Preventing Nuclear Terrorism

Continuous Improvement or Dangerous Decline?

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**Risk Summary and Trend:** Overall, the risks of nuclear theft in Russia appear to be moderate. Nuclear security measures are drastically improved, but still have some weaknesses, and the threats these security systems must counter are substantial. While Russia continues to make some nuclear security improvements, the overall risk trend appears to be toward increasing risk, with the end of all but a modest portion of U.S.-Russian nuclear security cooperation, an increase in the threat of Islamic terrorism, and increasing economic uncertainty that could make it difficult for facilities to allocate resources for nuclear security.

**Pakistan**

In Pakistan, a modest but rapidly growing nuclear stockpile, with substantial security measures, must protect against some of the world’s most capable terrorist groups, in an environment of widespread corruption and extremist sympathies.  

Pakistan has substantially strengthened its nuclear security in the past two decades. In a recent survey of nuclear security experts, the Pakistani participant reported dramatic recent changes in the organizations governing nuclear security; in the numbers, training, and equipment of guard forces; in approaches to screening personnel; in requirements for nuclear material accounting and control; and in approaches to strengthening security culture, along with substantial changes in every other aspect of nuclear security covered in the survey.  

By some estimates, the Strategic Plans Division, which manages Pakistan’s nuclear weapons, has 25,000 troops available to guard Pakistani nuclear stocks and facilities. Pakistani officials report that sites are equipped with extensive barriers and detection systems, that the components of nuclear weapons are stored separately (though that may be changing as Pakistan moves toward tactical nuclear weapons intended to

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80 For a previous assessment, see Bunn et al., *Advancing Nuclear Security*, pp. 17–20.

81 Bunn and Harrell, *Threat Perceptions and Drivers of Change*, p. 9.

82 Finance Minister Ishaq Dar asserted that a “special security force of 25,000 personnel, who have been specially trained and provided sophisticated weapons, has been deployed to protect (the nuclear assets).” See “Pakistan Says “25,000 Guards Watching Nukes,” *Global Security Newswire*, June 25, 2013, http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/pakistan-says-25000-nuke-oversight-duty/ (accessed June 5, 2015). By another account, the total strength of the “security division” of the National Command Authority was 20,000 in 2013, but headed upward to 28,000. Not all of these personnel may be assigned to guard duties at any particular time. See Naeem Salik and Kenneth N. Luongo, “Challenges for Pakistan’s Nuclear Security,” *Arms Control Today*, March, 2013, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2013_03/Challenges-for-Pakistans-Nuclear-Security (accessed February 9, 2016). Security force for nuclear sites at 20,000, heading up to 28,000. Used to be mainly retired military. Now they are being replaced by new recruits trained at the new training center, allegedly comparable to the one the U.S. has established in New Mexico. Security force capabilities tested through “field exercises and war games.” Sites have inner and outer perimeters with electronic sensors “and counterintelligence teams.” All personnel brought into “any components of the strategic program” are screened “in concert with other intelligence agencies” (presumably ISI).
be rapidly deployed to the field), and that Pakistani weapons are equipped with locks to prevent unauthorized use. The United States has engaged in extensive cooperation with Pakistan to improve nuclear security, an effort reportedly expanded after President Obama took office. Despite a variety of negative reports in the U.S. press on Pakistani nuclear security, U.S. officials from President Obama to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have repeatedly expressed confidence in Pakistani nuclear security arrangements. It is notable, however, that these statements of confidence have not been repeated at recent high-level U.S.-Pakistani meetings—suggesting that the United States has concerns about some elements of Pakistan's nuclear security approach. The Director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, however, testified in February 2015 that improvements were continuing.

There are also negative trends, which may be related to the absence of recent U.S. expressions of confidence. Pakistan has the world's fastest-growing nuclear arsenal, and is shifting toward tactical nuclear weapons intended to be dispersed to front-line forces early in a crisis, increasing the risks of nuclear theft should such a crisis occur. This increase in numbers of weapons is probably leading to an increase in numbers of locations as well. In particular, Pakistan brought a fourth plutonium production reactor online in 2014, and in 2015 reports suggested that a new plutonium reprocessing plant for handling the spent fuel from these reactors was either operational or nearly so.

Pakistan's nuclear security systems must protect against almost overwhelming adversary threats. Terrorist groups continue to demonstrate that they are willing and able to launch

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84 For one unclassified account of this cooperation and the U.S. concerns that drove it, see David Sanger, Confront and Conceal: Obama’s Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power (New York: Crown, 2012), pp. 58–67.

85 See, for example, “U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, March 1, 2016), http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/03/253857.htm (accessed March 13, 2016). That statement only notes activities such as Pakistan hosting IAEA events and committing to ratify the amendment to the CPPNM; there is no mention of nuclear security cooperation and no expression of confidence in Pakistan’s nuclear security arrangements.


complex, well-coordinated attacks on heavily defended military targets within Pakistan. For example, in September 2014, a group of naval officers who had been recruited by al Qaeda’s newly formed South Asia branch attempted to seize a Pakistani frigate, with the idea of using its anti-ship missiles to attack U.S. naval vessels, provoking an extended firefight. The Pakistani defense minister told Parliament “without assistance from inside, these people could not have breached security.” Sympathy for Islamic extremist causes remains widespread in Pakistan, including in the nuclear and security establishments—some of whom have long been key sources of support for the Taliban, Lashkar e Taiba, Jaish Mohammed, and other terrorist groups. At the same time, the militants’ extreme violence has undermined any support they once had and provoked significant Pakistani military action against them; if successful, these actions may reduce the risk that militants could succeed in a nuclear theft attempt. Pakistan also suffers pervasive and deeply ingrained corruption, which can create additional opportunities for insider recruitment.

Risk Summary and Trend: Overall, the risk of nuclear theft in Pakistan appears to be high. The trend seems to be toward increasing risk, as Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal expands and shifts toward tactical nuclear weapons, while adversary capabilities remain extremely high. Over the longer term, the possibilities of state collapse or extremist takeover cannot be entirely ruled out, though the near-term probability of such events appears to be low.

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89 Hasan, Shah, and Gorman, “Al Qaeda Militants.”