

Rise of the Bhasmasur

Are We Indeed a Nuclear Weapons Power Now?

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It is now little more than a year since India tested its nuclear “weapons” on 11 May 1998. (The nuclear test in 1974 was officially called a “peaceful nuclear explosion.”) What is more, around the first anniversary of the tests a mini-war began with Pakistan in the Kargil sector of Kashmir on the Indian side of the Line of Control, the de facto border between India and Pakistan. It is now time to test the presumptions, expectations and scenarios which were laid out only twelve months ago.

When India tested its nuclear “weapons”, we were told that the “security environment” around India had seriously deteriorated, more specifically that China posed a nuclear threat to India which had to be met and that Pakistan, with nuclear technology transfer from China was also posing a threat closer home. But the previous prime minister Mr. I.K. Gujral who had stepped down only a few months earlier said that no such threats had built up when he demitted office and none had developed subsequently.

Clearly, the Indian tests were not at all a response to any sudden development. On the contrary, relations between India and China were improving fast and the two countries had signed an agreement in 1996 on confidence building measures. Indeed, the first operative line of that agreement laid down that “Neither country will use

its military capability against the other.” “Military capability” obviously included nuclear weapon capability. Why then did the leaders of the BJP-led government choose to conduct the tests? The timing was of not related to changes in recent security threats; the testing of the Pakistani missile Ghauri provided only a fig-leaf. The BJP had actually predetermined it would exercise the “nuclear option” which had not been pursued by the previous governments to prove that it had the will which the

previous governments lacked. Now, by coming to power, the BJP had the opportunity to implement that determination.

It is a mistake to think that the BJP alone is responsible for our nuclear weaponisation policy. All the previous governments in India have encouraged the nuclear establishment in India to pursue nuclear weaponization. Even Pandit Nehru who publicly opposed nuclear weapons for India never prevented Dr Homi Bhabha from doing research on and development of nuclear weapons. But the route chosen to achieve that purpose was through development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Bhabha knew too well that his laboratories were developing dual purpose technologies. In any case, the aim of researching and developing nuclear weapons became policy after the first Chinese test in 1964.

It is important to remember that India’s leaders over the decades have cut their teeth on ideas about nuclear weapons current during the 1950s. It was then taken as axiomatic that nuclear weapons were the true currency of power and prestige; the concept of deterrence was yet to evolve. But in ensuing decades other countries which acquired nuclear weapons engaged in a learning process. The Cold War intensified that process and towards the end of the Cold War

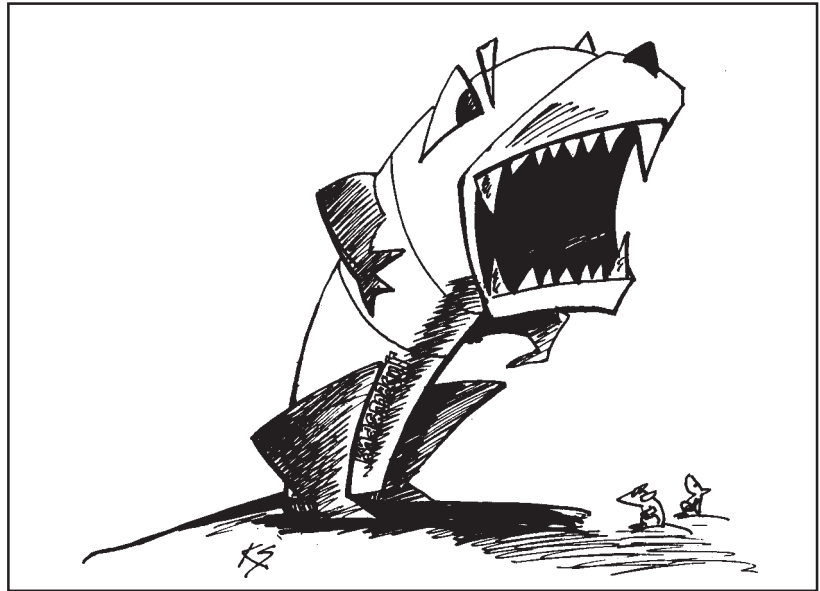


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the complexities of maintaining nuclear stockpiles, the limitations on their use for fighting wars and the requirements of command, control and communications for avoiding accidental war had driven the nuclear powers to the conclusion that a policy of waging nuclear war was unthinkable. Moreover, the rise of Germany and Japan as economic superpowers showed that power and prestige had little to do with possession of nuclear weapons. But since some Cold War thinking still persisted, particularly in the minds of the armed forces of nuclear weapons countries, while greatly reducing the size of nuclear arsenals, they still cling to them.

Indian leaders across the political spectrum have not gone through any learning process when it comes to nuclear weapons. They have picked up the buzz word “deterrence” but that is where learning stops. They are vague about exactly what is being deterred and how. They have not thought about a “crisis stable deterrent” —or, how much deterrent is enough against whom? What would constitute a “fire break” when a war with either Pakistan or China is going on? What would be India’s targeting doctrine: cities or major concentrations of troops or both? How to work out a minimum deterrent vis-à-vis one of the two countries that does not turn out to be a maximum deterrent against the other, thus giving rise to a difficult set of policy options in a nuclear arms race. When the decision to openly become a “nuclear weapons power” was made, the leaders did not ask or answer any of these questions. A search for answers began only after the decision was made and it is still continuing.

Although India has declared itself to be a nuclear weapons power, it is difficult to tell whether it has actually weaponized, whether



the devices it exploded on 11 and 13 May 1998 are actually weapons which can be delivered by aircrafts or as warheads mated to missiles. The nuclear laboratories and the Defence Research and Development Organization claim that their products have been miniaturised and ruggedised (made immune to shocks). But to count as weapons, they need to be light in weight and compact in size. The Prithvi missile, for instance, needs a warhead not exceeding 500 kgs. for its designed range. Being liquid-fuelled, it needs some time to be readied for launch. Aircraft are capable of carrying higher weights and can be launched at short notice but they are vulnerable to being shot down; so sufficient numbers of nuclear bomb carrying planes must be launched so that at least a few are likely to get through. Keeping such matters totally secret is counter-productive because as a result neither the Indians nor their adversaries can be sure how credible the weapons are or even whether weaponisation is just a bluff.

Analyses of the tests made by international experts have questioned the yields of the Indo-

Pak tests as well as whether there was a thermo-nuclear (hydrogen bomb) test at all at Pokhran II. This is another element that erodes the credibility of weaponisation. Moreover, three of the five tests were very small ones. What were they intended for? Were they tactical nuclear weapons or as triggers for much larger “enhanced” ones? In the absence of sufficient data it is impossible to navigate through this fog. There is so much ambiguity that the situation is in some ways similar to the “non-weaponized deterrent” during the pre-tests period.

Immediately after the tests the think-tanks both in India and Pakistan declared that there could be no war any more because of the possibility of escalation to the nuclear level. But exactly one year later came the mini-war in the Kargil sector of Kashmir. Obviously, while sending “intruders” across the Line of Control, no one in Pakistan was “deterred” by India’s nuclear weapons. India therefore enjoys no strategic advantage because it possesses nuclear weapons. On

the contrary, if escalation approaches the “fire break”, international intervention would become inevitable, something that India has avoided at all costs. No strategic advantage there, only disadvantage.

The five decades long experience of the nuclear weapon powers shows that 86% of the cost of deliverable nuclear weapons goes towards the cost of ensuring safety of the weapons (no accidental detonation), command and control systems (to avoid launch by unauthorized persons) and intelligence acquisition (timely warning of enemy moves, data on targets etc.). Only 14% of the cost goes towards the weapons. India, as of now, reports it has the weapons but it needs to go a long way before it has a complete system. Otherwise there always be the danger of accidental explosions because of spontaneous combustion of explosive charges, accidents involving aircraft or missiles crashing during flight, unauthorized launches by “nuclear assassins” seeking personal solutions to national problems, and so forth. The Indian nuclear establishment assures us they have taken full account of all these factors but there are no teeth in those assurances by way of any evidence. Ditto for Pakistan.

The only nuclear policy India has had is about whether or not to exercise the “option”. Until the BJP came to power, the answer was “may be”. Now it has become “yes”. There is no operational policy. The “may be” policy decidedly rejected the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) but the “yes” policy came around to agreeing to sign it. The overall nuclear policy is governed

by aspiration of become a great power, and by larger-than-life fear of enemies. It is now clear that India’s tests have done nothing to satisfy its aspirations to become a great power. Even India’s neighbours do not recognize that status; rightly or wrongly they regard India as a hegemon. As for threat perceptions, these are expressed only in the form of one-liners from the government, lacking an analysis. Exactly what kind of threat? Projected under what circumstances? Why, for instance, has there been no nuclear threat from China since it exploded its first bomb in 1964? If capabilities are permanent and intentions only transitory, how do countries within India’s Prithvi and Agni missile range know that India’s intentions towards them will not change? One-line threat perceptions are taken to be self-evident truths. Such truths led to the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union. Such truths will, willy nilly, drive India to attempt to catch up and prepare for worst-case scenarios at tremendous cost.

Neither India nor Pakistan has been recognized by the world as a nuclear weapons power. So the nuclear apartheid which the tests were supposed to demolish is still alive and kicking more furiously than ever. For the world, India has become a “nuclear Taliban”. It is too important to be totally isolated and ignored. Instead, various strategies are being tried out to attempt to contain it, including brandishing UN Resolution 1172, which is supported by all powers whose cooperation is essential for India’s well-being.

The Bhasmasur born only last year will not be destroyed by the UN resolution. It was nurtured lovingly during its gestation for some thirty years by a nuclear

establishment which received all the money and talent it wanted and became accountable only to itself. The political leaders exercised no control over it because they got locked in the 1950s mindset. It is largely the nuclear establishment which sabotaged the signing of the CTBT in mid-1990s and went on pressing the government of the day to allow it to carry out nuclear tests. It always portrayed itself as the supreme protector of India’s national interest and frightened the political leaders into believing that the national interest would suffer irreparably if the knowledge and technology developed by the present generation of scientists and technologists was not passed on to the coming generations. These arguments continue to be repeated.

After the tests were actually carried out, the political leaders came face-to-face with the consequences. Even the BJP, the most vociferous of all political parties about exercising the option, began to fly around like a headless chicken. In the face of sanctions and much else, it decided to sign the CTBT, something it would have rejected out of hand far more vehemently than the Congress (I) did only four years ago. This is a sign that at long last the political establishment has finally got on to the learning curve. The future government, too, will realize that the Bhasmasur needs to be contained if not destroyed. Perhaps the learning process will produce a Vishnu in the guise of a statesman who will persuade Bhasmasur to self-destruct. □

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