Pakistan, Proliferation, and the Middle East

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

This week's coup d'tat in Pakistan against the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has returned the Pakistani military to power just as neighboring India was installing a new government after national elections. While much attention is being focused on the immediate risk of a diplomatic confrontation between the world's two newest nuclear powers, the change in Islamabad could also have important repercussions in the Persian Gulf: Pakistan could export missiles and weapons of mass destruction in a direct challenge to U.S. policy.

Proliferation to the Middle East? Pakistan has a long-standing military relationship with the Arab Gulf states, which are geographically as near to Pakistan as New York is to Chicago. As Muslims, but not Arabs, Pakistani contract military personnel provide a loyal backbone to local armies. A whole Pakistani tank brigade used to be based in Saudi Arabia, and flying with the air force of Abu Dhabi--the leading emirate of the United Arab Emirates (UAE)--was once the fast track for promotion at home for Pakistani pilots. Both countries continue to receive Pakistani technical and training assistance, as do three other Arab Gulf states: Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar.

But Pakistan has more to offer than just military personnel. Pakistan has at least two missiles in its arsenal: the 1,125-mile-range Ghauri, successfully flight-tested both this year and last, and the 375-mile-range Shaheen, tested earlier this year. The Ghauri, now under production, is based on a North Korean adaptation of the old Soviet Scud, while the Shaheen is thought to be a variant of the Chinese M-9. In addition, prompted by India's own nuclear tests, Pakistan tested two different designs of atomic bomb last year. One was a design provided by China fourteen years earlier; the other was developed indigenously by Pakistani scientists. The latter included elements of miniaturization, a crucial stage in the development of missile warheads. Although the United States is thought to have received assurances in the past from Pakistan about not exporting its nuclear technology, these now need to be renewed. Any guarantees on missile sales are thought to be much weaker.

The danger of missile proliferation is two-fold: direct supply and the indirect transfer of technology. The most likely customers for Pakistan's missiles are the Arab Gulf states, including U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and Dubai. Riyadh bought around forty CSS-2 missiles--which are capable of reaching targets in both Iran and Israel--from China in the mid-1980s. Dubai, part of the UAE, has acquired several Scud missiles. Both systems are considered out-of-date. By contrast, Pakistan has awkward relations with neighboring Iran, in part based on the status of Pakistan's 20 percent

Shi'a Muslim minority, and Islamabad is thus unlikely to sell missiles to Tehran. But Pakistan's improvements to North Korean missiles could well be transferred to Iran by the cash-short Pyongyang government, which last year declared that earning foreign exchange was a basic motive of its missile development.

Saudi Arabia has recently been paying particular attention to Pakistan, with high-level Saudi visitors to Pakistan within the last year including Crown Prince Abdullah. In May this year, Saudi defense minister Prince Sultan visited Pakistan's uranium enrichment plant at Kahuta, outside Islamabad, as well as the adjacent factory making the Ghauri missile. The Saudis provided the aircraft in which Sharif, then Pakistan's prime minister, flew back from Washington after his July meeting with U.S. president Bill Clinton.

Over the years, Pakistan has avoided direct participation in the Arab-Israeli dispute, but Israel has grown increasingly concerned by Pakistani development of nuclear weapons and its support for Islamic extremists in Afghanistan. This has led to growing links between Israel and India, in particular the supply of weapons systems. The coup might speed these links. But at the same time that India's relations with Israel have been improving, India is also becoming more involved with the Arab Gulf states; driven by its booming economy, its soaring energy demand can best be met by natural gas from the Gulf, either through pipelines or as liquefied natural gas (LNG). The commercial importance of India for the Gulf states is a major factor in their neutrality on India-Pakistan issues.

Pakistan's New Military Rulers. Pakistan's military-bureaucratic elite has always been crucial to running the country and, until domestic political challenges occur, will probably administer competently. Two views dominate in this group: a determination to safeguard Pakistan as a Muslim nation and a refusal to accept Indian hegemony in South Asia. Although Pakistan's population is smaller--150 million compared to more than 1 billion for India--its income per capita is greater. And Pakistanis take great pride in pointing out that although many people in Pakistan are poor, very few starve to death as might happen in India. These views have been reinforced in the last eighteen months by Pakistan's ability to match India's missile and nuclear developments.

The worldview of the new Pakistani leader, General Pervaiz Musharraf, is thought to be colored by the experience of being born in what is now India and having to leave as a refugee for Pakistan after the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947. A career soldier trained in the United Kingdom, he spoke in English in his first television broadcast after the coup. He probably sees his coup as being the proper reaction of a Pakistani soldier when the politicians have made a mess of running the country.

But the Kashmir crisis earlier this summer is a worrying example of what might happen again in the future. Pakistan was trying to use force to break the deadlock in the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, whose majority Muslim population has been ruled by India for more than fifty years. General Pervaiz is reported to have been a leading planner of the Kashmiri action in which Pakistan infiltrated Islamic fighters--veterans of the war against Moscow's rule in Afghanistan--along with its own special forces. The initial successes of the Pakistani-backed forces were soon blocked, however, and Pakistan was forced to withdraw all the fighters, in part under pressure from the United States.

U.S. Policy Issues. Pakistan likes to see itself as a friend of the United States, and the two countries were closely allied during the Cold War. In the 1980s, for instance, U.S. aid to Afghan fighters poured through Pakistan. But on issues like nuclear weapons and missile development, Pakistan has taken a determinedly independent stance. Its views on the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism and the need to preserve the regional status quo are also radically different from those of Washington. The United States needs to search urgently for common ground to ensure the stability of both South Asia and the Middle East. And Washington will want a reversion to democracy and rule of law, though this seems unlikely to happen in the short-term--the military in Pakistan is part of the political balance in the country because other state institutions are either weak or have become too politicized.

Simon Henderson is an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute who has lived in Pakistan and made a special interest of following its development of nuclear weapons and missiles.

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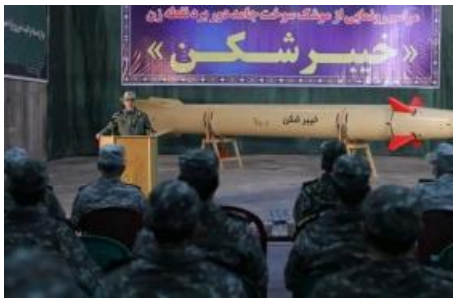

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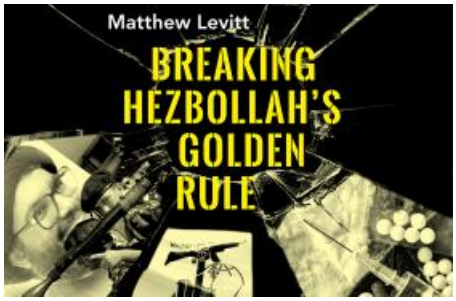

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