

Bad Options:

Or, How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Live with Loose Nukes

By Thomas Donnelly

“The prospect that a nuclear-capable state may lose control of some of its weapons to terrorists is one of the greatest dangers the United States and its allies face.” So states the 2006 report on the Quadrennial Defense Review, noting that, at its core, the problem was one of “internal stability.” While this sort of language might seem vague and euphemistic, Pentagon planners have a very specific scenario in mind: Pakistan. Our most strategically immediate proliferation problems are posed by North Korea and Iran, two states obviously hostile to the United States. But a more important problem may be that of Pakistan, a crucially important ally in the global war on terrorism and the larger “Long War” for the future of the Islamic world. The Pakistan problem magnifies the military difficulties of operating in the shadow of nuclear weapons by trying to focus them through a very cloudy political lens. To be effective, any operation would have to be excruciatingly precise, yet the opacity of Pakistani politics, especially its domestic politics, naturally diffuses any military option. It would be hard to know, in advance, whether American intervention in a Pakistani crisis – whether related to nuclear weapons, materials or facilities – would make things better or make them worse.

An unstable nuclear state poses a novel conundrum for American strategists. We thought we knew how to deter the massive nuclear force of the Soviet Union, through five decades of superpower Cold War – although the unanticipated collapse of the Soviet empire and the resulting nuclear chaos suggests that the principles of deterrence might have rested on a more liquid foundation than we understood at the time. But the Soviets appeared to be the model of

implacable, unchangeable stability, and to them, we appeared to be “rational actors,” predictable and open to carrot-and-stick diplomacy, even if their assessment of carrots and sticks might have been very different than ours.

Despite a high degree of rhetorical hand-wringing, by both the Clinton and Bush administrations and also by other nations, a barely-diminished belief in the efficacy of deterrence remains at the core of the proliferation and broader strategy for Iran and North Korea. The U.S. and international approach in both cases can be regarded as a recycling of Cold War containment, if only because no one can think of a better option. Even though the leaders in Pyongyang and Tehran seem to be the embodiment of irrational, even megalomaniacal, autocrats, we act as though we can do business with them, if we are properly cautious. We pretend not to notice the odd behavior of Kim Jong Il, whose eccentricity was encapsulated by the *Economist* magazine’s cover portrait with the caption, “Greetings, Earthlings,” or even Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose apocalyptic pronouncements are too frequent to keep up with—the daily declarations to incinerate Israel or bring death to the Great Satan America have simply become part of the background chatter. We take their hostility for granted but retain our belief in their rationality as international actors.

Only in the cases of Pakistan – to repeat, an important if uncertain ally – and the remnants of the former Soviet Union do the prospects of dealing with nuclear instability and unpredictability appear to have pierced the adamant brows of American strategists. In the case of Russia, the primary approach has been a kind of renewed arms control reflected in the 1991 Nunn-Lugar Nuclear Threat Reduction Act. And only, really, in the post-9/11 world have the dangers of “loose nukes,” suggested by Pakistan’s backing of the Taliban in Afghanistan, its nuclear brinkmanship with India and the used-car-salesman proliferation practices of A.Q.

Khan, begun to take root in the imagination. Indeed, we are coming very late to thinking about a military option for this very perplexing problem.

Inherently Unstable?

On the other hand, Pakistan has always been a somewhat unstable state; one might even argue it was built upon not just a myth but a falsehood. Even before they created Pakistan, the Muslims of the subcontinent have been divided and confused about many basic questions defining the nation and the state.ⁱ The original conception, as Stephen Cohen of the Brookings Institution has explained, was for a Pakistan as an “extraordinary” state, “a homeland for Indian Muslims and an ideological and political leader of the Islamic world.”ⁱⁱ At the same time, the ideology of the Pakistan movement was opaque and contradictory, with the contradictions seemingly captured in the figure of its leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Karachi-born but trained as a lawyer in England and retaining a lifelong affinity for fine English tailoring. Though a partner of Gandhi and Nehru in the India Congress, Jinnah was suspicious of their all-India approach, and as British imperial power on the subcontinent began to wane in the early 20th century, the compact between Indian Hindu and Muslim likewise weakened. Moreover, Kemal Ataturk’s abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in 1922 threw the Muslim world into turmoil, with the particular effect of politics becoming ever more local; the pan-Islamic caliphate movement collapsed entirely. There was rising political uncertainty not only in the subcontinent but across the broad Islamic world.

Thus, at the 1928 session of Congress, Jinnah proposed not only guaranteed seats for Indian Muslims in national and provincial legislatures, but the creation of three “designated Islamic states” – Sind, Baluchistan, and the Northwest Frontier Province – within a future

independent Indian federation. In other words, while the subcontinent was still struggling to separate itself from British rule, Jinnah was proposing an ethnic state-within-a-state that held within it the promise of further separation. To be sure, to Jinnah and others the allegedly inclusive All-India Congress appeared more like a vehicle for Hindu political dominance. And the definition of who was a “Muslim” was mostly defined in distinction to Hinduism and elided traditional differences between regions and tribes. The deeply secular Jinnah declared in 1940 that the two communities “are not religious in the strict sense of the word, but are in fact different and distinct social orders. And it is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Jinnah’s dream also held an expansionist tendency. When Gandhi embarked upon his “Quit India” campaign at the nadir of Britain’s fortunes in World War II, Jinnah seized the opportunity to double his territorial demands, adding Kashmir, the Punjab and Bengal to his list of Muslim provinces. Though this would prove to be an inherently unstable strategic fantasy, Britain, in its haste to leave India after the war, allowed the growing fissures between Hindu and Muslim to fester. In the final solution to the Raj, the Punjab and Bengal were split, inciting massive ethnic cleansing and resulting in the deaths of nearly 1 million and, of course, leaving Kashmir a contested province. The fundamental instability of the new Pakistan was apparent from the start, and was confirmed – though hardly entirely resolved – by the 1971 secession of East Pakistan. That the nascent “Bangladesh” would rely on Hindu India to secure the separation showed the weakness of Jinnah and Pakistan’s ideas of Muslim brotherhood. The bond of Islam was not strong enough to convince Bengalis that they should remain confederate with, and subordinate to, Punjabis.

“Pakistan is a paranoid state,” writes Stephen Cohen, “that has enemies.” Pakistani strategists and political elites fear they may become a “West Bangladesh – a state denuded of its military power and politically as well as economically subordinated to a hegemonic India.”^{iv} Yet, somewhat perversely, the result is a strategic “adventurism,” by which Cohen means Pakistan’s ambitions in Kashmir and Afghanistan, but which equally should be applied to Pakistan’s nuclear program, to its relations with China, and its ambiguous stance vis-à-vis the Taliban, al Qaeda, various “associated movements” internationally, and its homegrown radicals. Indeed, it’s hard to escape the conclusion that Pakistan began as and remains a profoundly unsettled and unsettling political phenomenon, both internally and internationally.

Curiously for a self-conceived Islamic state, Pakistan has found it difficult to deal with a narrower but more immediately powerful vision of Islam – that advanced by al Qaeda and the radicals. Islamist *madrassas* have provided education, and other state services, when and where the Pakistani government has not. The Pakistani army, by far the strongest institution of the state, has long had cozy relations with Islamist groups, particularly in the eternally troublesome North-West Frontier Province. The traditional wisdom is that the army holds the upper hand. Cohen expresses this perfectly: “The political dominance and institutional integrity of the Pakistani [army] remain the chief reasons for the marginality of radical Islamic groups,” he concluded even in 2003. “Although the army has a long history of using radical and violent Islamists for political purposes, it has little interest in supporting their larger agenda of turning Pakistan into a more comprehensively Islamic state.”^v

But who’s using whom is difficult to tell from a distance. At minimum, there seems to be a strong correlation of interests between Islamic radicalism and Pakistan’s otherwise “national” interests, or the interests of Pakistan’s Pashtuns. Indeed, the history of Pakistan is – to

oversimplify for the sake of clarity – a history of the pact between Punjabis and Pashtuns, a partnership reflected particularly through the Pakistani army and officer corps. While this has itself been an unstable relationship, it has helped keep a lid on the even more fissiparous tendencies of Sindhis and Baluchis. It has also made the Punjabis partners in the nationalistic yearnings of Pashtuns to reclaim “Pashtunistan” – a homeland cut in half by the 1893 Durand Line, the border that allegedly advanced British colonial interests but, like a good number of the borders through the Islamic world, left constant conflict in its wake.

This has made for unending border wars, both in Kashmir – it was Pashtun tribesmen, supported by the Pakistani army, who sparked the fighting that began in October 1947, shortly after the British withdrawal, and continues to this day – and in Afghanistan. The persistence of terror and guerilla attacks in Kashmir, such as the recent series of bombings in Srinagar, is in part a product of “tolerance” in Islamabad, as is the continuing tension with Afghanistan. Speaking at a counterterrorism conference in Turkey in March, Afghan President Hamid Karzai – a Pashtun himself, it should be remembered – complained that extremist tendencies and terrorism in Afghanistan were not just an internal problem, but the result of “political agendas and the pursuit of narrow interests by governments.” By this euphemism, Karzai meant Pakistan, as he made clear when talking about the Taliban, whose rise in the 1990s he described as a “hidden invasion propped up by outside interference and intended to tarnish the national identity and historical heritage” of Afghanistan.^{vi}

Yet it would be a mistake to blame all of Pakistan’s internal and border problems on the Pashtuns; Punjabis have often been at odds with their Baluchi and Sindhi countrymen. Recent deployments of the Pakistani army to Karachi, ostensibly to dampen unrest in the wake of a suicide attack that killed three Sunni Muslim clerics but seen to be a move against the large

Baluchi population there, have fueled Baluchi separatist feelings. Islamabad “has treated Baluchistan like a colony,” complained Imran Khan, a member of the Pakistani parliament. Baluchi nationalist Humayun Baluch charges that Punajbis are being introduced as settlers, traders and miners: “[Our] provincial resources are being exploited and looted,” he says.

People’s rights are being compromised and everything is being done for the benefit of the Punjabis. Army troops, army weaponry, helicopters, jets, and F-16s are being used in Baluchiustan. The population is being forced out and primarily living in Sindh [in Karachi]. Houses have been burned and looted.^{vii}

Also irritating to Baluchi national pride is the construction of the Gwadar port, and the influx of Chinese engineers who oversee the project. On May 3, 2004, the “Baluchistan Liberation Army” killed three Chinese engineers working on the port project, an effort that employs several hundred Chinese nationals; Baluchi nationalists believe that Beijing is in league with Islamabad to develop and export the province’s natural gas resources. Pakistan’s leading natural gas company, Sui, is located in Baluchistan but provides products for the entire country.

Pakistan was born in instability and retains a political culture marked by deep insecurity and uncertainties that underlie the idea of the Pakistani nation and the formation and history of the state of Pakistan. These distortions are exacerbated by the army’s dominance of the state; civil society has been unable to soothe either Pakistan’s real fears or the fears that are the unsurprising result of “adventurism.” Even those accustomed to Pakistan’s “normal” instability, like Stephen Cohen, can be sure that the army will continue to balance these many competing demands in the face of rising Islamic populism or Baluchi separatism; he is not confident much beyond the immediate future. The more Pakistan acts as though it were cornered, the more cornered it becomes. The more tightly the army grips the reins of power, the more likely the bridle may break.

A Nuclear Nightmare

The marriage of seemingly incorrigible instability and nuclear weapons is a profoundly frightening prospect, as the Quadrennial Defense Review noted:

Several other [weapons of mass destruction]-armed states [beyond Iran], although not necessarily hostile to the United States, could face the possibility of internal instability and loss of control over their weapons. The lack of effective governance in many parts of the world contributes to the WMD dangers, providing opportunities for terrorist organizations to acquire or harbor WMD. The prospect that a nuclear-capable state may lose control of some of its weapons to terrorists is one of the greatest dangers the United States and its allies face.^{viii}

The report goes on to observe that collecting reliable intelligence on such programs and activities is a challenge. Research efforts are easy to conceal and difficult to detect and track; the study forecasts “further intelligence gaps and surprises.” Despite such difficulties, the United States must be prepared to “act in cases where a state that possesses WMD loses control of its weapons, especially nuclear devices.”^{ix} If this is an injunction to act should Islamabad lose control of its nuclear weapons – or its nuclear materials, or nuclear expertise – it’s asking an awful lot, not just in a military, operational sense, but in a strategic and geopolitical sense.

Consider, to begin with, the extent of Pakistan’s nuclear program. The effort was begun in 1972, shortly after the secession of Bangladesh, under the direction of Pakistan’s then-Minister for Fuel, Power and Natural Resources, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto – a man who was later prime minister, ousted in a military coup by General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq and executed as a murderer. Pakistan was hit with an embargo of Western nuclear imports after India’s 1974 nuclear test, but the program took a huge step forward in 1975 with the arrival of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, a German-trained metallurgist who had worked at the URENCO uranium

enrichment plant in Holland and had great experience with gas centrifuges. He also, it seems clear in retrospect, had a great experience of espionage, for not only did he supervise the construction of the Kahuta weapons facility – formally, the Khan Research Laboratories – which produces highly enriched uranium and also ballistic missiles, he also enhanced Pakistan’s standing in the clandestine networks of proliferation.

Kahuta is a massive complex east of Islamabad, with dozens of buildings and reportedly housing 3,000 centrifuges. It is said to produce enough material to make three to six warheads per year. While estimates vary, Pakistan’s total inventory of highly enriched uranium is something on the order of 1000 kilograms, enough material for approximately 60 fission devices. In addition, in the 1990s Pakistan began construction of a research reactor at Khushab, near the city of Faisalabad in the Punjab, capable of producing plutonium and perhaps tritium – ingredients key to making smaller-sized nuclear devices. Overall, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has estimated that Pakistan’s nuclear weapons, nuclear testing, civilian nuclear and related facilities extend to nearly two dozen sites, clustered in the Punjab and centered on Islamabad, but also as far away as Karachi, where the Canadian-supplied KANUPP reactor provides power to the city.

All in all, Pakistan maintains a relatively small amount of nuclear material, which it guards closely; under U.S. pressure, formal command and control mechanisms have been improved. The Pakistani army has gained firm control over the nuclear program, which it did not always maintain previously. At the same time, the possibilities of an “insider job,” from those in the Pakistani nuclear establishment with radical Islamic sympathies or from a rogue army officer, can no longer be dismissed out of hand. For that, thank A.Q. Khan.

This is not the place to rehearse the entire story of Dr. Khan's proliferation activities. Experts differ as to how complicit the Pakistani military may have been in the creation and running of the networks that included North Korea, Libya and Iran, but in many ways the more disturbing interpretation would be that Khan operated without the army's knowledge. The civilian prime ministers of the era, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, were both extraordinarily weak, though in different ways. Khan's nuclear programs were nominally under civilian control, although in practice, Khan enjoyed a large degree of autonomy during times of military rule.

While Khan's clients and potential clients were states – possibly including the Taliban's Afghanistan^x -- the nature of his networks and motivations remains as opaque as, well, as opaque as Pakistan. Khan had an undeniable profit motive, but there was more: he was “also motivated by pan-Islamism and hostility to Western controls on nuclear technology.”^{xi} These two traits – pan-Islamism and resentment of Western constraints on Pakistani strength – are part of what make Dr. Khan a figure of Pakistani pride.

The extent of the Pakistani nuclear infrastructure, and the resulting array of potential targets, calls for an arbitrary analyst: to examine the strategic, operational and tactical issues embedded in the Pentagon's rhetoric about securing other nations' nuclear materials, one must simply manufacture a scenario, and hope that it contains some illustrative value. Thus, I intend to discuss a situation in which the facility at Kahuta is penetrated and partially seized by a relatively small force of insurgents, in concert with some radicalized elements of the Pakistani army and nuclear bureaucracy. I will further suppose that while the larger part of this force seizes and defends part of the installation, that one or more smaller detachments may have made off with materials in order to produce a “dirty bomb” – a simpler device more in keeping with the immediate capabilities of al Qaeda and its affiliates. Thus the military task for U.S. and

allied Pakistani forces is to reclaim the facility, render it safe, and attempt to recover whatever has been pirated away. I do not intend to much discuss a “Phase IV,” post-combat environment, but any serious planning would have to do so. The operation will be a watershed event in Pakistani politics, in the politics of the region, and for the United States; a tactical success could still create larger strategic problems.

To repeat: this is a very arbitrary scenario, at once as realistic as any other and at the same time fantastical. Some Pentagon analyses – which seem to be driven more by operational and programmatic than strategic considerations – posit a larger breakdown of the Pakistani state. I cannot judge the relative plausibility of any particular scenario, but intervening in what would amount to a civil war in Pakistan is enough to set the strongest heart aflutter. And, whatever set of circumstances one might imagine, many of the strategic, operational and tactical issues would remain constant from scenario to scenario.

Strategic Issues

While the periodic assassination attempts on Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf have spurred U.S. military planners to begin to work through the operational issues associated with a potential loss of control of nuclear weapons, facilities, materials and expertise, the prospect remains, as the *New York Times* reported, “an extremely difficult and highly risky venture.”^{xii} And, when former CIA Director George Tenet and former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage visited Islamabad prior to the invasion of Afghanistan, an important secondary issue to the invasion was the safety of Pakistan’s nuclear program.

Any operational assessment – even one as brief as the one to follow – must make some strategic assumptions. Although an India-Pakistan exchange occupied many analysts’ minds in

the 1990s, clearly the sort of scenario envisioned by the Pentagon now is a far more limited, if more likely, danger. The first assumption I will make is to stipulate that any U.S. military action in Pakistan must have at least the tacit agreement of the central command of the Pakistani army, if not the government in Islamabad. Indeed, it might be that a split between a future civilian government and the high command would be the event that leads to loose nukes. But any notion of fighting to gain access to Pakistan makes speculation so complicated as to make it an exercise in futility or, at minimum, an operation that takes so long to unfold that it's not responsive to the situation. Also, it must be assumed that the situation that leads to loss of control is not a broad-based rebellion or insurgency against the Pakistani army or the Musharraf government. Fighting for access in the face of a popular uprising across Pakistan, or even across the Punjab, is too hard to contemplate. Another correlated but necessary assumption is that the Pakistani army allows U.S. forces to deploy through some – and at least several – airfields and ports. Indeed, in this illustrative exercise, I will tend to assume the most benign conditions, if only to show how complex even the “easiest case” might be.

A second kind of political presupposition must be made about the international politics of the situation. Attempting to gain a UN resolution, for example, could well slow any useful military action, even if the climate were generally favorable; it's hard to imagine the Chinese being very “forward leaning” – although if the Pakistanis made an appeal to the “international community” in the moment of such a crisis, it might be hard to keep the Chinese out, and even harder to so the longer the operation continues. As in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, allied participation would not be of much military value; at the same time, any U.S. deployment would require international cooperation, such as the use of airfields in Germany. The sole exception to this rule might be Indian assistance, which would be useful tactically and operationally, but any

hint of Indian cooperation would make a U.S. intervention more toxic to Pakistanis than it would be otherwise.

A third set of assumptions has to be made about the level of political and strategic preparedness on the part of the United States. This means not just traditional intelligence “indications and warning,” but a predisposition on the part of an American president and his advisers – and the political system more broadly – to react in a timely fashion. These will be circumstances where indecision can be fatal. It may be that the crisis in Pakistan comes at the denouement of a process that unfolds over weeks or at least days, but that’s hardly a certainty. The key issue is how much predeployment notice is given to U.S. forces. In the spirit of arbitrariness, let’s say one week, enough time to allow the movement of some U.S. forces, but not, for example, large-scale ground forces.

More important than the strategic preparedness would be the preparedness of the American body politic. Under today’s climate, it is difficult to imagine a great enthusiasm for further American “adventurism” in the Islamic world, especially if premised upon worries about weapons of mass destruction. Such public doubtfulness may be a reaction to Bush Administration’s policies and performance since September 11, but the public’s mood would shape the choices of a future administration, too. Even if there were a “rallying” effect in time of crisis, it might be difficult to get a congressional resolution authorizing the use of military force – if indeed the Congress were even in session. In sum, the domestic politics of a “preemptive” operation to secure Pakistani loose nukes is at best uncertain and might well provoke strong opposition.

Fourth, one must stipulate the regional posture of U.S. units. Will we have significant forces still in Afghanistan? What will the location of U.S. carriers, surface combatants and

submarines, and Marine expeditionary forces be? What other operations will be ongoing at the time, such as in Iraq? Again, one must be somewhat arbitrary. For the sake of this argument, I will assume that U.S. forces will have access to Afghanistan for purposes of deployment, that some significant land force will still be deployed there, but, with the exception of small special operations units, its ability to redeploy from Afghanistan will be limited. It should be possible to deploy naval forces, including Marines, to the Indian Ocean littoral, within striking distance of targets in Pakistan. But the core assumption must be that this is largely a strategic deployment by units based in the United States itself.

Operational Issues

The most immediate challenge of any military operation to secure Pakistan's nuclear materials will simply be to get there. It's a long way from the United States to Pakistan, from Fort Bragg to Islamabad. As suggested above, the cooperation of some substantial elements of the Pakistani army and government will be essential. Without access, for example, to multiple airfields and ports in Pakistan – not just for initial, strategic access, but to stage follow-on operations – a U.S. operation would not be possible.

The core of the operation will be infantry-style land forces; air and naval forces can and must provide support, but the operation should not be an exercise in firepower. The most essential units – the small, highly trained teams of Delta Force or the Navy's SEALs – are held in constant readiness to deploy, and indeed, it is reasonable to expect that some of these forces may already be in the region, engaged in the al Qaeda manhunt. But even those units held in high states of readiness would have to deploy from their bases half a world away from Pakistan;

conversely, those forces most likely to be in the region might not be ideal for the immediate mission.

It's reasonable to assume that amphibious forces and Marine infantry, with limited lift capability, are within reach of Pakistan in times of crisis. Additionally, prepositioned stocks on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia would be quite valuable, especially for follow-on operations. Still, the scope of such an operation would overwhelm the capabilities of such small units. This is not simply a "snatch" operation. Two factors argue strongly in favor of a larger force: the size and city-like complexity of the Kahuta facility, and the need to cast a wider "dragnet" to cover possible escape routes – Kahuta is located hard by the mountains and not far from the North-West Frontier Provinces. While Pakistani forces will be able to provide an outer shell of security, along with whatever heavy forces and additional firepower necessary, and will certainly demand to take nominal command at every step of the way, the United States will want to take every step possible to ensure tactical success. A substantial number of Special Forces would be required for liaison with Pakistani tactical units and raids and other highly demanding operations; perimeter-securing number of U.S. Army Rangers or Marine infantry would also be required. Moreover, prudence demands that there be a second substantial "on-call" force should an extraction operation be required or, heaven forbid, an escalation. Ideally, the flow of forces into the region should continue for several weeks; one might deploy, for example, a brigade of the 101st Airborne in Afghanistan, and a follow-on force of Marines or soldiers and their helicopters afloat on a large-deck carrier.

Securing Pakistani air space might well be a challenging task. Even if one stipulates that the Pakistani air force – a not insignificant fleet – is generally friendly, the number of man-portable, heat-seeking air defense missiles available to the "rebels" would be a major worry.

U.S. cargo aircraft would be vulnerable, at the very least on take-off and landing, as would assault helicopters. But even when the air space is secure, the more benign job of building an “air bridge” from the United States to Pakistan in a timely fashion and with sufficient carrying-capacity to move and sustain units in the field would itself be complex and costly.

With the possible exception of the most elite SOF units, there would be several stages of deployment after the initial strategic movement. This isn't going to be a case of deploying directly to the fight. Whether staging in Afghanistan or in Pakistan proper, the force will require tactical and even operational mobility – this means vehicles and helicopters. In addition, the operation will require a small forward headquarters element, but it must be commanded by a very senior general; the military practice of a three-star joint task force headquarters is probably the wrong, one-size-fits all approach. Political sensitivities alone demand a four-star officer; the commander must be able to speak authoritatively and win trust among Pakistanis, as well as in Washington. At the same time, it would be folly to try to direct tactical events from a distance.

Nor would the operational problems be solved once deployment to the theater has been accomplished. Getting from, say, Islamabad to the vicinity of Kahuta would itself be a challenge; for example, there is a single access road whose front gate is closer to the city than to the facility. And there probably would be as much worry about “leakers” – small teams carrying nuclear materials into the surrounding countryside or to the megalopolis of Islamabad and beyond – as about any force holed up in Kahuta. Again, much would depend upon the level of cooperation by the Pakistani army and the overall state of the country, but any situation dire enough to demand an American intervention would also complicate military operations.

Tactical Issues

Well, some tactical issues, to be precise: Let's imagine that an American force actually makes it to the scene of a Kahuta crime. The deployment will have been a difficult challenge, but the situation at the site will be no cakewalk.

The Kahuta facility is a large one, as discussed above. It is a small city nestled into the ridges of a mountain, making access difficult and any operations inside the facility itself a kind of urban warfare. Since Kahuta, in addition to being a nuclear facility, also hosts the factory for Pakistan's ballistic missiles, there would be plenty of explosive material to handle. Whether a break-away group might be able to manufacture a radiological "dirty bomb" on the premises is an interesting question.

Penetrating the Kahuta perimeter should be relatively easy to do, despite the fact that there is a single access road. But the situation inside would be a challenge. Any intelligence about the site itself – and I would assume Pakistani army cooperation here – would still be of limited value. The location of nuclear weapons, materials, scientists, hostages and the disposition of the enemy inside would be hard to determine. The enemy within would have a fair amount of time to prepare multiple fighting positions, plant mines and booby-traps, and plan retreat and escape routes.

Additionally, there might be very little time for intelligence preparation of the battlefield; time would most likely be an overriding factor. It would be hard to preserve the virtue of patience. Satellite surveillance would be useful, but ideally, more persistent and penetrating intelligence-gathering platforms, from unmanned aerial vehicles to larger manned electronic warfare aircraft, would be among the first units to deploy. But how much capability would be available is difficult to say.

Even supposing that, like a George Clooney movie, the operation ends relatively successfully, a number of further questions would remain. Was all the nuclear material accounted for? How would we know? If some has gone missing, where is it, or how far might it have gone? (It's not very far, for example, from Kahuta to Kashmir.) Even if we believe we have all the stuff, what is to be done with it? What, exactly, is meant by "rendering safe" – the term of art for dealing with recovered nuclear materials – in this situation?

And what happens after the immediate operation is concluded? What will have been the larger effect on what we have stipulated will be an extremely chaotic situation in Pakistan? Will we hold the nuclear materials "in trust" for a future Pakistani government? Will such a U.S. intervention tip the balance in a civil war – how could it not? What is a reasonable "exit strategy" in this situation?

Inventing New Options

In the end, the very complexity of such an operation – which would be similar in the cases of North Korea or Iran – makes it quite right for the Pentagon to start thinking about options for dealing with "loose nukes" other than the kind of recycled arms-control thinking reflected in the Nunn-Lugar program, IAEA reform or other international agreements. Traditional nonproliferation approaches can have a value, and the danger is great enough to warrant the effort, but working on a military "Plan B" is more than prudent. At the same time, taking the bottom-up, tactical-and-operational approach can only be expected to achieve limited goals, making a "military option" only slightly less unappealing while still leaving the strategic and geopolitical conundrums to be solved on the spot. One of the strongest reasons to work through the operational and tactical challenges is the need to make informed strategy. The

likelihood of the above scenario ever coming to pass is less important than the fact that the distances, geography and other military realities are, more or less, constants.

As hopeless as this paper may have made it seem, perhaps the best protection against a loss of control of nuclear materials in Pakistan is for the United States to adopt a long-term policy of engagement with the army and with the people of Pakistan. As things now stand, our desire for stability and nuclear control depends entirely on General Musharraf and the Pakistani army, a necessity that will continue for the foreseeable future. At the same time, the dominance of the army and the Punjabi elite has stifled any hopes for a more legitimate and responsible government in Islamabad. Fortunately, the Bush Administration appears to have realized that South Asia is a strategic priority for the United States; the American commitment to Afghanistan and the budding strategic partnership with India have the potential to shape a more stable future for the region. Pakistan has every reason to feel itself an important part of this future, and to become something other than a paranoid state beset by enemies with nothing more than nuclear weapons to guarantee its safety. That would be a genuinely new option.

Notes

ⁱ This argument is developed more fully in Thomas Donnelly, "Countering Aggressive Rising Powers: A Clash of Strategic Cultures," *Orbis*, Summer 2006, pp. 1-16.

ⁱⁱ Stephen Cohen, "The Nation and the State of Pakistan," *Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2002, p. 109.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 1997, p. 523.

^{iv} Stephen Cohen, "The Jihadist Threat to Pakistan," *Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2003, p. 7.

^v *Ibid*, p. 19.

^{vi} Ron Synovitz, "Afghanistan: 'Pashtunistan' Issues Linger Behind Afghanistan-Pakistani Row," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 24, 2006.

^{vii} Ayesha Khan, "Pakistan: Simmering Baluchi Insurgency Complicates Regional Relations," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 20, 2006.

^{viii} U.S. Department of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, 2006. p. 32.

^{ix} *Ibid*, p. 33.

^x See David Albright and Corey Hinderstein, "Unraveling the A.Q. Khan and Future Proliferation Networks," *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2005, pp. 111-128.

^{xi} *Ibid*, p. 112; see also William J. Broad, David Sanger and Raymond Bonner, "How Pakistani's Network Offered the Whole Kit," *New York Times*, February 13, 2004.

^{xii} David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, "A Nuclear Headache: What If the Radicals Oust Musharraf?" *The New York Times*, December 30, 2003.