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The First Casualty of the War on Terrorism Must not be Pakistan: Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons must not fall into Terrorists' Hands

The United States must carefully craft its approach to nuclear-armed Pakistan for help in extracting Usama bin Laden from Afghanistan. Many Pakistanis are sympathetic to the Taliban, and militant Pakistani clerics vocally oppose the government's cooperation with the United States. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf must be able to offer assistance to the United States such that domestic instability does not rise to the level that threatens his government. Similarly, the United States must not exert too much pressure on Musharraf and must provide him with sufficient incentives, political support, and other tools to stay in power. Increased instability in Pakistan could make Pakistan's nuclear weapons and stocks of nuclear explosive material dangerously vulnerable to theft by militant groups.

Pakistan's nuclear assets are substantial, but little is known about the security of these assets. As the end of 1999, according to estimates by the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) Pakistan possessed sufficient nuclear explosive material (plutonium and weapon-grade highly enriched uranium (HEU)) for 30-50 nuclear explosives (bombs and/or warheads). ISIS presumes that Pakistan has increased this stock since the end of 1999, given its military competition with India.

Whether or not all of Pakistan's nuclear explosive material has been converted to nuclear weapons is unknown, leaving the possibility that many kilograms of bulk material may be poorly protected. The key sites and facilities used to produce plutonium and HEU have been identified, but the storage locations of these materials and weapons are undoubtedly among the most important state secrets in Pakistan.

Should the location of these materials become known, security forces at storage sites may be unable to thwart a determined attack by extremist groups allied with bin Laden or the Taliban, particularly if even a small number of guards are sympathetic to the Islamic fundamentalist cause. In the extreme case—should extremists take over the Pakistani government—control over Pakistan's nuclear explosive materials and weapons could be lost irretrievably.

Crafting a policy that will ensure Pakistan's survival will not be easy. The U.S. track record in Pakistan in recent years has had limited success. Western sanctions following Pakistan's 1998 nuclear tests, and more recent overtures to Pakistan's arch-rival India, have alienated both its population and leadership from the United States.

"Fighting the war on terrorism starts with ensuring the stability of a nuclear-armed Pakistan," said David Albright, the president of ISIS, "otherwise the terrorist threat will take on a new, frightening dimension."

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For additional information about Pakistan's nuclear weapons and fissile material capabilities, see <http://www.isis-online.org/maproject/pakistan.html>.

For additional ISIS resources on the threat of nuclear terrorism, see <http://www.isis-online.org/publications/terrorism/index.html>

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