Pakistan Coup Underscores Nuclear Dimension

By TODD SECHSER

Pakistan's recent coup highlights the unique dangers of nuclear proliferation in politically unstable states. Eighteen months after India and Pakistan declared their nuclear capabilities in a series of test explosions, U.S. government sources now report they have taken the step of weaponizing their nuclear devices by placing them atop ballistic missiles.

Pakistan's coup was bloodless, but its decision to build an arsenal raises the prospect that future revolts could involve nuclear arms. In a country where civilian control of the military is weak, political chaos could produce a catastrophic nuclear accident.

Unfortunately, the United States has failed to apply this prudence to emerging nuclear powers. Fearing nuclear safety assistance would undermine the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's (NPT) credibility, Washington has shared its safety technology secrets with only its closest European allies.

U.S. policy has achieved near-perfect success in constraining proliferation, but it may aggravate dangers in the few cases where nuclear weapons have spread. New proliferants, including India and Pakistan, have proved unwilling or unable to develop nuclear safety devices.

In a book published by India's quasi-governmental Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, "Nuclear India," author Kapil Kak argued that "there is no necessity to replicate the elaborate command and control structures of the West, which we can ill afford."

This precarious situation requires new thinking. The NPT prohibits assistance in weapon production, but legal scholars point out that it does not expressly forbid aid to safeguard existing weapons. A nuclear war triggered by an inadvertent missile launch would arguably harm nonproliferation efforts more than a program of minimal safety assistance.

The United States should evaluate whether its strong commitment to the NPT can be balanced with weapon safety programs. In particular, the United States should consider declassifying early versions of nuclear safety mechanisms for employment by India and Pakistan.

The uniform military support witnessed in Pakistan's coup rarely characterizes military upheavals. In a domestic power struggle, nuclear arms would be important symbols of authority.

Rival factions likely would clash over control of the arsenal, and the rush to seize warheads could result in a devastating nuclear accident. Fragile command and control also raises the prospect of theft by terrorists. Safety mechanisms similar to those employed on U.S. nuclear weapons could help mitigate these risks.

American assistance also could have helped establish strong civilian control over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. An Islamabad newspaper, The News, reported April 10 that final launching authority rested with the prime minister.

But without encoded locks to prevent unauthorized nuclear use, this authority is merely symbolic. Apprehension about Pakistani nuclear safety has exacerbated anxiety in an already tense region.

As news of the coup unfolded, India placed its military forces on high alert, and Indian Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee called an emergency Cabinet session. Such measures only heighten tensions and risk military miscalculation by both sides.

Nonproliferation always will be an indispensable component of international security, but perhaps an intelligent compromise can be reached with India and Pakistan to reconcile pragmatic efforts to safeguard nuclear arsenals with the NPT.

Safety assistance could complement, not replace, policy tools that are effective in slowing the spread of nuclear weapons, such as technology export controls and security guarantees.

Tempering the destabilizing effects of proliferation would not constitute a tacit acceptance of nuclear weapons. Rather, it could be a sophisticated response to the nuclear rivalry in South Asia.