



Centre for Air Power Studies

PAKISTAN'S NAVAL NUCLEAR BRINKMANSHIP

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Predicated on its strategy for “consolidation of deterrence capability at all levels of the threat spectrum,”¹ Pakistan is reportedly advancing towards sea-based nuclear assets by reckless maritime brinkmanship. The rationale behind its striving for the third leg of nuclear triad seems ill-founded and dangerously destabilising.

During the last decade, notable shifts in Pakistan’s nuclear weapons posture can be marked. Pakistan has moved from ‘minimum deterrence’ posture to ‘second-strike’ capability and now expanding its inventory to include both strategic weapons and TNWs. Reportedly, since 2001, the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) has been working on KPC-3, a project “to design and manufacture a miniaturized nuclear power plant for submarine.”² A decade later, the Pakistani Naval Strategic Force Command (NSFC) was established (on May 19, 2012) with the mandate to develop and employ the Naval Strategic Force as custodian of Pakistan’s second-strike capability.³

A distinct set of motivations drive Pakistan’s naval nuclearisation programme. First is its desire to mirror India’s advances, disregarding the fact that this would neither promote stability, nor guarantee Pakistan invulnerability completely. “Given India’s territorial expanse, Pakistan with its nuclear missile capable submarine would not be able to neutralise India’s broader nuclear weapon capability.”⁴ In fact, India’s nuclear powered submarine, INS Arihant, does “not introduce a strategic imbalance in the India-Pakistan context” as India has renounced the strategic advantage by embracing the No-First-Use (NFU) doctrine.⁵ Also, India’s nuclear deterrence is not Pakistan-centric.

Second, with the pretext of acquiring greater 'strategic depth', Pakistan's naval nuclearisation is an attempt to compensate its conventional inferiority vis-a-vis India. Islamabad seems to follow the precedent set by Israel's alleged decision to place nuclear-tipped cruise missiles aboard conventional submarines.⁶ But this is a dangerous path, which combines dual-use systems with doctrinal opacity – highly detrimental for crisis stability.

For India, it may not be so much the process of naval nuclearisation in Pakistan, rather the manner in which it is being pursued. South Asian deterrence stability or instability will not be determined by second-strike capability alone as Pakistan seems to envisage. In fact, investment in other areas like nuclear tipped cruise missiles, miniaturisation of nuclear warhead (TNWs), and sub-conventional warfare has complicated the regional discourse.

More importantly, the scattering of nuclear assets at sea, particularly aboard surface ships, greatly increases the risks of a nuclear weapon falling into wrong hands – a perennial concern with Pakistan's growing nuclear arsenal. The toxic mix of Jihadi terrorism and nuclear brinkmanship by Pakistan in fact poses greatest threat to the South Asian nuclear discourse. As George Perkovich rightly says, Pakistan "cannot be a responsible possessor of nuclear weapons if it does not have sovereign control over organised perpetrators of international violence operative from its territory".⁷ Pakistan's normal argument that its nuclear assets are secure as they have separated the warheads from the delivery systems "will now be tested" as in the case of sea-based assets physical separation of components is very hard to do.⁸

From operational point of view, sea-based assets need constant refinement of equipment and personnel, razor-sharp communications, robust command and control systems, and the requirement of mastering advanced safety procedures. Therefore, they are not of much strategic advantage if not mastered well and operated optimally. Mere possession of them for the sake of maintaining parity with India will offer no strategic advantage to Pakistan.

Thirdly, Pakistan’s tryst to ensure second-strike capability at sea warrants survivable submarines, reliable communication with national leadership, and accurate missiles to reach assigned targets. Also, much depend on doctrinal clarity, professionalism of personnel, technological sophistication, financial support, etc. These have not been an easy task for countries like China, Japan, Australia, and many others. Moreover, sea-based nuclear assets fit well with NFU doctrine.⁹ Following a nuclear opacity posture along with nuclear first-use policy, Pakistan’s naval nuclearisation could excite offensive operations.

Basically, the Agosta-class submarine – Pakistan’s likely naval nuclear platform – is “indistinguishable from its conventionally-armed counterpart ... creating the chances for accidents, incidents, or heightened tensions”.¹⁰ Also, Pakistan Navy may station nuclear weaponry aboard surface ships and maritime-patrol aircraft which are essentially vulnerable platforms, prone to command and control dilemma as it necessitates delegation of the control of the weapons to the tactical level. This would “dilute the ability of national authorities to maintain the highest degree of political control” over the assets.¹¹ Therefore, possible offensive operations and deployments of Pakistan’s naval assets, and the nexus between new platforms “raise the critical question of strategic stability” and gives birth to “dangerously escalatory dynamics”.¹²

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Moreover, question remains on Pakistan’s capability to design and develop a sea-based nuclear missile. Even China, which is known to be helping Pakistan in its nuclear

programme, does not possess a credible submarine-launched missile yet. The odds that Pakistan will succeed in developing its undersea nuclear assets without assistance from China are highly improbable. Even if it did manage to get an SSBN, it is not certain whether the Pakistan Navy will be allocated enough resources to undertake the responsibility of the nation's second-strike capability. The financial cost of developing and operating sea-based nuclear assets is enormous. Pakistan's oversized submarine plan would certainly add to its US\$61 billion debt burden. Owing to GDP stagnation since 2008 with an average annual growth rate of 2.5 percent, Pakistan was compelled to abandon a multi-billion dollar deal with Howaldtswerke-Deutsche Werft (HDW) for three U-214 submarines, and a deal with China to provide six diesel-electric submarines, as it could not provide collateral.¹³

Given this contour of Pakistan's nuclear brinkmanship, it is a nightmare to introspect how safely it could navigate its upcoming third leg of the triad based on the foundation of a stagnating economy and unregulated military imbued with an India-parity syndrome.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

End Notes

¹ Statement by former Director General Strategic Plans Division, Lieutenant General (Retd.) Khalid Ahmed Kidwai, Press Release, No PR94/2011-ISPR, https://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press_release&id=1721

² Andrew Detsch, "Pakistan's Oversized Submarine Ambitions", *The Diplomat*, October 09, 2013.

³ "Naval Chief Inaugurates Naval Strategic Force Headquarters", Press Release, No PR122/2012-ISPR, http://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press_release&id=2067, May 19, 2012.

⁴ Abhijit Singh, "Pakistan Navy's 'Nuclear' Aspirations", *IDSA COMMENT*, June 29, 2012.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Iskander Rehman, "Nuclear weapons and Pakistan's Naval Strategy", <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/08/22/Nuclear-weapons-and-Pakistans-naval-strategy.aspx?COLLCC=2386816040&>, August 22, 2014.

⁷ George Perkovich, "The Non-unitary Model and Deterrence Stability in South Asia", in Michael Krepon and Julia Thompson (eds.), *Deterrence Stability and Escalation Control in South Asia*, The Stimson Centre, Washington, DC, 2013, p. 34.

⁸ Michael Krepon, quoted by Craig and Karen DeYoung, "Pakistan is Eyeing Sea-based and Short-range Nuclear Weapons, Analysts Say", http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/pakistan-is-eyeing-sea-based-and-short-range-nuclear-weapons-analysts-say/2014/09/20/1bd9436a-11bb-11e4-8936-26932bcfd6ed_story.html

⁹ Rory Medcalf, "Sea-based Nuclear Weapons in Asia: Stabiliser or Menace?", <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/08/06/Sea-based-nuclear-weapons-in-Asia-Stabiliser-or-menace.aspx?COLLCC=2287509229&>, August 06, 2014.

¹⁰ Andrew Winner, "Why Indian and Pakistani Sea-based Nukes are so Troubling", <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/08/29/Why-Indian-and-Pakistani-sea-based-nukes-are-so-troubling.aspx?COLLCC=2363686704&>, August 29, 2014.

¹¹ Bruno Tertrias, "Why Sea-based Nuclear Weapons won't Stabilise the Indo-Pacific", <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/08/07/Why-sea-based-nuclear-weapons-wont-stabilise-the-Indo-Pacific.aspx?COLLCC=2324169849&>, August 07, 2014.

¹² Medcalf, n. 9; Rehman, n. 6.

¹³ Detsch, n. 2.
