



Islamabad Policy Institute

Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development

Roundtable with Media on

Pakistan's nuclear journey: 21 years of deterrence and stability

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Pakistan's nuclear journey: 21 years of deterrence and stability

Islamabad Policy Institute, Pakistan

CONTEXT

28th May 2019, marked the 21st anniversary of Pakistan's nuclear tests in response to India's Pokhran-II nuclear tests of May 1998. In commemoration of the occasion, Islamabad Policy Institute (IPI) organized an exclusive lecture for media on Friday, May 31, 2019. The topic of the lecture was 'Pakistan's nuclear journey: 21 years of deterrence and stability'. The lecture was widely attended by senior journalists from various national and international media organizations. The participating journalists represented a diverse range of career levels and organizations coming from outlets like Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, Voice of America, Kyodo (Japan), Associated Press, Independent, British Broadcasting Corporation, Bloomberg, IRNA (IRAN) as well as local ones including Dawn, DawnNews TV, Express Tribune, Business Recorder and G-TV.

The event was planned to provide an opportunity to key officials dealing with nuclear issues and journalists to sit directly across from one another and have an intimate discussion on the developments related to Pakistan's nuclear program over the past two decades. The thinking behind the event was that the nuclear issues are difficult for journalists to cover because of the complicated nature of the news related to nuclear disarmament, nonproliferation, and nuclear security. Moreover, these developments are often too fast paced.

Normally, the journalists cover the press releases on NCA meetings, missile tests, the country's position on the developments in the neighborhood affecting regional peace and stability; and the intellectual discussions on these issues on the think tank circuit, but they rarely get a chance to hear directly from the relevant officials. At seminars and conferences, the journalists, despite being one of the most important target audience, are usually relegated to the sidelines as silent observers. The journalists, therefore, at best regurgitate what is told to them, but the downside of all this is that they do not fully understand the message and may not adequately amplify it or even worse may misinterpret it. They may, therefore, not be fully equipped to deal with the international propaganda about the nuclear program reaching them with full intensity and may fall for it.

The event was part of a series of activities that IPI is planning to undertake to better explain the developments in the nuclear program to journalists by directly engaging them in discussions and capacity building activities. IPI, through these activities, would expose the journalists to the leading scholars on the issues and the most relevant officials, who could brief them on political and technical aspects of the nuclear program.

The objective of the lecture and future activities is to assist the journalists in substantive and informed reporting on nuclear issues.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE EVENT

In his opening remarks, Professor Syed Sajjad Shabbir Bokhari (Executive Director IPI) said the nuclear deterrent has, to a great extent, helped in preventing large scale hostilities between India and Pakistan by compelling both countries to contain crises, which keep happening from time to time, at early the early stages of escalation. He emphasized that three aspects of Pakistan's nuclear program were noteworthy. *First*, the nuclear factor was injected in South Asia by India, and Pakistan only responded to this new threat by following suit. While the motivation of India's nuclear program is seeking a status, primarily because of its 'great power' aspirations, Pakistan's nuclear program stems from security, more so following its tragic experience in 1971. *Second*, the nuclear program is specific to security concerns in South Asia *vis-a-vis* India, notwithstanding baseless propaganda about the so-called greater ambitions. Pakistan's nuclear program is defensive and reactive in nature solely to provide full spectrum deterrence to preserve peace and regional security via a stable balance of power in South Asia. *Third*, Pakistan has a very transparent and publicly well-defined system of command and control which is led by an elected civilian government. Pakistan's track record of nuclear safety and security is impeccable and has been recognized as such even by its detractors and critics. Prof Bokhari further announced that IPI would soon publish a handbook for media persons on nuclear issues to enhance their comprehension of nuclear issues and global politics.

The session was moderated by defence analyst Syed Mohammad Ali. Pakistan's nuclear program, Mr Ali noted, has significantly contributed towards meeting both traditional and non-traditional security needs of the country. Nuclear deterrence, he said, had enabled Pakistan

timely manage and de-escalate several regional crises with India during the past three decades. It also gave required confidence to the country's national leadership and the diplomats in managing the crises.

Speaking about Pakistan's Nuclear Journey - 21 Years of Deterrence and Stability, Director General Arms Control and Disarmament Affairs Brig. Zahir H. Kazmi centered his discussion on four postulates:

1. Nuclear weapons have deterred Pakistan and India from waging a major war.
2. But, crises between Pakistan and India have kept recurring and carry with them grave risk of escalation to a larger conflict in the Subcontinent.
3. Despite possession of nuclear weapons by both India and Pakistan, the two countries are in a state of no war, no peace – a situation that must change.
4. Security dilemma exists and pursuit of stability remains elusive.

Brig. Kazmi emphasized on resolution of territorial disputes in the subcontinent for sustainable peace and observed that nuclear deterrence could only restrict major hostilities. He maintained that deterrence is not an end in itself but a psychological state. "It should inspire fear in which the perceived cost of deterrence breakdown is higher than the desired benefits of preferring war as an instrument for dispute resolution."

He listed three constituents of Stability - an enabling geostrategic environment including the presence of mechanism for dispute resolution; exercise of strategic restraint and responsibility amongst the adversaries; and maintenance of balance in nuclear deterrence capabilities through arms control rather than stability through competition.

Director General Arms Control and Disarmament, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mr Kamran Akhtar said that greatest challenge facing Pakistan's nuclear weapon program emanates from its image at international level and the narrative that has been built by its detractors. He, therefore, emphasized greater interaction with local and foreign journalists and media organizations to make them better understand Pakistan's nuclear program and the developments linked to it.

He recalled the common myths and misperceptions about Pakistan's nuclear program that need to be debunked. These myths are:

1. Pakistan has fastest growing nuclear program
2. Pakistan is an irresponsible weapon state
3. Pakistan has history of nuclear proliferation
4. Its nuclear security is vulnerable with a possibility of a terrorist takeover of the nuclear assets or unauthorized use of Pakistan's nuclear weapon by military commanders
5. It is a military led program.

Rejecting the myths, he said the data available internationally does not support the propaganda that Pakistan has the fastest growing nuclear program. Indian nuclear program is the fastest growing nuclear program, he maintained citing studies on Indian program by international panel on fissile material and Belfer Center for Science. He reminded that Indo-US nuclear deal and the 2008 exemption granted to the India by NSG boosted Indian program's capacity to produce fissile material.

Regarding the misconception that Pakistan was an irresponsible nuclear state, Mr Akhtar said Pakistan has been behaving more responsibly than others. He said that during the recent Pulwama crisis, none of the Pakistani leaders (both civilian and military) used the word nuclear, rather it was India that deployed nuclear capable missiles and nuclear submarine and brandished the nuclear threat during the conflict.

While addressing the third allegation regarding nuclear proliferation, he stated that incidents of state sponsored proliferation have existed in history of nuclear politics. The creation of Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 1974, for instance, was a consequence of Indian government authorizing the diversion of spent fuel from the Canadian supplied reactor, which led to so called peaceful explosion by India in 1974. In Pakistan's case the often cited case of proliferation by AQ Khan Network, was an individual act and not state sanctioned proliferation. The state, he noted, took action against the individual when the matter came to notice and instituted a strong export control regime to prevent recurrence of such incidents. He suggested that the world must now move ahead instead of remaining fixated on AQ Khan case because even going by the Statue of Limitations, which assign a certain time after which offenses cannot be punished, it is an old episode, which involved multiple countries and not just Pakistan.

Speaking about concerns regarding nuclear security, Mr. Akhtar highlighted that Pakistan has done much more than any other country on account of nuclear security. Pakistan has a center

of excellence on nuclear security, which is IAEA recognized and hosts international training courses. IAEA director general, he reminded, has visited the center and praised the nuclear security and safety system of Pakistan. About nuclear safety, he said Pakistan is operating five reactors and there have been no accidents so far. Approval of safeguards for eight reactors by IAEA board of governors is in itself a testament that the world is satisfied with our safety record.

Finally with regard to military control of the program, he stated that many nuclear related laws have been amended on the recommendations of Foreign Office, which shows how much civilian input is valued. He asserted that the main policy and decision-making body of the National Command Authority (NCA) is led by Prime Minister as the chairperson and has more civilians than military officials. Moreover, all nuclear program related issues are decided through mutual consensus.

During the discussion with media personals, Mr. Kamran Akhtar said deterrence was largely a misunderstood concept and “some have come to believe that even a stone cannot be hurled at us”. It by no means implies that India could now do nothing against Pakistan, he maintained while explaining how the Indian Air Force intruded into Pakistani airspace despite knowing that Pakistan possessed nukes. He cautioned that the misunderstood concept of deterrence could undermine public confidence and work against deterrence from psychological and political point of view. He further stated that “if Indians are trying to sell this narrative that deterrence failed then it is an irresponsible and dangerous narrative, which could undermine strategic stability and lead to escalation for India would be responsible.”

Brig Kazmi stated that the purpose of deterrence was to close space for war and bring states to the negotiating table. He said deterrence worked during the post-Pulwama military stand-off despite Indian attempt to escalate to a different level by talking about mobilization of nuclear missile and nuclear submarines.

Prof Bokhari concluded the session with a vote of thanks.

CONCLUSION

The speakers during their presentations emphasized that the nuclear deterrent has helped prevent large scale hostilities, but it is important to address the longstanding disputes to achieve sustainable peace in the region. The speakers further mentioned that the entire discourse about the nuclear program has been focused on the security aspect because of the prevailing environment in region. The contributions of the nuclear program towards health and food security, just to name few, therefore often get overlooked in the media coverage.

The journalists in their comments emphasized on the importance of a forum that could serve as a resource to journalists by directing them to appropriate experts and resources as needed.

The speaker session and a part of the Q&A would be put on IPI website so that other journalists could benefit from the discussion at the event.

IPI as mentioned above and encouraged by the participation of the journalists and the extensive press coverage of the event is looking forward to developing a full-fledged media program on nuclear issues.