Pakistan Defence 1/1/04 The Nation

Defence Notes

Indo-Pak strategic assets

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I am somewhat hesitant to write about the rather opaque topic of Indo-Pakistani strategic assets and their command and control mechanism. India, however, is more transparent in the projection of these assets than Pakistan. A rural buff like me has no access whatsoever to the NCA (National Command Authority) and such other ancillary outfits as the ECC (Employment control Committee) - the Development Control Committee and the Strategic Plan Division of Pakistan. I have, however, been able to get better insight about the Indian assets as the Indian Press is more knowledgeable and vocal about their strategic assets and the philosophy of the employment of these assets.

One thing is very obvious that the military dominates the nuclear programmes in Pakistan.

The other day in Rawalpindi I had a chance meeting with Gen Khalid Ahmed Kidwai - and assiduous artillery officer who is the Director General for Deployment and Development of Pakistani strategic assets. He works in the JSHQ - Chaklala. He is yet to command a corps.

This short presentation brings out some of the more solidified aspects of the Indo-Pakistan strategic assets (as of October 2003).

I do not hesitate to tell the readers that the material has been largely extracted from a US, 'Congressional Research Service' presentation 'Missile Proliferation and the Strategic Balance in South Asia' - and surely has a certain degree of transparency and accuracy. One thing is very certain that "India and Pakistan have the ability to strike and destroy military and civilian targets outside of their respective countries by means of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and aircraft." These forces, associated readiness posture, command and control, and missile defence constitute a strategic capability on a regional scale.

The estimates on India's nuclear weapons arsenal vary but a number of analysts believe that as of 2002, "India had between 30 to 35 nuclear weapons with yields varying between 5 to 25 kilotons (kts) (despite an Indian claim that it had detonated a nuclear device on May 11, 2002 with a 43 kt yield.) - See "India's Nuclear Forces" - 2002, bulletin of Atomic Scientists, Vol 58 March 2002, page 1.

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These devices are likely configured as aerial bombs or missile warheads. While a precise breakdown of the number of bombs versus missile warheads is not known, a senior Pakistani military official reportedly claimed that the majority of India's nuclear weapons were configured as aerial bombs. See "The Consequences of Nuclear Conflict Between India and Pakistan" - Natural Resources Defence Council June 04, 2002.

India has a number of different types of aircraft - but it is generally believed that India would use 1970s - and 1980s - vintage Soviet built MiG27 Flogger aircraft (with a range of 800 Km), and the Anglo-French Jaguar aircraft with a 1600 Km range to deliver aerial bombs. See India's nuclear forces - 2002 P-2.

The recent acquisition, the Sukhoi-30 Mk-I purchased from Russia - with a reported capacity to carry 8000 kg payload, and with a normal range of 3200 km, and an air-to-air refuelling range of about 7000 km provides India with a nuclear deep strike capability, and some experts believe that India has acquired the Sukhoi to counter China's deep strike capability.

Turning on to the missiles, India is suspected of having successfully flight tested an 'Agni II' missile (range 3000-3500 km) carrying a nuclear warhead assembly without its plutonium core in 1999, and again in 2001. See Srinjoy Chaudhry "Sukhois Capable of Hitting Chinese Targets", Statesman - London September 28, 2002.

While such tests are considered crucial for warhead development by some experts, some nuclear scientists are of the view that additional flight testing to adequately test the weapon's fuze and trigger will be required before India could deploy nuclear armed missiles operationally. See "India's slow-motion Nuclear Deployment" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Non-Proliferation Project - Washington DC September 7, 2000 Page I.

According to Press reports India's Defence Minister, George Fernandez reported to the Indian Parliament on July 29, 2003 that India had conducted 20 tests of seven different types of missiles including two Agni variants during first half of 2003. See "Twenty Missile Tests in India in the First Half of 2003 at a cost of 16 Million Dollars" - Agence France Presse, July 30, 2003.

And finally though not a weapon or a delivery system in the correct sense of the term, India' satellites - and there are a number of these - can contribute to its strategic capabilities. Some analysts believe that India's network of communication satellites and its Technology Experiment Satellite, which reportedly has an optical resolution capacity of one meter, provides India with a strategic early warning capability that could help ensure the survivability of its nuclear forces. These satellites could also help improve India's military command, control, communication and intelligence capacities.

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