

## **Whose Bomb is it Anyway? Public opinion and perceptions about Nuclear Weapons and Policy in the Post-Explosions Phase in Pakistan**

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### **Introduction**

The Pakistani society is riddled with fissures on almost every issue and aspect concerning the nature of political system, nation-building, the meaning of the national identity and the means to ensure it. When it comes to the nuclear issue amidst this cacophony and chaos, General Pervez Musharraf asserts that there is complete national consensus on Pakistan's nuclear program. Leaders of *Jamaat-E-Islami*, the most vocal political party in espousing the cause of nuclear Pakistan, argue that barring few individuals who are against nuclear weapons, the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis consider nuclear weapons essential for the country's security. Is there really a consensus in Pakistan regarding the nuclear option? Have people thought about their country's nuclear weapons program and policy? Have they thought about the likely costs of their country's nuclear program? Do they know who is in the control of the country's nuclear infrastructure? Such questions address the perceptual, doctrinal, command and control, and future dimensions of Pakistani nuclear weapons and policy.

To find answers to such questions, I conducted a countrywide survey, with the help of dedicated volunteers who are too numerous to name here, between June-August 2000 to gauge the nuclear nationalism and its related aspects in the world's newest nuclear power, and ascertain what ordinary men and women living in different parts of the country thought about it. I thank Monterey Institute of International Studies' Center for Nonproliferation Studies (USA) for providing me the opportunity to work on this study through a postdoctoral fellowship.

With illiteracy hovering at around sixty percent, the majority of people living in rural areas, and with women often considered as silent spectators in the political culture, earlier surveys on the nuclear issue have only solicited views of the elite urbanized section of the population. Although very useful in some respects, those surveys hardly tell anything about the presumed consensus on the nuclear issue. The present survey tries to fill that gap by reaching out to the marginalized and the rural sections of the population as well. In these essays, I present descriptive results of the survey from the province of

Sindh and offer preliminary analysis of these results to bring out various shades in the nuclear landscape of Pakistan.

The survey findings will help us better understand the shades of public opinions and attitudes about Pakistan's security with special reference to various aspects of the nuclear issue in the post-Chagai period. The survey questions deal with perceptual, command and control, current and future role of nuclear weapons as means of policy, probability of accidental use, and the possibility and scenarios where Pakistanis could support deliberate use of nukes.

Starting with a brief profile of Sindh—primarily to enable readers not familiar with Pakistan's political landscape—I shall provide the demographic breakdown of the survey's respondents. Then I discuss the survey findings on peoples' perceptions about the nuclear weapons, their views on the policy and doctrinal aspects, and lastly their understanding of the issues related to the command and control of nuclear weapons. An analysis of implications of the findings for different groups is discussed in the conclusion.

### **Sindh: Profile and Context**

Sindh is the second most populous province of Pakistan with a population of about 29.9 million—according to the 1998 census—which is approximately 23 percent of Pakistan's total population of 137 million in 2000.

There are two main linguistic groups in Sindh. Mohajirs—literally meaning immigrants are Urdu speaking immigrants mainly from Northern India who arrived in the province during partition in 1947 and years following that—are mostly settled in the urban metropolises like Karachi and Hyderabad. Karachi—the country's largest city with a population of approximately six million—is considered a Mohajir stronghold. The Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) disputes the six million figure as Karachi's population. Its estimates put it as more than ten million people. The rural areas and small towns of the province are predominantly Sindhi speaking.

The Mohajirs have been electing the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) candidates as members of provincial and national legislatures in successive elections. The party, with its top leadership living in exile in London, has been vehemently against the "Punjabi Establishment." Altaf Hussain, the leader of the MQM, has gone to the extent of

declaring the 1947 partition as one of the biggest blunders in human history. He has challenged the validity of the Ideology of Pakistan—a pliable term used by the dominant discourse in Pakistan to mean variety of things at different times.

The Sindhi intelligentsia's anathema and mistrust toward Islamabad even predates the MQM's pronouncements. They have long viewed Sindhis as a wronged community in Pakistan. These sub-national movements do not necessarily echo the dominant national discourse's views about the country's identity, its security needs, and the means to ensure the national security. With a focus on various aspects of the nuclear issues, this study highlights shades of opinion from the province of Sindh in the nuclear discourse of Pakistan.

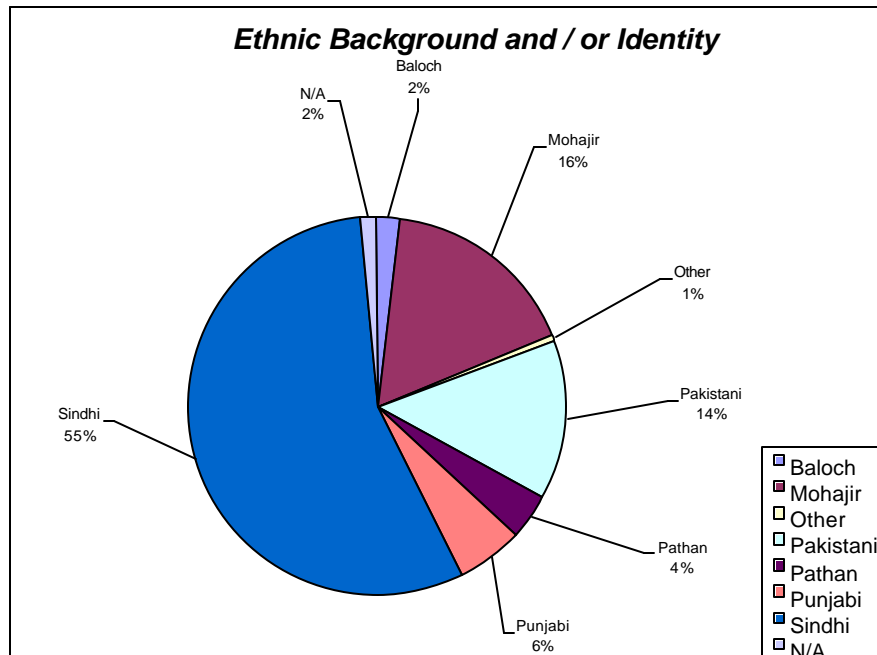
### **Demographic and socio-political breakdown**

The results presented here are a part of the larger countrywide survey with a sample size of 800 respondents. The number of respondents from Sindh is 200 divided almost equally between rural and urban areas. Of these 200 respondents, 133 are male (67 percent) and 66 (33 percent) are women. Although it would have been ideal to have equal number of respondents from each gender, the cultural impediments to interact with women makes the share of female respondents lower. However, the percentage of women respondents in this survey is still significantly higher than the survey commissioned by the Joan B. Kroc Institute and published in 1998 as an edited volume titled *Pakistan and the Bomb: Public Opinion and Nuclear Options*. That survey was conducted prior to the May 1998 explosions and only seven percent respondents in it were female.

Pakistan is the society of young people and that is reflected in the age-breakdown of this survey's respondents as well. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed are under 39 years old. Sindh is an ethno-linguistic mosaic and the manner in which people have defined their identities amply testifies it (see Chart 1). Slightly over half of the respondents identified themselves as Sindhis (55 percent). This shows the level of confidence in identifying oneself as a part of the Sindhi imagined community. The MQM has been in the forefront of creating a Mohajir sense of identity, but only 15 percent of the respondents identified themselves as Mohajirs. That is well below the projected percentage of Urdu speaking population in Sindh. The answer lies partly in 14 percent of the respondents identifying themselves as Pakistanis, who, one can safely proffer are mostly Urdu speaking. Islamabad has persistently tried to create an overarching Pakistani

identity at the expense of ethno-linguistic identities, but this survey shows that people in Pakistan can and do have multiple identities.

Chart 1: Ethnic Background and/or Identity



### Perceptions about Nuclear Weapons

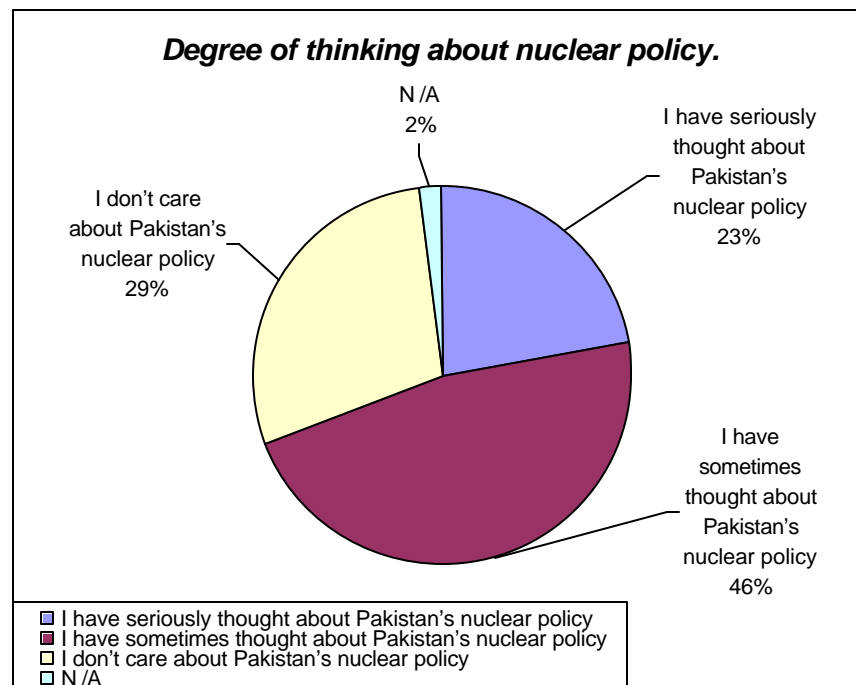
The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led government in India decided to conduct nuclear explosions on May 11, 1998 and the operation was codenamed *Shakti* (strength). The Indian decision to test determined the timing of the Pakistani explosions that followed on May 28. The question for the government of Nawaz Sharif was not whether it would authorize the tests, but when would it do so. Sharif claimed that Pakistan's defense has become impregnable after the explosions. Couple of years after the tests when the people of Sindh were asked if they shared the same sentiment, a majority of them (61 per cent) replied in affirmative, but a significant 31 percent of them did not think Pakistan was more secure after the nuclear explosions, and eight percent of respondents said they did not know if the nuclear tests had enhanced the country's security.

Greater honor, respect, and status are oft-repeated themes among proponents of the nuclear option in Pakistan. The leading lights of nuclear nationalism argue that Pakistan, being the first Muslim country to induct nuclear weapons in its armor, has earned itself respect of the world at large and of the Islamic countries in particular. Only

fifty-four percent of the people in Sindh concur with the above characterization, and thirty percent think that nuclear explosions have not earned Pakistan any international respect or status. Approximately fifteen percent are not sure whether the explosions have earned or eroded Pakistan's international standing.

The mainstream and undifferentiated accounts subscribing to the notion of a consensus in Pakistan about the nuclear issue assume that Pakistanis have reached at the consensus stage after seriously debating and thinking about their country's nuclear program and policy. When probed on this issue, the results indicate that majority of people of Sindh either do not care about the nuclear policy or only occasionally think about it (see Chart 2).

Chart 2: Degree of thinking about the nuclear policy



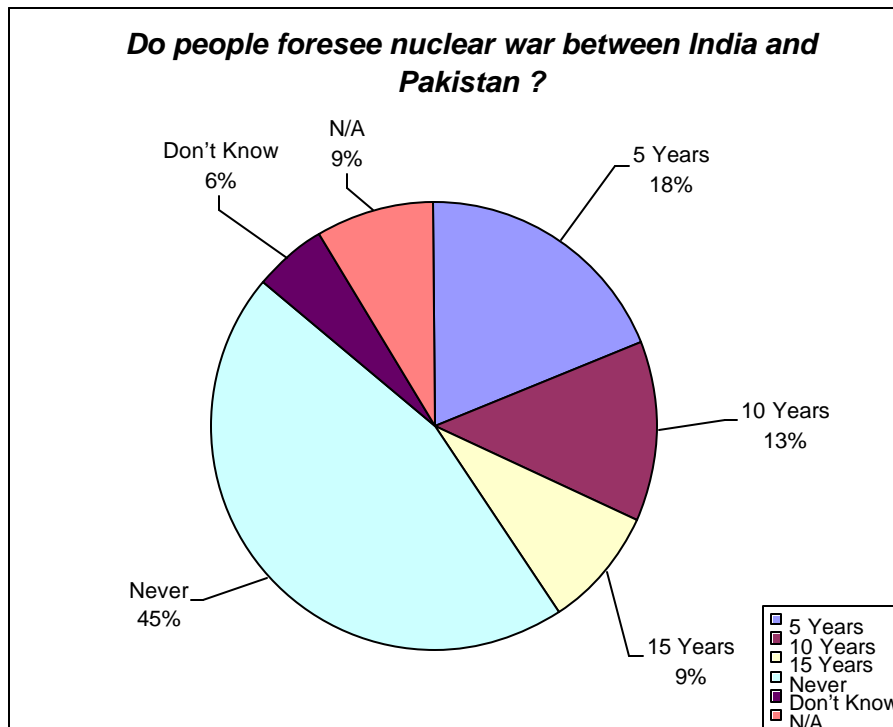
Secrecy is the hallmark of the Indian and Pakistani nuclear programs when it comes to their technical aspects and the decision-making processes. Both governments have expected and assumed that their citizens believe in what they say about the nature of the nuclear programs and its policy directions. The myth of consensus also assumes a high level of trust between the government and the ordinary people on the issue of nukes. Almost half (45 percent) of the respondents in Sindh say that they do not believe what the

government says about the country's nuclear program and policy. Another 20 percent did not know if they believed the government's word or not. Only thirteen percent strongly believed what the government said about the nuclear program, and another 18 percent believed in general what the government was saying. This finding further dents the dominant claims about a consensus on the nuclear issue as far as Sindh is concerned.

The Pakistani government's dithering on the issue of the signing of the CTBT is based upon the argument that it is trying to build a consensus in the society on this fractious issue. The underlying assumption here is that ordinary Pakistanis have a say in determining the policy options in such matters. The majority of people in Sindh (46 percent) do not think they have any say in shaping the country's nuclear policy. Only 19 percent strongly agreed with the statement that ordinary Pakistanis have a say in what the government decides on the nuclear issue, and another 24 percent agreeing that their views are taken into consideration while framing the nuclear policy. Combined together, the lack of trust in the government's utterances about the nuclear policy and peoples' perceptions about their minimal says in the formulation of this policy contradicts the claims of the proponents of the dominant view on the nuclear discourse.

Another perceptual aspect about nuclear weapons concerns their utility as war-preventing means between India and Pakistan. One of the favorite leitmotif in the nuclear discourse in Pakistan is that with the introduction of the nuclear weapons in the strategic interaction between the two hostile neighbors, the probability of a major conventional war is now minimal. When asked if they foresee any major conventional war between India and Pakistan, only 45 percent respondents thought there will be no war between the two countries, but 40 percent of people, with varying degrees (see Chart 3), saw the probability of a conventional major war between India and Pakistan in the next fifteen years. This shows that the majority of people in Sindh do not share the assumption of nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrents—pivotal point of those who try to rationalize the acquisition of nukes.

Chart 3: Do people foresee a nuclear war between India and Pakistan



The traditional thinking on the nuclear weapons suggests that nuclear weapons are there to avoid war not conduct it. The possession of nuclear weapons infuses responsibility in parties and they realize that nuclear weapons are not a war fighting means. Only 54 percent of respondents in Sindh think there will never be a nuclear war between India and Pakistan, but 29 percent of them think there will be a nuclear war between the two countries in the next five to fifteen years. It would be interesting to see if those who think there will be a nuclear war between India and Pakistan have pondered over ways to avoid this eventuality or prepared themselves for the catastrophe.

I have observed in my discussions with people in Pakistan that there is a severe lack of understanding about the actual destruction that a nuclear war can cause. A nuclear confrontation is considered a somewhat refined form of the conventional warfare. A major reason for this could be the fact that previous conventional wars between the two

countries have primarily been border wars where civilians in the then West Pakistan remained mainly unharmed.

### **Policy and Doctrine**

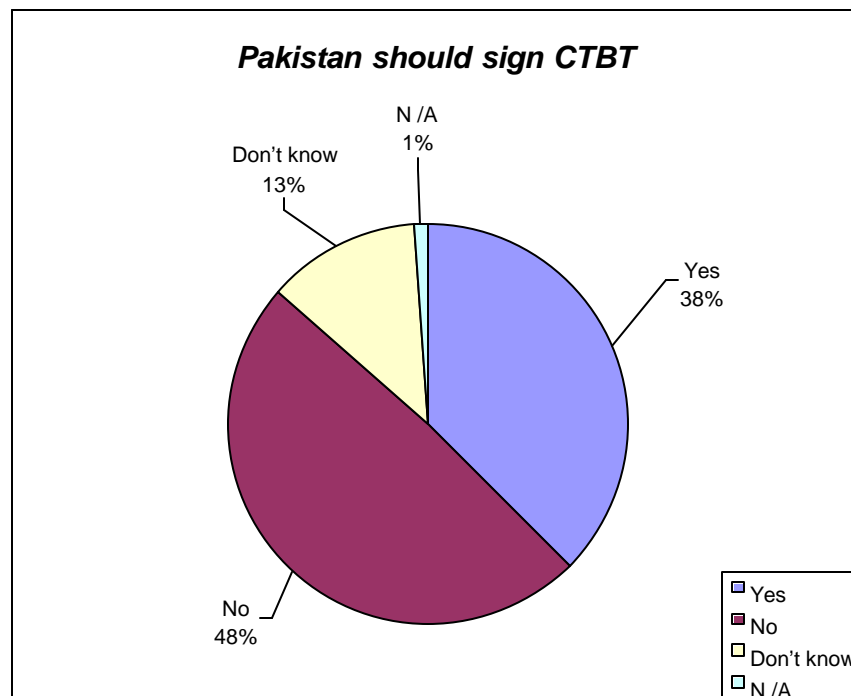
Countries have to grapple with questions about the policy, doctrinal, and command and control aspects after acquiring nuclear weapons. “How and for what purposes should they plan to use such weapons?” This question is at the heart of military doctrine which broadly consists of “plans about how and when military force is to be used.” This section deals with peoples’ response to the questions concerning the contours of Pakistan’s nuclear policy and military doctrine.

The Jamaat-e-Islami has championed the cause of preventing the government from signing the CTBT. By way of putting pressure on the government, the Jamaat conducted, what it termed, a nation-wide referendum on the CTBT in March 2000. The results, as imagined by the Jamaat, were overwhelmingly against the CTBT. Almost 98.5 percent of those who voted in the referendum were against Pakistan signing the CTBT. The percentage of the CTBT opponents in Sindh was slightly lower than the national average, but still 98.30 percent of ballots cast were against the CTBT. Nuclear hawks have made effective use of the Jamaat’s referendum verdict as a byword for anti-CTBT consensus in the country declaring, in General Hamid Gul’s words, that the “entire Pakistani nation is against signing it.”

If one accepts uncritically the results of various referenda held at the national level, the otherwise fractured electorate of Pakistan would come out as a homogenous bloc. Mercifully, the unrealistically one-sided results claimed by these referenda have always cast serious doubts about their validity. We need not look farther than the April 2002 referendum which extended General Musharraf’s presidency by five years.

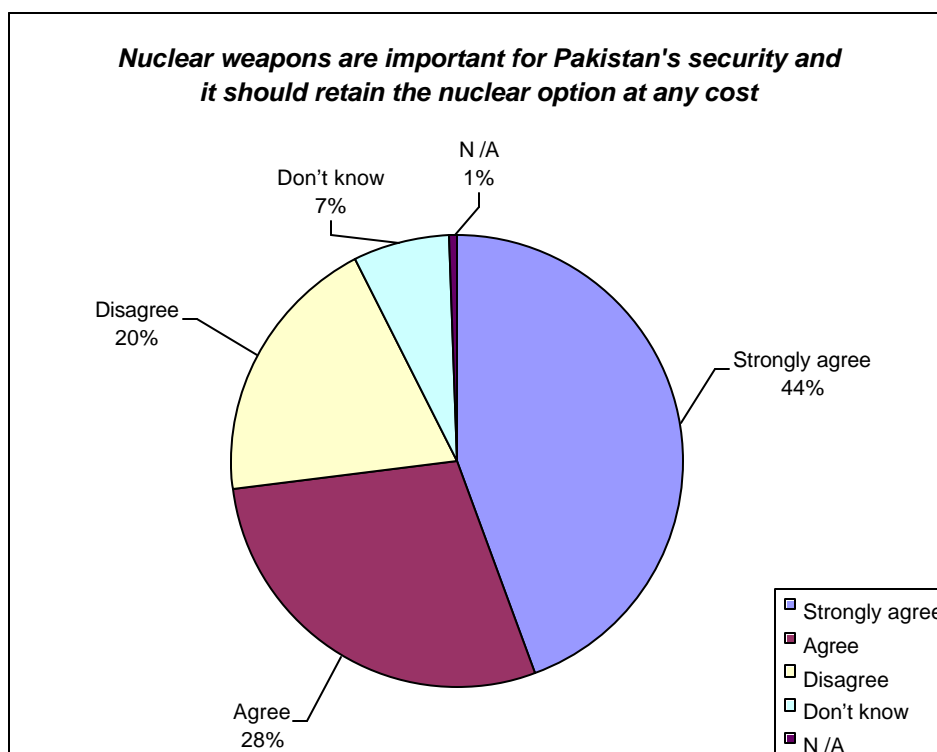
The response of people of Sindh in our survey on the issue of the CTBT signing was nowhere near what the Jamaat claims. Less than half of the respondents (48 percent) were against signing of the CTBT, while close to 40 suggested that Pakistan should sign the CTBT (see Chart 4). The substantial support of the CTBT in Sindh can be partly explained by the gulf of security perceptions in Islamabad and the province.

Chart 4: Pakistan should sign the CTBT



Retaining the nuclear option has become an article of strategic faith in Islamabad. It is portrayed as one of those rare issues on which the entire Pakistani society agrees. The Chart 5 shows that 72 percent of people in Sindh concur with the statement that nuclear weapons are important for Pakistan's security and nuclear option should be retained at any cost. Such support for the official claim suggests that Islamabad has succeeded quite well in convincing ordinary citizens of the province about the viability of the nuclear program and its importance for the country's security. This support will, however, come as a surprise to the cadres of ethno-national parties who imply that Sindhis' views on national security are diametrically opposed to those of Islamabad.

Chart 5: Nuclear weapons are important for Pakistan's security and it should retain the nuclear option at any cost

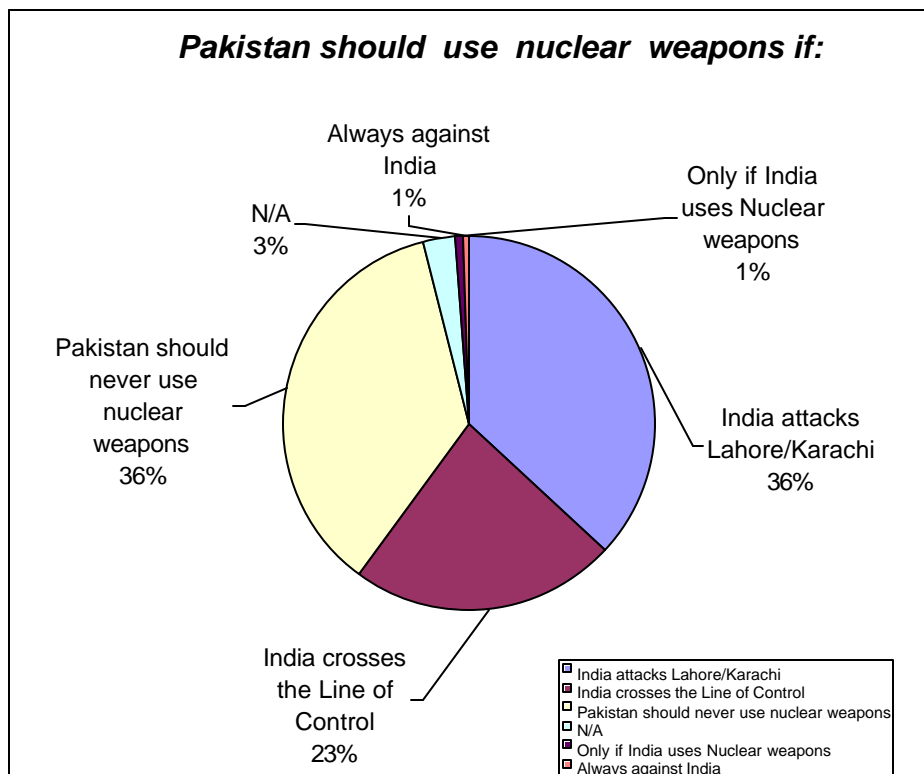


Nuclear weapons are considered primarily political and deterrence weapons effective for preventing war between the two nuclear powers. In order to assure that these weapons continue to serve as deterrents, the possessors have to outline conditions under which they may deem it necessary to use them. Unless the criterion of their usability is defined, the mere presence of nuclear weapons is unlikely to prevent war. Counter-value and counterforce are two euphemisms of the nuclear age devised by strategic experts to provide a sanitized version of specific uses of nuclear weapons. The former means using nuclear weapons against the adversary's population centers while the latter refers to confining the use of nukes only against the enemy's military-related establishments. Europe has experienced the devastation of the two major wars of the twentieth century. The Japanese society has been at the receiving end of the only atomic attack undertaken so far. The India-Pakistan wars, in contrast, have been quite limited in their scope and brief in terms of duration. The ordinary people in India and Pakistan largely consider nuclear weapons as an extension of conventional weapons. The marginal role played by

anti-nuclear weapons movement makes the public awareness about the destructive capacity of nukes minimal in the Indian and Pakistani societies.

In the survey questionnaire, respondents were presented three choices, i.e., counter-value, counter-force, or never to use nuclear weapons; in terms of usability of nuclear weapons (see Chart 6). Surprisingly, 36 per cent of the people said that Pakistan should never use the nuclear weapons. Given the lack of public awareness of the ravages of nuclear war and an almost romantic and fetish official portrayal of nukes, the instinctive abhorrence toward the use of nuclear weapons by the ordinary people can be construed as a sign of innate positive human quality. However, close to a quarter of respondents were of the view that Pakistan should use nuclear weapons if India crosses the Line of Control.

Chart 6: Pakistan should use nuclear weapons if

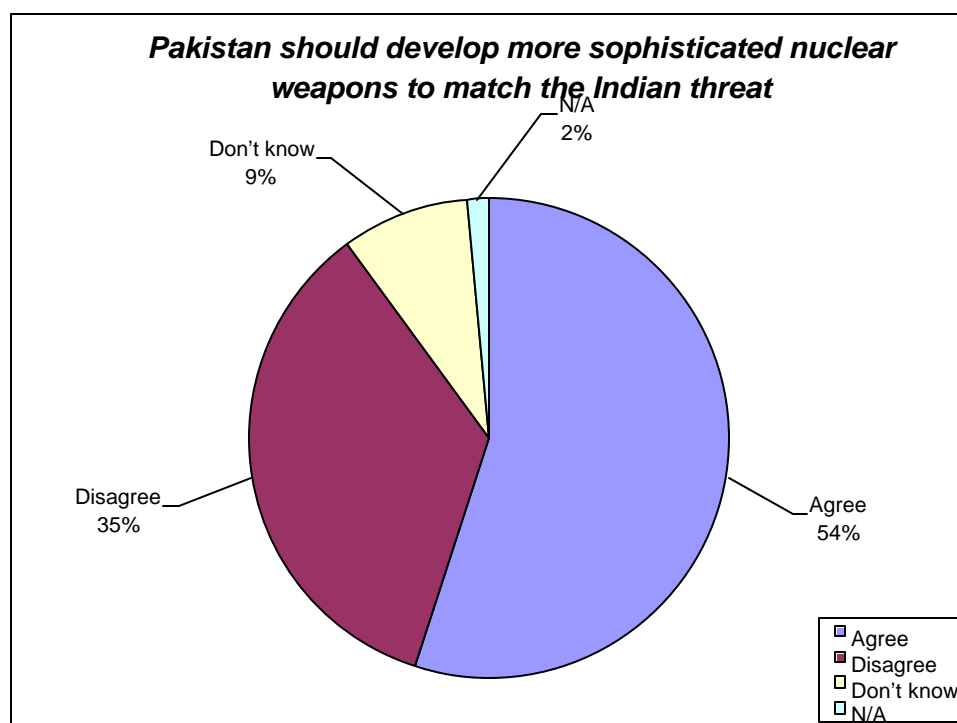


Although India has officially adopted the no-first use policy, Pakistan retains the right to use nuclear weapons if its existence is threatened. And 82 percent of Sindhi population is convinced that if Pakistan decides to launch a nuclear attack on India, New Delhi will retaliate in kind. This public perception should come as a consolation to the

Indian policymakers because it shows that ordinary Pakistanis do take the threat of Indian nuclear retaliation seriously.

The draft Indian nuclear doctrine and subsequent assertions of New Delhi to eventually develop and deploy a triad-based nuclear arsenal is likely to evoke similar response from the military and “strategic enclave” in Pakistan. Prior to the 1998 testing, the Indian and Pakistani strategic analysts extolled virtues of what came to be termed as the state of “non-weaponized deterrence.” The unconfirmed presence of nuclear weapons was considered as a stabilizing factor between the two regional rivals.

Chart 7: Pakistan should develop more sophisticated nuclear weapons to match the Indian threat



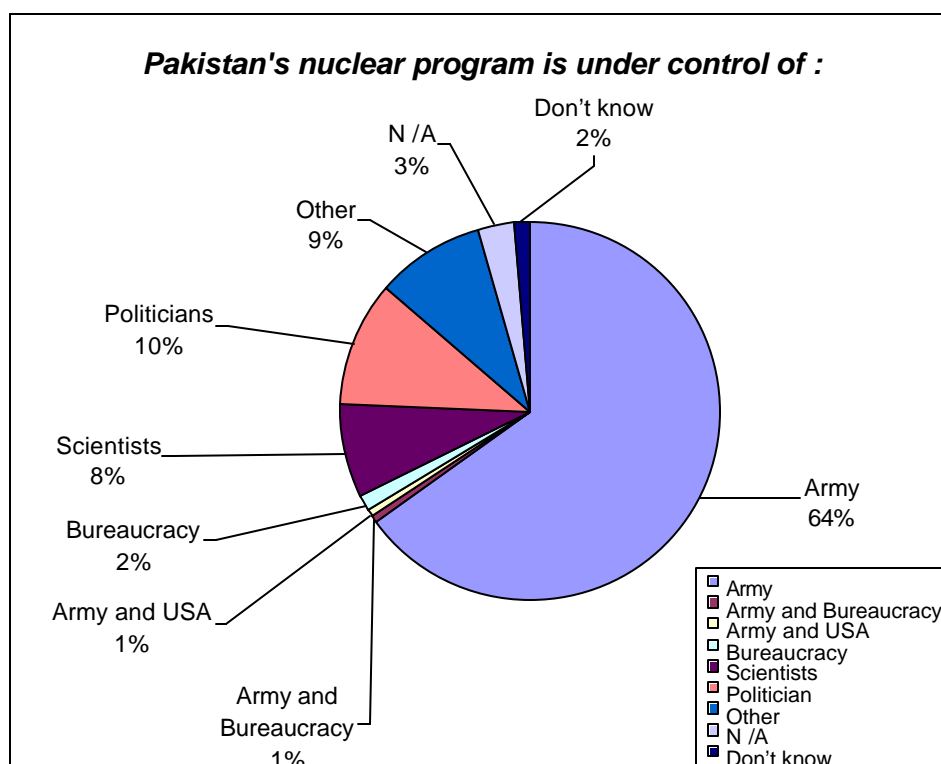
The 1998 explosions changed the situation qualitatively and analysts wondered whether the subcontinent would imitate the mindless arms race experience of the East-West confrontation. Although it is too early to make any definite conclusions about the nuclear future of India and Pakistan, about 54 percent of respondents in Sindh agree that if India develops more sophisticated nuclear weapons then Pakistan should respond in kind (see Chart 7). This moderate number of nuclear enthusiasts calling for a tit for tat approach toward India is in marked contrast to Islamabad’s claim of consensus on the issue. Around 35 percent of respondents disagreed with the proposition of matching

Indian nuclear weapons development. Islamabad's decision not to match the Indian decision of raising its defense budget for the past two years may be partly a result of Pakistan's ailing economy and partly cognizant of peoples' lack of unqualified support for such an increase.

### Command and Control of Nuclear Weapons

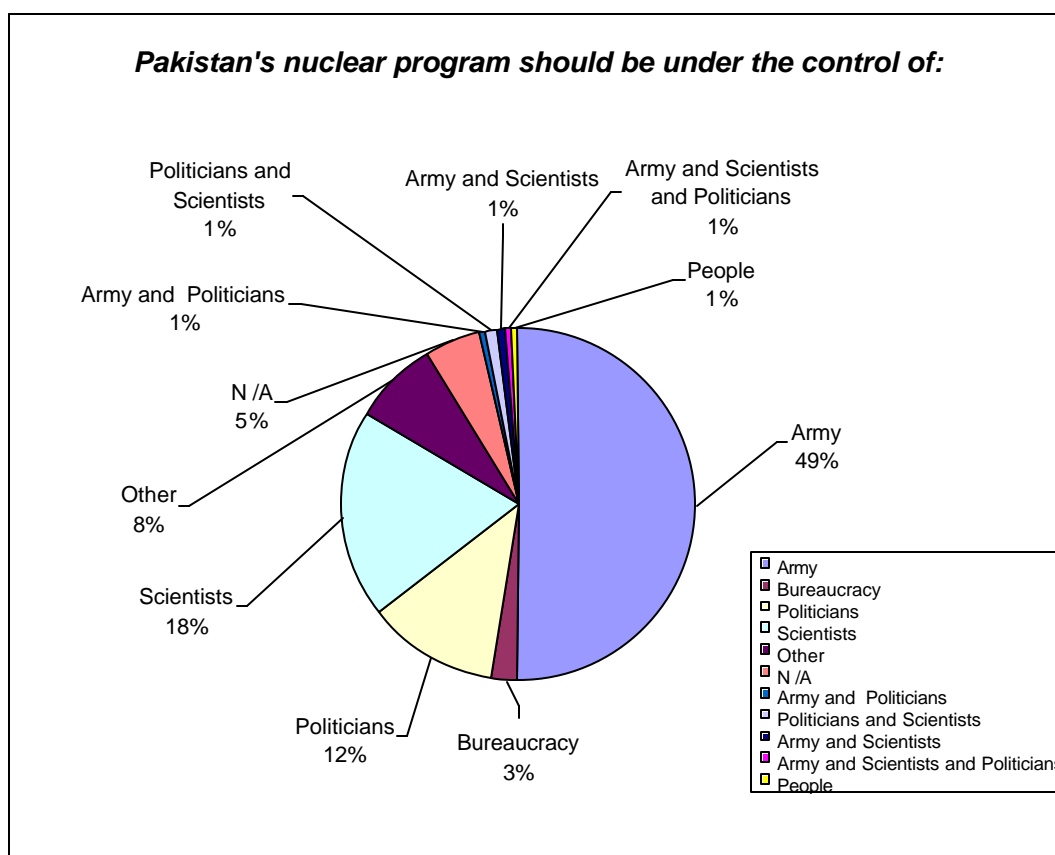
The actual command and control related aspects of Pakistan's nuclear program have remained shrouded in secrecy to the public amply fed with symbols of nuclear nationalism. We started with ascertaining the public's views on the command and control aspect by asking who they thought controlled Pakistan's nuclear program. Sixty-four percent of the respondents think it is under the army's control (Chart 8). In spite of high profile scientists like Abdul Qadeer Khan, only eight percent of respondents consider scientists controlling the country's nuclear program. Although at the time of the nuclear testing, the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif was in the saddle in Islamabad, only ten percent of respondents thought politicians controlled the nuclear program. The response to the existing control of the nuclear program suggest that the public in Sindh has a fairly good idea as to where the power lies when it comes to Pakistan's nuclear program.

Chart 8: Pakistan's nuclear program is under the control of



In the follow-up question, we asked as to who should control of the nuclear program of Pakistan. Close to half (49 percent) of the respondents think that army should control the nuclear program, following by 18 percent supporting the scientists' control, and 12 percent wanting politicians to control the program (Chart 9). This shows that the Pakistan army is considered the most reliable force to control the nuclear program. It should come as a consolation to nuclear hawks and a cause of worry for those who would like to see civilians at the helm of nuclear affairs. Popular perception of politicians as a corrupt and inept group may have contributed to the public's lack of support for civilians on this issue. In terms of the impact of these views on future of the nuclear politics in the country, one can safely suggest that the armed forces will continue to employ nuclear custodianship as a legitimizing tool for non-representative political setup in times to come.

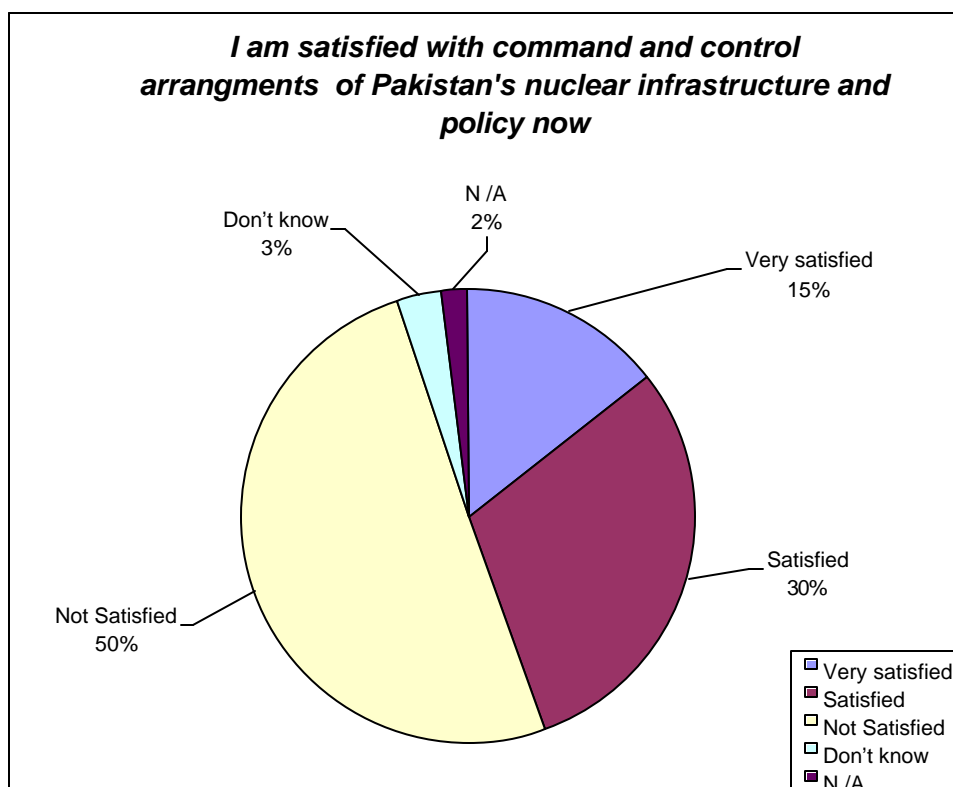
Chart 9: Pakistan's nuclear program should be under the control of



Pakistan's nuclear establishment assumes that people have utmost confidence in the country's command and control, and the safety of nuclear installations. This

assumption is belied by findings of the survey in Sindh where only half of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the command and control arrangements in the country (see Chart 10). Such an opinion is reflective of the peoples' lack of faith in the government institutions in general. The gradual erosion of the state institutions and infrastructure has created a general sense of pessimism about the efficacy of the state-run organizations.

Chart 10: I am satisfied with the command and control arrangements of Pakistan's nuclear infrastructure and policy now

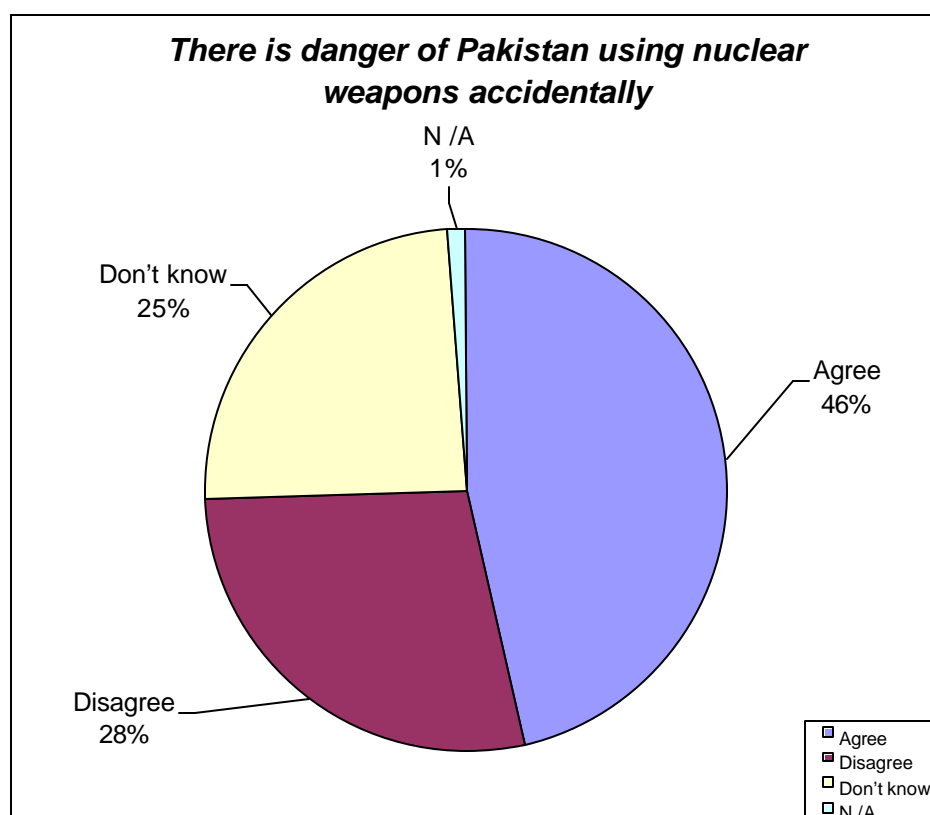


Along with the deliberate use of nuclear weapons as means of military tactics, scholars and activists express concern about the use of nuclear weapons either as a result of accidents or escalation. Even the record of countries like the United States is not free from nuclear accidents. The possibility of accidents at the Pakistani nuclear installations simply cannot be wished away. There is little by way of public education to make people aware of the hazards of nuclear accidents in the country. The minuscule anti-nuclear movement has not done much to fill in this lacuna. Yet, almost 46 percent of respondents of Sindh agree that there is a danger of Pakistan using nuclear weapons accidentally (see

Chart 11). When asked if they consider Pakistani scientists capable of preventing accidents at nuclear facilities, only 42 percent of people had expressed their trust in scientists. Twenty-three percent expressed their disagreement and, surprisingly, 33 percent people said they have no views on the issue.

The well-informed sections concerned about the nuclear safety issues have a window of opportunity to channel the public's instinctive concern about safety into a sustained voice to demand more transparency on the workings of nuclear installations.

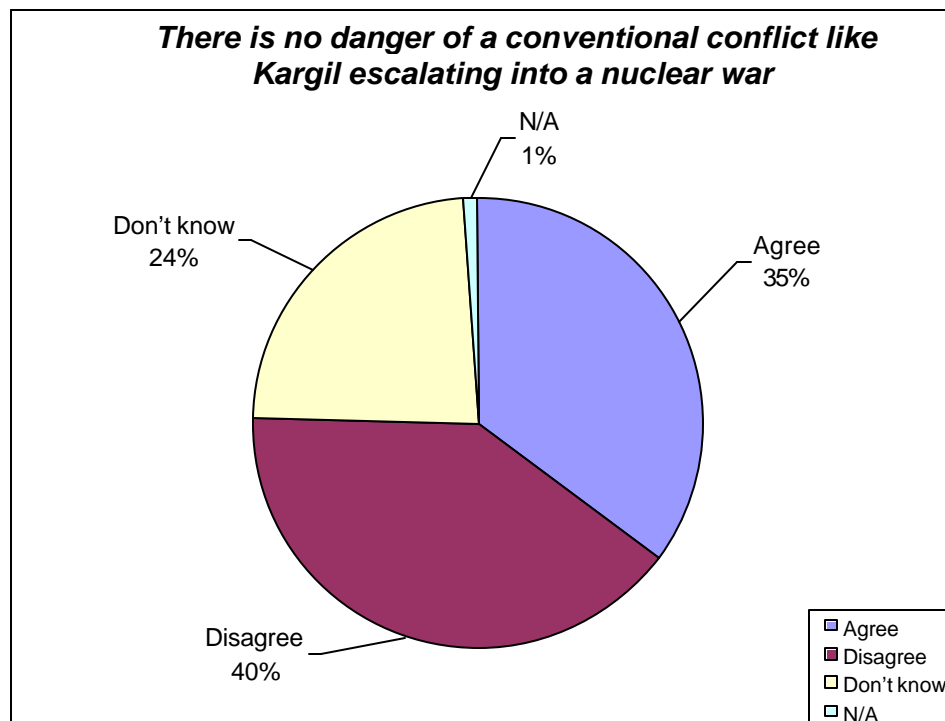
Chart 11: There is a danger of Pakistan using nuclear weapons accidentally



Along with accidents, escalation of conventional conflict into a nuclear one is another possibility of inadvertent use of nuclear weapons. The geographical proximity of India and Pakistan, a history of conventional wars between the two neighbors, and ongoing low intensity conflict in Kashmir convinced the former US president, Bill Clinton, to declare the Line of Control in Kashmir as “the most dangerous place on the earth” where an India-Pakistan crisis, if not managed properly, can lead to a nuclear exchange. Alarmism of such statements notwithstanding, the 1999 Kargil crisis proves

the fragile nature of the India-Pakistan relations and inability of nuclear weapons to prevent adversaries from fighting limited conventional wars. The majority of public in Sindh (40 percent) think that there is a danger of conventional conflicts like the Kargil escalating into nuclear exchange (see Chart 12).

Chart 12 : There is no danger of a conventional conflict like Kargil escalating into a nuclear war



## Conclusion

The relevance of the preliminary findings of the opinion survey from Sindh can be assessed from the perspective of four sections, namely, policymakers at the national and international levels, nuclear hawks in Pakistan, anti-nuclear activists and analysts, and security studies' students interested in broadening the focus of their discipline. I will briefly discuss these four aspects in this conclusion.

The overall results of the survey indicating significant support for the official position on the broad nature and direction of Pakistan's nuclear policy in the province of Sindh should be a source of reasonable satisfaction for policymakers in Islamabad. Even a casual observer of Pakistani politics will find divergence between Islamabad and Sindhi perceptions on issues affecting the country's politics. The traditional champions of the

nuclear issue—the army, religious parties, and India-bashers—do not have the core constituency in Sindh, yet 61 percent of respondents in that milieu think that nuclear weapons have made the country more secure and 54 percent believe that the nuclear tests have enhanced Pakistan's international stature. However, close to fifty percent respondents (46 and 45 percent respectively) do not think they have any say in the country's nuclear policy or they believe what the government says about the nuclear program. Given Islamabad's penchant for political expediency over transparency, this lack of trust is likely to increase in the future. In spite of Sindh's political alienation during the army led governments, 49 percent respondents still want the army to control the nuclear program. This support will be used by the army in situations where civilians tried to exert control or wanted a greater say in determining the nature and direction of the nuclear program.

Nuclear hawks comprise a motley of individuals and institutions in Pakistan. Leaders of certain religious parties, retired and serving military officials, spin-doctors and media pundits to scientists like Abdul Qadeer Khan are at the core of this group. They would be disappointed with and dismissive of the findings of the survey mainly because it runs counter to the claims of national consensus on the nuclear issue. With one third of respondents neither considering Pakistan more secure nor more respected in the wake of explosions, and 38 percent supporting the signing of the CTBT; the findings point toward cleavages in what to outsiders appears a national consensus.

Nuclear hawks and anti-nuclear activists see each other involved in a zero-sum game where the loss of one is considered gain by the other. The findings should enable nuclear dissidents to identify sympathetic ears for their cause in the political landscape of Pakistan. The dissent on the nuclear issue has been confined to a select group of analysts who frame their argument mainly in terms of nonproliferation concerns of the Western countries, thus, having little resonance for the indigenous groups. This survey would help anti-nuclear voices to identify the recognizable disenchantment of Sindh's population with various aspects of the existing nuclear policy and program. The creative use of this data could be one way of breaking the existing isolation of anti-nuclear activists from the wider public. The anti-nuclear voices can lay claim for a legitimate position in the nuclear discourse only by successfully striking cords with ordinary people.

What relevance studies like this can have for students of international and South Asian security? Political realism assuming state as a unitary actor with objective interests

to safeguard is still the dominant and most prevalent perspective in the field. An increasing number of scholars is questioning the validity of these assumptions and their explanatory value. A differentiated account of the dynamics of politics of nuclear weapons in Pakistan and demonstrates that the myth of consensus on the nuclear issue can only be meaningfully questioned by ascertaining peoples' views. This study will help security analysts recognize "that different groups conceptualize security and power differently, and that such concepts are always socially situated." Sensitivity to domestic dynamics of security policy does not dismiss the value of traditional security studies. Decision-makers and most analysts still wear the lens of state-centric perspective to understand threats and devise means to tackle them. Critical appraisal of such claims based on empirical evidence would help policymakers to recognize the subjective and socially constructed nature of what they believe to be an objective reality. Academically, rigorous case studies on these lines will complement and enrich theoretical frameworks striving to bring the people back in the security studies. I will conclude on a word of caution. Opinion surveys are by no means the most authentic method or the final word on this subject matter. If conducted prudently, such studies do help us in identifying broad themes prevalent in the selected section of the society on the chosen subject.

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