

The prime minister of India ordered the nuclear tests in the second week of April 1998. The decision was of course taken much earlier and was spelt out in the election manifesto of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and in the coalition's National Agenda for Governance. Simply put it was a posture that the BJP had adopted many years ago. There was then no need to justify the decision. Or, even to attempt to formulate a policy afterwards. It is doubtful if one has emerged even today. It is this decision taken in a hurry and without the advantage of democratic deliberations that the country will have to repent at leisure.

It is necessary then to examine the reasons and implications of this decision. The initial euphoria and the hype that "We have at last achieved something" is now over. The nation has spent some time reflecting over the issues; the time has now come for a rational assessment. This article attempts a strategic and security analysis of the issues that led to the decision as well as examine the consequences.

Role of Nuclear Weapons

What is the role of nuclear weapons in today's world? The nuclear bomb has been used in war only twice, at the end of the Second World War. It was then seen to have a role in conflict. Soon afterwards it was realised that it was perhaps not so useful after all. It was too powerful to be actually used, as it would destroy all that one could hope to conquer or gain. Even its threat of use was not effective because again the possibility of unleashing such total destruction reduced the very rationality of its use and made even this threat less convincing. Therefore, even a country with

Riding A Tiger

Strategic and Security Issues in India Going Nuclear

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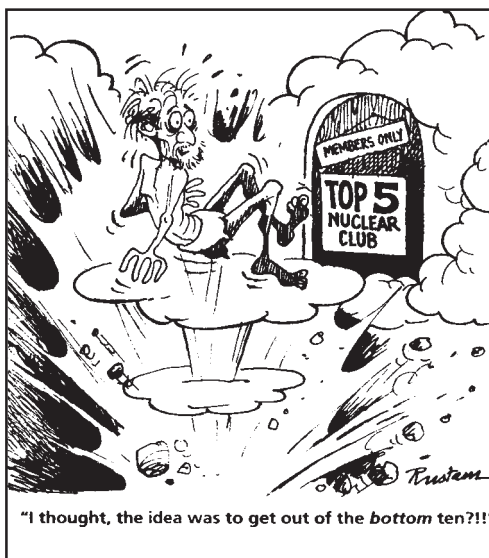
Riding A Tiger Strategic and Security Issues in India Going Nuclear a nuclear arsenal was unable to coerce another state to do its bidding.

All those nations which have had nuclear weapons have lost a war to another. We have seen that the possession of nuclear weapons did not give them any advantage. The USA did not win the Korean War in the 1950s. It lost the war in Vietnam in the 1970s. Soviet Union lost in Afghanistan. China was given a drubbing by Vietnam in 1979. France lost against Algeria. Britain failed in Egypt in 1956 and in Falklands against Argentina its nuclear weapons played no role. China and Soviet Union fought to a draw on the Ussuri River in 1969 though both were nuclear weapon powers. Threat of nuclear weapons on board the US aircraft carrier Enterprise in 1971 did not

prevent the liberation of Bangladesh. Again US nuclear superiority could not rescue the Americans held hostage for over a year at its embassy in Tehran till January 1981. In many ways the nuclear bomb is a much over-rated weapon.

Some feel that nuclear weapons can do one thing: deter another side from using its nuclear weapons. To that extent it may impose a heavy caution on starting a conventional conflict, but it does not rule it out altogether. Instead, it generates greater tension between nations that have nuclear weapons and face each other. It worsens their mutual relations and may even encourage subversion, terrorism and low-intensity proxy wars. For India, it will have no role in preventing subversion in Jammu and Kashmir. Instead, it is likely to worsen the situation there. It has been a quick learning process for our politicians. Jingoistic statements by the BJP leaders in mid-May, that nuclear tests had altered the situation in Jammu and Kashmir, had to be stopped as soon as Pakistan conducted its nuclear tests.

Nuclear weapons will definitely not help recapture Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Rather, with Pakistan having nuclear weapons too, this is an even more remote possibility today. Our home minister now seems to have given up the idea of hot pursuit into PoK, a step he seemed to strongly favour earlier. Nuclear weapons will also not help blunt



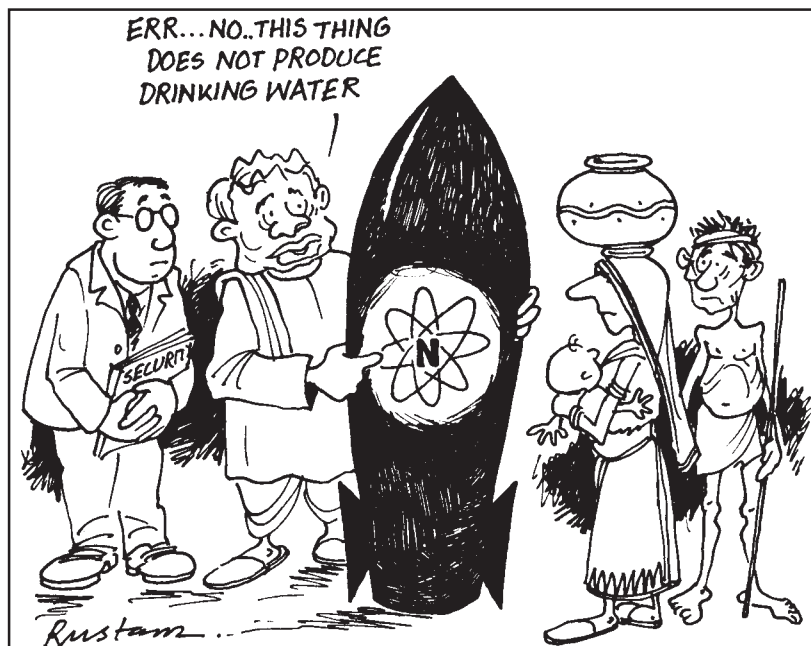
Pakistan's proxy war in J&K. Pakistan, in fact, seized a golden opportunity to internationalise the Kashmir issue and with that aim has intensified the proxy war there. It is a setback to the steadily improving situation in the Valley. A setback to our diplomacy as well.

Similarly, nuclear weapons will not allow us to recapture Aksai Chin or hasten the Line of Actual Control demarcation process with China. This can be done only through negotiations, and not through threat of force. A conflict there is unlikely to allow us to achieve the overall purpose. Dialogue seemed to have been getting us somewhere. But, this process has now suffered a reverse.

Do Nukes Enhance Status?

Do nuclear weapons confer high international status? Does nuclearisation allow a seat at the top table in global discourse? The truth is that nuclear weapons are no longer the currency of power that they were once supposed to be. It may have been so in the Cold War and till the middle of the '60s, but since then their role has been severely downgraded. The currency of power today is economic might. It is measured in per capita Gross National Product. It is also measured in terms of Human Development indices. A healthy, educated population and a thriving domestic economy competing successfully with other economies, is what the world admires. This is precisely what has become more difficult for India to achieve after the nuclear tests.

Japan, Germany and even Korea now find a position at the top table, and none is a nuclear power. The permanent seats in the United Nations Security Council will probably go to Germany and Japan they could have become nuclear weapon states any time they wished to-but not to India. Unfortunately, India has lost this



opportunity and has marginalised itself in the world for several years at a very critical period in its evolution. When it was poised to become a global player by the momentum of its economic growth, it seems to have shot itself in the foot.

Were the Tests Necessary?

Were there any sudden and serious threats to India's sovereignty to justify the tests? Till two months before the tests the government did not show any great anxiety on the external situation. China had nuclear weapons since 1964. It had a policy of "No First Use" and "No Use against a non-nuclear weapon state". We were covered by both these conditions. In the wars of 1965 and 1971 when China sided with Pakistan, it never threatened the use of nuclear weapons against India. Our relations were actually improving since 1988. Only a year-and-a-half ago both countries had signed a treaty agreeing not to use military means against each other. This was achieved after eight years of painstaking diplomatic efforts. It

was actually as close as one could get to a no-war pact. There simply was no credible or urgent threat from China now.

It is true that Pakistan had developed nuclear weapons since 1987. It claimed this was a necessary step after the Indian test at Pokharan in 1974. But, it had not tested these weapons. It could also not test unless India did so, because it was far too vulnerable against international economic sanctions. Till Islamabad actually tested its nuclear weapons it would have no credibility as a nuclear weapon power, no matter whether these were tested in China surreptitiously or not. Till this credibility was established, the use or threat of use of these weapons and hence any military relevance would lack validity. Indian tests allowed, perhaps even compelled, Pakistan to come out of the closet. Now it matches India's military capability and enjoys a modicum of parity with it. Something it could never hope to achieve earlier entirely through conventional forces.

There indeed was a Sino-Pak military co-operation in a wide range of areas including help in military

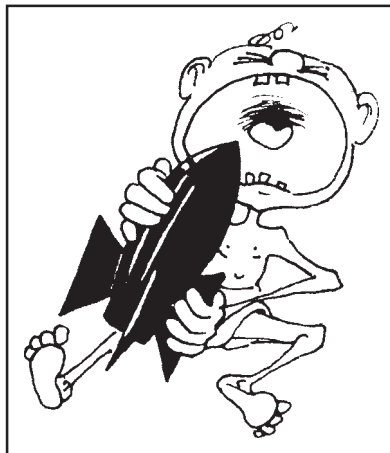
weapons and missiles. China claimed it was to counter the substantially greater help India received from Russia and erstwhile Soviet Union all these years. The way to stop this is not to threaten with use of force, but to engage in constructive dialogue. This was working to an extent. The current situation has, if anything, made matters worse. Sino-Pak military co-operation can only be expected to grow in the future.

There are other reasons put forward to justify the Indian tests. One has been that through nuclear weaponisation we can break the monopoly of the nuclear weapon countries and fight for nuclear disarmament from within the club. This, of course, does not wash with anyone. One does not have to join a group of dacoits to fight against crime. Our moral position would have been much stronger if we did not weaponise. We could always work for disarmament through existing United Nations institutions.

Do We Need Weaponisation?

After the tests there is an irrevocable logic to weaponisation. What was the need to test nuclear weapons if these are not meant for the armed forces? Even if we do not, can we prevent Pakistan from doing so? Can we be sure that Pakistan will not develop and deploy nuclear weapons? Would China not now increase its military presence and capability along the Indian border? It is reported to have already targeted its nuclear missiles against India, something it had not presumably done so far. Having begun this cycle it is not easy to stop. Besides there is no trust that the other side would not do so. It is not easy to dismount after jumping on to a tiger.

It is true that weaponisation will not mean the total mindless nuclear armament build-up that the US and Soviet Union acquired during the cold



war. It is because we just do not have that kind of money. But, we too will have to build more and more nuclear weapons, missiles, command and control systems, aircraft, underground shelters and all the attendant paraphernalia. Otherwise we cannot deploy the nuclear weapons safely. If we are not planning to do all that, why did we then test and decide to go nuclear in the first place? To think that weaponisation will not cost money is not only deceiving the citizens, but also challenging their intelligence. All this money will have to be at the expense of investing in basic needs like education and healthcare. Nuclear arms race pauperised and destroyed the Soviet Union. We are perhaps already too poor to be pauperised further. But, if arms spending increases further, it will extinguish the hopes of future generations of our citizens.

Do Nukes Add to Stability?

There is no clear evidence that possession of nuclear weapons leads to stability among the nations. A stable deterrence situation is a misnomer, for there are just too many uncertainties. It also requires enormous expenditure. Poorer countries have a tendency to cut costs on additional duplicated safety measures. Finally, there is always the possibility of human error. Machines

sometimes fail. There is always the possibility of false information and bad assessments. This may lead to a wrong decision and can ultimately trigger an accidental war.

Nuclear deterrence is based on the premise of total rationality. However, in practice, we know that very few people are rational under all circumstances. That is why wars take place between nations in the first place. Only, that in a nuclear war there is no second chance. There is no bringing back a missile that has already been launched with its deadly bomb targeted at the very heart of a city.

Nuclear deterrence was achieved in some measure perhaps between the US and the Soviet Union. These were two large adversaries who were separated by long distances. India has to balance a deterrence situation with two adversaries at the same time, with both of whom we share a common and disputed border. Where missile travel time is between three to five and seven to ten minutes, there is no time to think or even wait to verify the situation, before launching a counter strike. Actually, nuclear weapons between adversaries deteriorate a military situation. It makes relationships tense and uneasy, because of the very threat of devastation. Adversaries find it difficult to resolve outstanding issues when such a threat looms large over them. We will find this no different.

It is still not too late. Before we move along this path any longer, there is time still to turn back. Once we are caught in the vortex of an arms race, reason will be the first casualty. We will then find ourselves engulfed in the logic of the nuclear era and get immersed in its zero sum arguments. Instead let us listen to our inner reason and think for once, how can violence and threat of war bring peace? □

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