played a key role in building up Pakistan's deterrent capabilities, especially in the area of missile technology. This was recognized by the United States in August 1993 when it imposed military sanctions on Pakistan under the terms of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), which sought to curb the transfer of Chinese technology for the development of Pakistan's medium-range missile programme. These sanctions, which were partially lifted in 1995, did little fundamentally to alter relations between China and Pakistan or diminish China's support for Pakistan's nuclear capability.

US policy in the 1990s clearly demonstrated the limitations of a sanctions-based approach to ensure Pakistan's compliance with the non-proliferation regime.¹⁷

¹⁵ See *The President's report to the Congress on progress towards regional non-proliferation in South Asia* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1993).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁷ This appears to have been recognized by a senior Clinton administration official who told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in May 1998 that while the United States would seek to 'stave off a nuclear missile race in the subcontinent' it 'will not sanction them [India and Pakistan] into compliance'. See testimony of Karl Inderfurth in *Crisis in South Asia*, p. 59.

Although there is no doubt that sanctions can inflict heavy damage on the Pakistani economy,¹⁸ successive Pakistani regimes appear to have become increasingly skilled at weathering their effects and turning elsewhere for economic and military assistance.¹⁹ Nor is the threat of diplomatic isolation and loss of prestige arising from sanctions likely to succeed in coercing Pakistan into changing its stance on the NPT and the CTBT. Pakistan's long history of military dictatorship has accustomed it to the rigours of international ostracism and the opprobrium reserved for a pariah state.

At the same time, it needs to be emphasized that Pakistan's defiance of the non-proliferation regime has been shaped by deep resentment against the United States, which is accused by Pakistan of applying discriminatory policies in pursuit of its non-proliferation objectives. The charge goes back to 1974 when many Pakistanis reacted with disbelief at the United States' decision not only to refrain from imposing sanctions on India in retaliation for its testing of a 'peaceful' nuclear device, but actually to approve an increase in economic aid to India within less than a month of the Indian detonation. The view that Pakistan was being unjustly singled out for punishment by the United States was reinforced by US non-proliferation laws in the 1970s, which Pakistani policymakers and public alike believed were specifically targeted at their country and used to justify sanctions against it in 1978 and 1979. Even when the United States has meted out equal punishment on India and Pakistan, as following their nuclear test explosions in 1998, it has failed to appease the sense of injustice in Pakistan. The strongly held view in Pakistan is that 'sanctions should have been imposed only on the country that started the nuclear race in the subcontinent and posed a threat to the region'.²⁰

Nevertheless, it has been the inconsistency of US policy on non-proliferation rather than the selective manner of its application that has really fuelled Pakistan's anger against the United States and, by implication, the international non-proliferation regime. In the early 1980s, even as Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme was struggling to break free from almost a decade of unremitting international constraints, the United States signalled that it would be prepared to relax its laws on non-proliferation if Pakistan agreed to act as a 'front-line' state in the Cold War in Afghanistan. Not surprisingly Pakistan seized the opportunity, believing it would herald the start of a more equitable relationship. Within a year of the final withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, however, the United States had shocked Pakistan by invoking tough non-proliferation rules

¹⁸ On the effects of the 1998 US sanctions on Pakistan see, Daniel Morrow and Michael Carriere, 'The economic impacts of the 1998 sanctions on India and Pakistan', *Non-Proliferation Review*, Fall 1999, Centre for Non-Proliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies < <http://www.ens.miiis.edu> >.

¹⁹ Some US officials have been aware of sanctions against Pakistan as a double-edged instrument. A former US National Security Council, Richard Haass, declared that the United States '[did] not want Pakistan to increasingly have to turn to the Irans of this world to remain solvent', adding that 'they [Pakistan] are already too close to Iran and North Korea'. See *Crisis in South Asia*, pp. 89–90.

²⁰ Gen. K. M. Arif, 'Signing the CTBT with Care', *Dawn*, 25 November 1998.

under the Pressler Amendment and imposing sanctions, which came into force in 1990. These sanctions were partially eased in the mid-1990s, but they marked a turning-point in US–Pakistan relations, confirming Pakistan's misgivings about the trustworthiness of the United States and generating anger among many Pakistanis at what they regarded as evidence of US ingratitude. Although the Clinton administration sought to make amends by easing some sanctions against Pakistan in the mid-1990s, their reinforcement following Pakistan's nuclear test explosions in 1998 reversed the modest gains in bilateral relations made in the interim. In September 2001 Pakistan, under pressure from the United States, re-emerged as a 'frontline' state in the 'war against terrorism'. As in the 1980s, the United States once again indicated its willingness to turn a blind eye to the development of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme if Pakistan agreed to support US policy *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan. However, what was significantly different this time was the public display of Pakistan's expectations as a trusted ally of the United States. These included 'special treatment' for Pakistan, which involved not only economic benefits in the form of financial assistance and debt rescheduling agreements but also an 'understanding' that there would be no unwarranted appeal to US non-proliferation laws such as would expose Pakistan to punitive sanctions in the future.

Nuclear war over Kashmir

The failure to secure Pakistan's compliance with the non-proliferation regime has compounded Western fears of a nuclear conflagration between India and Pakistan over their conflicting claims to Kashmir. Much of the hostility focused on this region is grounded in the circumstances surrounding the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, which led to the creation of Pakistan in the face of stiff opposition from Indian nationalists who rejected the idea of a separate Muslim state. The dispute over Kashmir is a consequence of this historical opposition. Although ostensibly a conflict over territory, the issue has enormous symbolic significance for both India and Pakistan, for whom the integration of Kashmir's Muslim majority is absolutely bound to their respective 'secular' and 'Islamic' identities.

These considerations account for the intensity of feeling aroused by the Kashmir issue, which has led to two wars (in 1948 and 1965) between India and Pakistan, and two major international crises (in 1990 and 1999), the first of which reportedly verged on a nuclear confrontation (see below). Mutual antagonism over Kashmir also aggravated relations during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war in Bangladesh, and continues to fuel tension over opposing Indian and Pakistani claims to the Siachen Glacier bordering China.²¹

²¹ The Siachen Glacier dispute relates to clashes in 1984 between India and Pakistan, which erupted over their contested claims to one of the world's largest non-polar glaciers situated at an elevation of some 20,000 feet near the border with China. For a background to the dispute see Wirsing, *Pakistan's security*, pp. 143–94.

The fear of an escalation of hostility between India and Pakistan to nuclear level first aroused serious Western concern in 1986–7, during what came to be known as the ‘Brasstacks’ crisis.²² This was named after ‘Exercise Brasstacks’, India’s largest ever military manoeuvre along its border with Pakistan. The aim was apparently to test the readiness of Indian troops in the event of a Pakistani attempt to seize territory by fomenting militant activity in Kashmir and the Indian state of Punjab. The crisis erupted when Pakistan, which had not been informed in advance about Indian troop movements, reacted with alarm by deploying large numbers of its troops, who happened coincidentally to be conducting their own exercises near Kashmir. Once India became aware of Pakistan’s heightened military activities, it in turn responded by immediately putting its troops on a war footing. It was not until January 1987, after urgent talks between the two sides, that the crisis finally subsided.

It is generally acknowledged that the ‘Brasstacks’ crisis might not have generated as much Western concern as it did had it not coincided with a declaration by a senior scientist involved in Pakistan’s nuclear programme and known to be close to the ruling military regime, that Pakistan would use nuclear weapons ‘if our existence is threatened’.²³ Although the statement itself was made public only after the crisis had ended, many Western governments reacted with alarm to the notion that India and Pakistan could have gone to war, possibly a nuclear war, as a result of confused signals and miscalculations.²⁴

The ‘Brasstacks’ crisis raised the spectre of an accidental nuclear war between India and Pakistan and prompted questions about ‘the degree of foreknowledge and control exercised by the Pakistani leadership and about the effectiveness or reliability of India’s intelligence capabilities’.²⁵ These issues resurfaced in 1990 when mounting political tension in Kashmir led to the build-up of Indian and Pakistani troops and triggered fierce clashes across the line of control (LOC) dividing the parts of Kashmir held by India from those held by Pakistan. As the crisis in Kashmir reignited, strong evidence from US intelligence sources suggested that Pakistan had assembled a nuclear weapon.²⁶ In May 1990 the United States moved quickly to pre-empt a repeat of the ‘Brasstacks’ crisis by holding urgent talks with Pakistan and India and prevailing upon both sides to exercise

²² For a detailed analysis of the ‘Brasstacks’ crisis see Stephen Cohen, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, P. R. Chari, Kanti Bajpai and Sumit Ganguly, *Brasstacks and beyond: perceptions and the management of crisis in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995).

²³ See statement by Dr A. Q. Khan, *Observer*, 1 March 1987.

²⁴ Neil Joeck, *Maintaining nuclear stability in South Asia*, Adelphi Paper Series, No. 312 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1997), pp. 21–2.

²⁵ Synott, *The causes and consequences*, p. 37.

²⁶ This was contradicted by Pakistan’s then Chief of Army Staff General Aslam Beg, a strong advocate of nuclear weapons. In an interview, which was said to have been conducted ‘almost three years after the crisis’, he denied that Pakistan had a usable nuclear device in 1990 or that it had been poised to stage a nuclear attack against India. Pervez Hoodbhoy, ‘Nuclear myths and realities’, in Zia Mian, ed., *Pakistan’s atomic bomb and the search for security* (Lahore: Gautam Publishers, 1995), p. 8. However in an earlier interview in 1992, Beg hinted that it was precisely Pakistan’s nuclear weapons that had deterred India from going to war in 1990. See below, note 29.

restraint. Although it is unclear why the United States acted so decisively,²⁷ there seems to be little doubt that there was concern about the potential for nuclear conflict arising from an 'apparent insouciance in Pakistan and India regarding the risks of conflict escalation to the nuclear level'.²⁸

The view that nuclear weapons had played an important part in deterring war between India and Pakistan in 1990,²⁹ and were likely to do so again in the future, was undermined in May 1999 when, less than a year after conducting its nuclear test explosions, Pakistan was once again engaged in a confrontation with India in the Himalayan region of Kargil and Dras. An armed exchange between the two sides had intensified when an estimated 2,000 Kashmiri militants, reportedly trained in Pakistan, crossed the border into Kargil on the Indian side of the LOC and seized high mountain ridges, threatening the main road between Srinagar and Leh. India retaliated with heavy artillery fire, inflicting heavy losses on Pakistani troops and forcing their withdrawal from occupied territory. The United States responded angrily to this latest military adventure by Pakistan and ordered an immediate end to hostilities. It also warned Pakistan against any further disturbance of the LOC and reportedly threatened to tighten nuclear-related sanctions, which would have jeopardised Prime Minister Sharif's ambitious programme of economic reform. Sharif's failure to withstand US pressure was regarded as an ignominious retreat by the army, which seized power in October 1999.

The confrontation in Kargil underlined two aspects of Pakistan's nuclear policy that could threaten regional stability in South Asia; both in some sense also reflect the emerging balance of forces in the country. The first is the apparent lack of a coherent doctrine of nuclear deterrence. The 1999 crisis suggested that sections of the Pakistani political and military establishment regarded nuclear weapons as the means not only to counter an Indian nuclear attack but also to deter India from staging a conventional war in response to Pakistani military advances in Kashmir.³⁰ Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's backing for the military

²⁷ One leading US expert on South Asia believes that 'After Washington underestimated the severity of the "Brasstacks" crisis in 1987, the intelligence community then exaggerated the possibility of Indo-Pakistani tensions leading to conventional or nuclear war'. Stephen Philip Cohen, 'The United States, India and Pakistan: retrospect and prospect', in Selig S. Harrison, Paul H. Kriesberg and Dennis Kux, eds., *India and Pakistan: the first fifty years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 198. See also Najam Sethi, 'There was no threat of Indo-Pak nuclear war in 1990', *Friday Times* (Lahore), 2-8 June 1994.

²⁸ Perkovich, *India's nuclear bomb*, p. 311.

²⁹ See Devin T. Hagerty, 'Nuclear deterrence in South Asia: the 1990 Indo-Pakistani crisis', *International Security* 20: 3, Winter 1995-6, pp. 107-8 and his *The consequences of nuclear proliferation: lessons from South Asia* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998). This was lent credence on the Pakistani side by General Beg who, in an interview with George Perkovich in 1992, claimed that 'the fear of retaliation [with weapons of mass destruction] lessens the likelihood of war between India and Pakistan. I can assure you that if there were no such fear, we would probably have gone to war in 1990.' Perkovich, *India's nuclear bomb*, p. 312.

³⁰ In May 1998 Pakistan's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, was quoted as saying that 'these [nuclear] weapons are to deter aggression, whether nuclear or conventional'. The statement prompted some analysts to conclude that 'Sharif's linkage of Pakistan's nuclear weapons with possible aggression by conventional forces plainly allowed for their first-use, without limiting them to deterring Indian nuclear threats', Synnott, *The causes and consequences*, p. 59. It is worth noting that unlike India, Pakistan is not formally committed to a 'no first-use' policy.

campaign in Kargil stemmed in part from the assumption shared by senior members of the army that Pakistan's nuclear status would inhibit India from engaging in serious retaliation. While Sharif may also have been keen to neutralize criticism within the army of his peace overtures towards India, which had culminated in the visit of Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Pakistan in February 1999, his support for military action in Kargil reflected a gross miscalculation, which if repeated by future governments, could lead to a dangerous military escalation in Kashmir.³¹ At the same time, Sharif's overthrow by the army, which had resented his attempts to blame it for botched operation in Kargil, clearly indicated that the army intended to retain its firm grip over the shape of Indo-Pakistani relations and the articulation of Pakistan's nuclear doctrine.

The second aspect of Pakistan's nuclear policy has been a tendency to exploit the nuclear balance with India³² by expanding low-level conflict. Some observers believe that the confrontation in Kargil was designed by Pakistan to gain military and political advantage over India by seizing territory and encouraging third-party involvement, in this case, Kashmiri Muslim militants.³³ The sponsorship of Kashmiri militant groups has, of course, long been the favoured policy of civilian and military regimes in Pakistan for whom they have represented a convenient 'front-line' in Pakistan's proxy war with India. Since the late 1990s, however, there has been some concern that 'official' control over these groups may have weakened, with many owing allegiance to, and operating at the behest of, shadowy intelligence agencies in Pakistan with opaque political agendas. These fears have been confirmed in recent months amid reports that General Musharraf's military regime has ceded control over the activities of militant Muslim groups in Kashmir to Pakistan's influential military security agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), in exchange for the ISI's cooperation in stemming popular dissent over the regime's support for US air strikes against Afghanistan.³⁴ The involvement of the ISI, many of whose commanders are said to espouse versions of radical Islam arising from their assistance to the Afghan *mujahedin* in the 1980s, could accentuate differences over nuclear policy within Pakistan's military establishment as Kashmiri militants stage ever larger and more perilous attacks against Indian forces in Kashmir.

³¹ Haider K. Nizamani, *The roots of rhetoric: politics of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), p. 112.

³² Some reports suggest that Pakistan may even have the edge in the nuclear balance of power. This was recently given some credence by Pakistan's President Parwez Musharraf who responded cryptically to the question of whether Pakistan's nuclear deterrence was 'numerically superior to India's' by saying that 'frankly, being ahead does not really disturb Pakistan'. Interview with President Parwez Musharraf, 16 May 2001, Guardian Unlimited <www.guardian.co.uk>.

³³ Synnott, *The causes and consequences*, p. 37.

³⁴ See Seymour M. Hersh, 'Watching the warheads: the risks to Pakistan's nuclear arsenal', *New Yorker*, 5 November 2001, pp. 48–54.

An 'Islamic' bomb

Pakistan's allegedly close links with some radical Muslim regimes and organizations abroad has lent particular urgency to the issue of nuclear technology transfer, especially with regard to the manufacture of what has come popularly to be known as the 'Islamic bomb'.³⁵

Current concern about an 'Islamic bomb' derives from Western suspicion that Pakistan's nuclear capabilities may have been financed by radical and wealthy Muslim states in the Middle East, notably Libya, in exchange for technical information to enable them to embark upon their own nuclear weapons programmes.³⁶ These reciprocal links are believed to have been strengthened by a commonly recognized need in the Muslim world for a broad-based nuclear deterrent against Israel.³⁷ Although much of the evidence for such links between Pakistan and rich Arab states is tenuous and often based on conjecture, Pakistan's leaders must bear some responsibility for fuelling Western concern. In 1979 Pakistan's former prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, wrote while awaiting his execution that, 'The Christian, Jewish and Hindu civilizations have this [nuclear] capability. The Communist powers also possess it. Only the Islamic civilization was without it, but that position was about to change.'³⁸

This admission by Bhutto of Pakistan's intention to pursue a nuclear weapons programme with an 'Islamic agenda' explains in part the determination of the United States to prevent the sale to Pakistan of a French plutonium reprocessing plant and its decision to impose nuclear-related sanctions in 1979. These moves unleashed fevered speculation about the threat of an 'Islamic bomb'.³⁹ The speculation was encouraged by hard-line religious parties, which gained influence in Pakistan during the 1980s. Their standing, which bore no relation to their dismal electoral appeal (generally less than two per cent of the vote), owed much to their close involvement with the military regime of General Zia ul Haq who was keen to strengthen Pakistan's Islamic identity in cooperation with other Muslim states. However, it was the convergence in thinking between these pro-Islamic parties and members of an emerging pro-nuclear 'epistemic

³⁵ An early expression of the anger aroused in Pakistani official circles by the idea of an 'Islamic Bomb' came from Agha Shahi, a former diplomat who served as foreign minister under General Zia ul Haq until 1982. In 1985 he wrote that 'Pakistan has been greatly concerned over the propaganda about the Islamic Bomb depicting Pakistan as the villain ... why is Pakistan being singled out for this treatment when a more or less permissive attitude is indulged towards Israel, South Africa, and India? The characterisation of the Bomb [sic] as Islamic suggests it is because Pakistan is a Muslim country'. Agha Shahi, 'Pakistan's Relations with the United States', *Pakistan Journal of American Studies* (Islamabad) 3: 1, March 1985, pp. 13–14.

³⁶ Steven Weissman and Herbert Krosney, *The Islamic bomb* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1983); originally published as *The Islamic bomb: the nuclear threat to Israel and the Middle East* (New York: Times Books, 1981), p. 29.

³⁷ See D. K. Palit and P. K. S. Namboodiri, *Pakistan's Islamic bomb* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1979).

³⁸ Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, *If I am assassinated* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1979), p. 138.

³⁹ See Swadesh Rana, 'The Islamic bomb', *India Today*, 1–15 June 1979, pp. 88–9.

community',⁴⁰ composed of strategic experts, retired generals and right-wing political commentators who were dedicated to countering an alleged 'Indo-Jewish conspiracy' against Pakistan, that lent credence to the otherwise nebulous idea of an 'Islamic bomb'. Reports in the early 1990s that the notorious Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) had channelled millions of dollars from the coffers of wealthy Arab states for Pakistan's nuclear weapons project also kept alive speculation about an 'Islamic' deterrent.

The United States, which had been forced to ignore the Islamic rhetoric surrounding Pakistan's nuclear programme in the 1980s owing to its involvement on the side of the Afghan *mujahedin*, now renewed its efforts to secure a commitment from Pakistan not to export sensitive, nuclear-related materials and technology to other countries.⁴¹ While such initiatives were mainly a response to Pakistan's suspected nuclear cooperation with North Korea, they also reflected a more general US concern about the nuclear ambitions of some Muslim states, including Iraq, Iran and Libya, which are strongly opposed to the United States' pro-Israeli policies but enjoy close relations with Pakistan.⁴² These concerns were accentuated in 1998 after Pakistan's nuclear test explosions. In May 1999 Pakistan's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, felt obliged to assure the international community that 'as a consistent policy', Pakistan would not transfer nuclear technology to any country or entity.⁴³ His statement coincided with a visit to Pakistan's top-secret uranium enrichment plant in Kahuta, near Islamabad, by Saudi Arabia's defence minister, Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, whose country is suspected of developing a nuclear programme.

The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001 have heightened fears of a coordinated 'Islamic attack' against Western targets. These anxieties are fuelled by press reports indicating that some transnational Muslim extremist groups with bases in Pakistan may have acquired weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons.⁴⁴ In October 2001 Pakistan's military regime, reportedly under pressure from the United States, ordered the arrest of two retired members of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission who had been closely involved in the development of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. Both were said to be hard-line Islamists who enjoyed close links with the Taliban government in Afghanistan and the Afghan-based Saudi dissident, Osama bin Laden, whose al Qaida network has been held responsible for the terrorist attacks. The

⁴⁰ A term developed by Peter Haas, who defines it as 'a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain or issue area'. See Peter M. Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic communities and international co-operation', *International Organization* 46:1 (winter 1992), pp. 1–36. For its application in the South Asian context see Nizamani, *The roots of rhetoric*, pp. 102–4.

⁴¹ Talbot, 'Dealing with the bomb', p. 121.

⁴² In 1987 Iran and Pakistan had signed a nuclear cooperation agreement under which Iranian nuclear scientists were to receive training at Pakistani nuclear installations. It has also been reported that in 1990 Pakistan's then Chief of Army Staff, General Aslam Beg, suggested to the government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto that nuclear technology be transferred to Iran in exchange for financial aid to counteract the effect of the 1990 US sanctions. Khaled Ahmed, 'The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and Pakistan', in Mian, ed. *Pakistan's atomic bomb*, p. 113.

⁴³ *Dawn*, 20 May 1999.

⁴⁴ *Guardian*, 14 September, 10 and 17 October 2001; *Observer*, 16 and 23 September, 11 November 2001.

arrests, the first ever involving nuclear scientists in Pakistan, compounded speculation that nuclear-related material may have been supplied to the Taliban authorities in Afghanistan.

The possibility of terrorist groups gaining access to Pakistan's nuclear weapons technology has raised serious questions about the safety of Pakistan's nuclear installations and its stock of nuclear warheads, which are said to number at least twenty. These questions have become especially pertinent in the light of speculation that well-organized groups of pro-Islamist zealots may have penetrated the top echelons of the army.⁴⁵ Some senior commanders of the military intelligence agency, the ISI, are also known for their pro-Taliban sympathies (a legacy of their involvement in the creation and financing of the Taliban in the mid-1990s) and are believed to be deeply opposed to Pakistan's support for US air strikes against Taliban targets in Afghanistan. Their closest allies are hard-line Islamic parties, including the Jamiat-i-Ulama-i-Islam (JUI), whose religious seminaries along the border with Afghanistan acted as breeding grounds for the Taliban.

This combination of political forces, which threatens Pakistan's political stability has led to concern that the secrecy of Pakistan's nuclear storage sites and the command and control of its strategic forces may be compromised by a coalition of pro-Taliban groups, causing the Musharraf regime eventually to lose control over the country's nuclear assets. However, there are some indications that Pakistan's military government intends to strengthen its physical control over the country's nuclear arsenal. One of the first measures adopted by Musharraf soon after agreeing to cooperate with the United States in the 'war against terrorism' was to reshuffle the army's senior corps commanders by sidelining pro-Islamic officers and promoting others known to be less conservative. In another significant move, Musharraf appointed one of his trusted military commanders to take over as head of the ISI. The regime has also sought to preempt the seizure of fissile material by 'rogue' military commanders or Taliban-backed militias by tightening security around Pakistan's main uranium-enrichment facilities at Kahuta and Golra Sharif, and its plutonium reprocessing plant in Khushab. All three facilities are located in the Punjab, well away from the volatile regions of the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, close to the Afghan border. Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that unlike the Middle East and Africa, Pakistan does not yet face any real threat to its chain of military command and control in the form of either a 'colonels' revolution' or a 'captains' coup'. Despite these considerations, however, it is likely that Pakistan will come under increased pressure formally to adhere to internationally recognized safety standards to foreclose any access to nuclear technology by groups engaged in the promotion of an 'Islamic *jihad*'.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the steady Islamization of the officer corps in the Pakistan army see Stephen P. Cohen, *The Pakistan army* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 86–98, and Brian Cloughley, *A history of the Pakistan army* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 277–81.

⁴⁶ The spectre of Muslim extremist groups gaining control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons was recently described by the UK Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, as 'the nightmare scenario in this part of the world'. 'Then', she added, 'we would have a Talibanized nuclear power with an unresolved major conflict with India, another nuclear power', *Guardian*, 19 October 2001.

Pakistani objectives

National

The most common (and least questioned) rationale for Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme is the threat posed by India to Pakistan's national security. This accounts for Pakistan's refusal to sign the NPT and its rejection of the treaty as fundamentally unsuited to an international order devoid of a dependable system of collective security. Yet as a recent study demonstrates, the 'nuclear option as a means to deter [Indian] threats entered late in the political discourse [of Pakistan]'.⁴⁷ One reason for this was quite obviously the Herculean task of nation-building that faced Pakistan in the years immediately following its creation in 1947. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that despite the endemic fear of 'Indian hegemony' that was to characterize Pakistan's security policy from the outset, it was not until the early 1970s that the strategic utility of nuclear weapons became an integral part of this policy.

Pakistan's early lack of interest in developing a nuclear weapons programme may also be explained by its close military links with the United States, which encouraged Pakistan's military leader, Field Marshal Ayub Khan, optimistically to declare in 1963 that, 'if India went nuclear we would buy nuclear weapons off the shelf somewhere'.⁴⁸ During this period Pakistan's efforts in the nuclear field tended therefore to be modest and generally supported by the United States; they included using atomic energy for agricultural and medical purposes and establishing Pakistan's first Institute of Nuclear Science and Technology in 1962.⁴⁹

However, Pakistan's war with India over Kashmir in 1965 appears to have been a turning-point in the reorientation of its security policy. At the heart of this reassessment lay Pakistan's disappointment at losing the diplomatic support of its long-time ally, the United States, which was now engaged with India in containing China's regional ambitions, and its shock over the suspension of US military aid to Pakistan. Z. A. Bhutto, who is generally credited as the founder of Pakistan's nuclear programme and was then foreign minister, expressed his country's disillusionment by opposing the NPT, which Pakistan subsequently refused to sign when it was first enforced in 1968.⁵⁰ Soon afterwards Bhutto warned that 'it will have to be assumed that a war waged against Pakistan is capable of becoming a total war', and called for plans to 'include a nuclear deterrent'.⁵¹

Pakistan's humiliating military defeat by India in 1971, which hastened the secession of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), clearly reinforced Pakistan's sense of insecurity and accelerated its nuclear programme. Although a bilateral accord

⁴⁷ Nizamani, *The roots of rhetoric*, p. 72.

⁴⁸ A statement attributed to Ayub Khan by Z. A. Bhutto in response to a proposal by Bhutto in 1963 for Pakistan to embark on a nuclear programme. Quoted in Nizamani, *The roots of rhetoric*, p. 87.

⁴⁹ At this time Pakistan was also keen to signal its good intentions concerning nuclear non-proliferation. In 1963 it signed the Partial Test Ban Treaty and finally ratified it in 1987.

⁵⁰ Officially Pakistan's opposition to the NPT in 1968 rested on the absence of effective security guarantees that would have proscribed the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. See Khaled Ahmed, 'The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and Pakistan' in Mian, ed., *Pakistan's atomic bomb*, pp. 117-18.

⁵¹ Z. A. Bhutto, *The myth of independence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 153.

with India over Kashmir, the so-called Simla Agreement, helped to stabilize relations between the two countries in 1972, it did little to shift the prevailing view in Pakistan of India as an implacable foe. Most analysts now believe that Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme gained momentum sometime between 1972–3,⁵² when its prime minister, Z. A. Bhutto, ordered the development of nuclear weapons to overcome the military defeat of 1971 and concluded secret agreements with China and Libya to finance and technically support the programme.⁵³

Pakistan's worst fears about India's superiority in nuclear technology were confirmed in 1974 when India conducted a 'peaceful' nuclear explosion. Faced with 'nuclear blackmail',⁵⁴ Bhutto vowed that his people would 'eat grass to ensure nuclear parity with India'.⁵⁵ Pakistan also mounted a vigorous diplomatic campaign to declare South Asia an NWFZ—a move that was rejected by India because it did not address its security problem with China.⁵⁶ Soon afterwards Bhutto redoubled his country's efforts to seek foreign assistance to expand its nuclear programme; but this plan also collapsed in 1978 after the United States forced France to abandon the sale to Pakistan of a plutonium re-processing plant.

Hemmed in by the dictates of the non-proliferation regime, Pakistan's nuclear programme went underground. In 1976 Pakistan inaugurated what was later revealed to be the hub of its nuclear weapons programme in Kahuta, an installation dedicated to the production and enrichment of bomb-grade uranium. China played a key role in developing the programme as an extension of its 'Pakistan tactic', which involved responding indirectly to the Indian nuclear threat by boosting Pakistan's deterrent capabilities.⁵⁷

Despite these developments, Pakistan did not abandon attempts to address its security problem with India through non-nuclear alternatives. In 1981 General Zia, under the influence of his 'doveish' foreign minister, Agha Shahi, proposed a 'no-war pact' with India and revived plans to declare South Asia an NWFZ. Both approaches were rejected by India as either lacking in credibility or unworkable without the participation of China. There was, however, some progress in 1988 when both sides moved to reduce bilateral tension by formally agreeing not to attack each other's nuclear installations.

Pakistan's carefully nurtured policy of nuclear ambiguity was finally jettisoned in May 1998 when it followed India in conducting its own nuclear tests.

⁵² See Ziba Moshaver, *Nuclear weapons proliferation in the Indian subcontinent* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 100–2; Weissman and Krosney, *The Islamic bomb*, pp. 9–29 and Perkovich, *India's nuclear bomb*, pp. 194–5.

⁵³ Stanley Wolpert, *Zulfi Bhutto of Pakistan: his life and times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 194–5; Salmaan Taseer, *Bhutto: a political biography* (London: Ithaca Books, 1979), p. 154.

⁵⁴ A phrase used by Z. A. Bhutto, quoted in Wolpert, *Zulfi Bhutto*, p. 237.

⁵⁵ See statement by Z. A. Bhutto in *Dawn*, 20 May 1974. See also Ashok Kapur, *Pakistan's nuclear development* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), pp. 136–78.

⁵⁶ For a comprehensive review of proposals relating to a South Asian NWFZ see Moshaver, *Nuclear weapons proliferation*, pp. 119–20.

⁵⁷ Walker, 'Nuclear order and disorder', p. 719.

Since the early 1990s there had been calls from a small though extremely vocal pro-nuclear lobby, consisting mainly of retired generals linked to the former military regime of General Zia and religious and right-wing parties, for Pakistan openly to declare its nuclear status as an affirmation of its national sovereignty. Their demands had intensified in reaction to international appeals to Pakistan to sign the NPT and the CTBT. Although many of these groups gained ascendancy and were patronised by the Sharif government, their influence had been successfully contained by a prevailing though fragile consensus across the political spectrum in Pakistan which held that while India was a 'threshold state', Pakistan was at best a 'responding threshold state'. It implied that the nuclear option in Pakistan was not so much an expression of national sovereignty (as it self-evidently was for the pro-nuclear lobby), as an effective deterrent that would match any Indian threat. However this consensus had depended upon a climate of nuclear ambiguity and was secure only so long as India refrained from nuclear testing. More importantly, in the context of Pakistan's 'zero-sum game' of domestic politics, where the nuclear issue was now less a contest over strategic options than over the nationalist or patriotic credentials of opposing political parties, few governments could have been expected to withstand the pressure to test.⁵⁸

Regional

National security interests are not the only considerations that underlie Pakistan's quest for nuclear power status. Pakistan harbours important regional ambitions and these, it believes, are likely to be vastly enhanced by its membership of the 'nuclear club'.

In the 1980s, when the superiority of India's conventional forces became more pronounced and advances in the areas of rocket and missile technology more spectacular,⁵⁹ Pakistan feared that it stood in danger of being relegated to a second-rate player in regional politics. The army, which had seized power in 1977, was particularly aware that Pakistan was unlikely ever to meet the accelerating costs of a modern conventional defence programme, or to close the arms gap with India. The political establishment, though generally hostile to the military regime at the time, shared this view. It too was keen to overcome Pakistan's sense of inferiority and backed the idea of the nuclear option as an 'equalizer' and a means to gain some leverage in Pakistan's regional rivalry with India.

This search for 'strategic equality' with India has deep historical roots in Pakistan. The country's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had legitimised his demand for a separate Muslim state by asserting 'parity' between Indian Muslims and Hindus. This claim, which was designed to elevate Indian Muslims from a minority to a 'nation' entitled to separate statehood, has had a profound effect

⁵⁸ For a considered Pakistani view of the factors affecting the decision to test see Hassan-Askari Rizvi, 'Pakistan in 1998: the polity under pressure', *Asian Survey* 39:1, Jan.-Feb. 1999, pp. 177-84.

⁵⁹ Wirsing, *Pakistan's security*, pp. 89-98.

on Pakistan, where any admission of the country's subordinate role *vis-à-vis* India, especially at the regional level, tends to revive historical memories of its 'lesser' ('minority') status.

Pakistan's regional ambitions received a boost in the 1980s when the United States ended the diplomatic isolation of General Zia's military regime by co-opting Pakistan as a 'front-line' state in the Cold War against Soviet expansion in Afghanistan. Although Pakistan's active involvement in the campaign soured relations with neighbouring Afghanistan and inflicted lasting damage on its own social and economic fabric, it presented it with the first real opportunity to establish 'strategic equality' with India. One recent assessment of Pakistan's Afghan policy suggests that it was motivated primarily by the desire to establish a pliable regime on Pakistan's western borders that would give Pakistan 'strategic depth ... to fight a prolonged war against India'.⁶⁰ Others point to Pakistan's Afghan policy as reflecting Pakistan's need to 'offset Indian predominance in the subcontinent'.⁶¹

The pro-Islamist orientation of General Zia's military regime in the 1980s was, of course, a crucial factor in securing Pakistan's influence over Afghan affairs. It gave Pakistan privileged access to the Afghan *mujahedin* and enabled it to play a decisive role as 'kingmaker' by favouring some groups over others. Key decisions were made by the ISI, which gained vast powers under Zia to funnel US aid to Afghan rebels. The ISI's preference at the time lay with hard-line Islamic factions led by the uncompromising Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who went on to wage a ferocious campaign against rival Afghan groups.⁶² Later in the early 1990s, the civilian governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif were defeated in their efforts to rein in the activities of the ISI, which sought to gain mastery over the prevailing political anarchy in Afghanistan by training and arming its own home-grown band of Afghan militants, the Taliban; they seized power in Afghanistan in 1996.⁶³ With the Taliban regime in disarray following the surrender of Kabul in November 2001, Pakistan has once again signalled its intention to intervene in Afghan affairs by vetoing any future Afghan government dominated by the opposition Northern Alliance, which is said to have the backing of India.

Even if its vital geo-strategic location and privileged intelligence on Afghanistan has allowed Pakistan to set some conditions for its cooperation in the 'war

⁶⁰ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, oil and the Great Game in Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. 186. According to Rashid, Pakistan's preoccupation with strategic depth derives from its 'elongated geography, the lack of space, depth and a hinterland', which inhibit its armed forces from conducting a protracted military campaign against India (Ibid.). The importance of 'strategic depth' for Pakistan may also be a response to the increased reliance on land-based ballistic missiles in South Asia, which some experts believe are likely to become the main delivery vehicles to carry nuclear warheads (the other two being manned aircraft and submarine launched missiles). Both India and Pakistan have invested heavily in ballistic missile programmes. India's medium-range Prithvi missile, which was successfully tested in 1988–9, is deemed by Pakistan to pose the greatest threat to its land defences. In 1998 Pakistan responded by testing its own medium-range Ghauri missile, which it claimed had a possible range of 1,500 km. If so, it would bring most Indian cities within striking distance.

⁶¹ Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: a modern history* (London: C. Hurst, 1999), pp. 267–8.

⁶² Wirsing, *Pakistan's security*, p. 57.

⁶³ Rashid, *Taliban*, pp. 183–95.

against terrorism', it is doubtful whether they would be sufficient to enable it to dictate the shape of a future Afghan government. What lends real weight to Pakistan's demands is its newly acquired status as a nuclear weapons state and its capacity seriously to threaten the fragile regional balance of power. Ironically, while this may well enhance Pakistan's regional standing, it could strengthen precisely those forces, including Islamic parties and conservative army officers, who currently threaten the stability of the Musharraf regime.

Pakistan's awareness of the potential advantages of becoming a nuclear power had been noted as early as the 1980s. One assessment at the time concluded that 'it would not be unnatural for Pakistan to view the development of nuclear technology as a comparative advantage or novel source of bargaining power in foreign relations'.⁶⁴ This is particularly true as far as Pakistan's regional influence is concerned. Politically, it has assured Pakistan of a dependable 'client state' on its western border to counter any Indian threat from the east. Militarily, it has provided 'strategic depth', while ideologically it promises to enable Pakistan to consolidate its role as a powerful patron linking pro-Islamic movements in Afghanistan with militant Kashmiri Muslims opposed to India.⁶⁵

Pakistan's nuclear status is also likely to bring it dividends elsewhere in the region. The Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) are currently the focus of intense interest in Pakistan, which is keen to expand its economic links with these countries. Pakistan is also vying for political influence over the region, in competition with Iran and Turkey, through the auspices of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).⁶⁶ It is even suggested that Pakistan's attempts to extend its reach to Central Asia may be motivated by its search for yet more 'strategic depth'⁶⁷ and, possibly, for the oil dividend that would accrue from the construction of a pipeline from Central Asia to the Indian Ocean.

Ideological

As the first ideologically defined Muslim state of the twentieth century, Pakistan has always been aware of its special place in the history of the modern Islamic world. Its size (the largest Muslim country until the secession of its eastern wing in 1971), strategic location (straddling the Muslim societies of the Middle East and South-East Asia) and sophisticated political and military elite, all raised

⁶⁴ Rodney W. Jones, *Nuclear proliferation: Islam, the bomb, and South Asia* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981), p. 51.

⁶⁵ Pakistan moved its training bases for Kashmiri militants to eastern Afghanistan in 1992–3 to avoid being sanctioned by the United States as a state sponsor of terrorism. This has strengthened the view that 'Increasingly the Kashmir issue became the prime mover behind Pakistan's Afghan policy and its support to the Taliban'. See Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 186.

⁶⁶ Ahmed Rashid, *The resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or nationalism?* (London: Zed Books, 1994), pp. 214–18.

⁶⁷ Iftikhar Malik, 'Pakistan and the Muslim world: national security imperatives and Islamic trans-territoriality' in Iftikhar Malik, *Islam, nationalism and the West: issues of identity in Pakistan* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 215–16.

Pakistan's expectations of emerging as the pre-eminent Muslim power. These expectations were substantially boosted by Pakistan's declaration of its nuclear status, which it hoped would encourage other nascent Muslim states also to recognize it as their 'natural' leader on 'Muslim issues' in world councils.

Early observers of Pakistan's nuclear policy had already drawn attention to Pakistan's desire 'to enhance its standing, influence, and prestige by being the first among its fellow Muslim nations to master the esoteric technology of nuclear weapons'.⁶⁸ Some argued that Pakistan was aware that a nuclear bomb 'would enhance [its] status' among Muslim countries and that 'it would be unnatural if Pakistani leaders were unconscious of this or studiously brushed aside whatever new elements of influence flew their direction spontaneously from other states'.⁶⁹ Z. A. Bhutto, who launched Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, also believed that 'among the rich and security conscious Arab states ... it would enhance Pakistan's stature and importance incalculably'.⁷⁰ Pakistan was clearly alive to the economic benefits that would derive from its growing prestige. According to one prominent critic of Pakistan's nuclear policy, who lobbies on behalf of the Campaign for Nuclear Sanity, 'there is a strong belief that the Bomb [*sic*] would elevate Pakistan's image among Muslim countries. Some cherish the fond hope that if Pakistan explicitly demonstrates its nuclear capability through a test explosion, oil money will pour into the country.'⁷¹

One of the ways in which Pakistan has sought to promote its image among Muslim countries is by characterizing its nuclear programme as a 'bulwark against Zionism'.⁷² The tendency was especially marked in the 1980s when General Zia's close involvement with the anti-communist resistance waged by the Afghan *mujahedin* shifted the focus of the nuclear discourse in Pakistan from the 'Indian threat' to a much broader preoccupation with the 'Zionist threat'. Among those most vigorously in favour of this shift were the leadership of Pakistan's biggest political party, the Jamaat-i-Islami, which cooperated closely with Zia's regime in the formulation of domestic and foreign policy. The withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and Zia's assassination in 1988 forced Pakistan to retreat somewhat from the 'Islamic' centre-stage. However, the Gulf war of 1991 and the subsequent failure of the Middle East peace process, which radicalized Muslim world opinion against the United States and Israel, provided Pakistan with the opportunity of boosting its image in the Muslim world. It did so under Sharif's right-wing government, when a combination of religious parties, right-wing commentators and 'hawkish' ex-generals redefined Pakistan's nuclear programme as a shield to be used as much against Israel and the 'Jewish lobby' as against India.⁷³

⁶⁸ Wirsing, *Pakistan's security*, p. 114.

⁶⁹ Rodney W. Jones, 'Pakistan's nuclear options' in Hafeez Malik, ed., *Soviet-American relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1987), pp. 212-13.

⁷⁰ Taseer, *Bhutto*, p. 154.

⁷¹ Hoodbhoy, 'Nuclear myths and realities' in Mian, ed., *Pakistan's atomic bomb*, p. 7.

⁷² Nizamani, *The roots of rhetoric*, pp. 105-9.

⁷³ See Tarik Jan, ed., *Pakistan's security and the nuclear option* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1995).

An influential body of security analysts in Pakistan now regards the country's nuclear option as a measure of Pakistan's twin commitment to Islam and Kashmir. For these 'bomb crusaders' Pakistan is 'duty bound to be the vanguard Muslim state with a nuclear shield protecting its territorial boundaries and safeguarding the ideological frontiers of the Muslim world'.⁷⁴ While these trends may well revive fears of an 'Islamic bomb',⁷⁵ their significance for Pakistan lies mainly in its traditional concern to be 'first among equals' in the community of Muslim nations.

Conclusions

This article has drawn attention to the gulf that currently separates Western and Pakistani perspectives on Pakistan's nuclear programme and its emergence as a nuclear power. The single most important area of difference relates to the question of Pakistan's stance on nuclear non-proliferation: the prevailing Western discourse on nuclear disarmament is deemed by Pakistan not to be responsive to its concerns about national security. Although there are some signs that the five 'legitimate' nuclear powers, especially the United States, may be moving towards a more graduated approach to non-proliferation in relation to Pakistan, these efforts have met with little response in Pakistan, where the nuclear option is fast becoming an issue as much about national sovereignty as about national security.

Indeed, questions of equity and status are central to Pakistan's nuclear policy, which is increasingly oriented to furthering Pakistan's regional ambitions. There is clearly a need to address the threat posed to world peace and security by a possible nuclear war over Kashmir and the risk of the seepage of nuclear weapons technology from Pakistan to other more volatile regions of the Muslim world. However, only a concerted effort by all parties to strengthen dialogue between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, and involve Pakistan more closely in a global system of surveillance aimed at tightening controls on the export of sensitive material, will really advance the cause of non-proliferation in South Asia.

Ultimately, however, the long-term implications of Pakistan's emergence as a nuclear power will be assessed in terms of Pakistan's own political development. Long periods of military dictatorship have allowed Pakistan's military establishment to exercise undue influence over the country's nuclear programme and determine its priorities. These, in turn, have placed a higher premium on security at the expense of economic development and blurred the distinction between Pakistan's national interest and the corporate interests of its military leaders. A return to civilian rule, however problematic this may be in the short-term, remains the only way genuinely to re-open the debate about the merits of Pakistan's nuclear programme.

⁷⁴ Nizamani, *The roots of rhetoric*, pp. 108, 109.

⁷⁵ See 'The Islamic bomb: priming an old fuse', *India Today*, 15 June 1998, pp. 38–9.