

## Beware Pakistan's small nuclear weapons

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By Ahmed Rashid.

When Prime Minister [Nawaz Sharif meets President Barack Obama](#) at the White House on Wednesday, their meeting will be critical for the future course of US-Pakistan relations. One issue at the top of the agenda - alongside the future of Afghanistan, Pakistan's own much-weakened state and attacks by terrorist groups - will be the country's nuclear weapons programme. Pakistan's rapid development of battlefield nuclear weapons raises many questions in the region and abroad.

Western analysts estimate [Pakistan](#) has between 100 and 120 nuclear weapons, far more than its rival [India](#), which is believed to have 90-100. Pakistan has multiple delivery capability, such as long and short-range rockets and aircraft. It will soon add naval capability with sea-launched missiles.

Less well-known is that Pakistan has one of the fastest growing battlefield or tactical [nuclear weapons programmes](#) in the world today, according to senior western officials I have spoken with. The Americans developed the capacity to put miniaturised nuclear bombs on short-range rockets, artillery and tank shells in the 1950s - something Pakistan is apparently doing now and very successfully.

"The most significant development in recent years has been the creation of a battlefield nuclear force 'in being' that provides Pakistan the option of a battlefield use of nuclear weapons," writes Christopher Clary in an essay on Pakistani nukes published by the [US National Bureau of Asian Research](#).

Western officials say the dangers of such weapons are many. They are made in large numbers and are small and thus can more easily be stolen or hijacked by extremist groups operating openly in Pakistan; smaller nuclear weapons make it easier to decide to wage a limited nuclear war if Islamabad considers it is being defeated in a conflict with India's much larger conventional armed forces; and such weapons can be specifically targeted on, say, invading Indian military formations, raising the ante for an all-out nuclear war.

Pakistan refuses to adopt a "no first use" of nuclear weapons in its strategic focus and therefore every crisis the two countries have been involved in since they became nuclear weapon states has forced Islamabad to adopt a threatening and risky posture in order to avoid total war with India, which it would surely lose. "Small nuclear weapons make it psychologically easier for decision makers to use them, rather than having to decide about an all-out nuclear war," says one western expert.

Pakistani officials point out several elements in their favour. Despite attacks on airports, military bases and other sensitive places, [terrorists](#) have never stolen or been able to acquire nuclear materials - although there is always a first time.

There is the equally threatening posture of Indian forces who have developed a battlefield plan called "Cold Start", which takes advantage of their much larger conventional forces to inflict a quick defeat on specific Pakistani forces or border regions before Islamabad can fully mobilise.

The [Pakistan army](#) which has to defend a very long border with India, and does not have the forces or reserves to do so adequately, fears exactly such a strategy. India denies that it even has a Cold Start strategy which makes discussions between the two countries even more difficult.

The real concern for western powers at the moment is not that two rational governments will go to war, but that the proxy wars they wage against each other will get out of hand. Terrorist groups who have been sponsored by the Pakistani military in the past and are not under any control now could create a war syndrome on the border, just as the [2008 suicide attack in Mumbai](#) by Lashkar-e-Taiba did when 166 Indians were killed. Likewise, India is needling Pakistan by allegedly backing separatists in Baluchistan.

In recent weeks, scares generated by terrorist attacks either on Indian forces in the [disputed region of Kashmir](#) or on civilian targets in both countries have led to several acute rises in tensions.

It is still difficult to convince the Pakistani army that the real threat comes not from India, but from the [spread of Islamic extremism and terrorist groups](#) active on its soil. The army also faces questions from a public that by and large supports the nuclear programme, but wonders why Pakistan needs such a large nuclear arsenal when it already has a viable nuclear deterrent against India and why so much is still being spent on making new bombs when the economy is in melt down. So far there has been no adequate answer.

Both India and Pakistan spend an extraordinary amount of money on their nuclear weapons programmes that are expanding and growing all the time at a huge cost to their respective populations who remain largely mired in poverty.

Pakistan's larger nuclear arsenal and development of tactical bombs and India's huge rocket development programme for carrying nuclear weapons has only fuelled a new arms race in the region that now involves not just the size of bombs, but also delivery vehicles.

Both countries may not like or trust one another but increasingly their nuclear weapons programmes are totally out of sync with economic and other realities on the ground. But who will say this to them when there is no international or regional diplomatic effort in place which could hold talks between the two sides and try and stem this hugely dangerous game? The west's concerns about Pakistan's miniaturised nuclear bombs should be translated into a larger deal that pushes both Islamabad and New Delhi to contain what is now a runaway bomb by making by two countries who have proved three times that they can go to war against one another.

*The writer is best-selling author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, most recently 'Descent into Chaos'*