

Non-Desirability of a Nuclear Deterrence

When the US dropped the history's first atom bomb over Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 followed by another over Nagasaki three days later, a gasp of horror went through the world. In India, the land of Buddha and Gandhi, reactions were particularly sharp. To a people taught over the ages to regard as wicked and irreligious any attempt to take human, animal or even entomological life, the atom bombs which look over 125,000 human lives in two deadly blows, were understandably repulsive. Nehru clearly said, "We will not make these bombs ever even if we have the capacity to do so."

But by 1967, Michael Edwards was asking, "why should India be any more rational than Britain or France?" He, therefore, predicted a similar decision in favour of nuclear weapons by India, something which is already a truism now. In this context, it would be intriguing to find out as to what extent a nuclear deterrence can secure a country. Whether such deterrence is really feasible and if yes, what are the costs involved?

Nuclear deterrence means a balance of nuclear power among a very limited number of nations, which these nations can use both to prevent nuclear war and to employ threats or blackmail for political gains. Deterrence is a two-way defensive-offensive doctrine. Nation A deters nation B (both are nuclear powers) by forever trying to achieve and maintain an acceptable balance of nuclear strength; a 'balance' means that the scales are clearly, though not overtly, tilted in nation A's favour.

Soon after the doctrine was formulated in the mid-fifties (after the USSR acquired thermo-nuclear capability), the debate that it generated in the US and Western Europe gave birth to concepts of 'limited' nuclear war and 'survival' in a nuclear holocaust. In the 1960's, the doctrine of deterrence was refined and mounted on the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), meaning that adversary nuclear powers must be armed with an adequate second strike capability which would resume the destruction of each other and thereby prevent one from striking again at the other.

Deterrence has kept the nuclear arms race on and promises no end to it. B.S. Gupta rightly says, "Deterrence has not fulfilled one of its early expectations that, armed with nuclear

weapons, nations will not be required to maintain large conventional forces". A nation's deterrent theory has to convince not only its adversary, but also the nation itself. This creates a greater problem, a trap. To get out of this trap, the NATO (more than three decades ago) began to push the idea that with some increased expenditure on conventional forces—say, 1% of GNP for five years—it should be able to hold and defeat a conventional Soviet attack without recourse to nuclear weapons. Here, a question arises that if conventional deterrence is feasible, then what are those thousands of warheads doing in Europe? Why were these weapons deployed in the first place? Why was not a strong conventional defence maintained from the start?

The fact is that there are many weaknesses in the concept of deterrence itself which arise because of a basic error: that of confusing defence with deterrence, i.e., we need a deterrence to defend ourselves. Defence is a policy of dissuasion based on counter-posing such force that an attack is doomed to fail. Deterrence, on the other hand, is a policy of dissuasion based on threatening reprisals which would outweigh any conceivable benefits from attack.

If the dissuasion posed by defence fails, at worst you fight and the invader is repulsed, or you lose and come to terms. But if the dissuasion posed by deterrence fails, you either save yourselves by coming to terms in any case, or you commit suicide along with your enemy. Defence is easily understood as a rational concept. But, as B.S. Gupta says, "Deterrence with its inherent flaws can be understood as rational only by those who believe suicide is preferable to living."

The evidence suggests that nuclear-weapon powers would rather accept heavy casualties or major and adverse changes in the politico-strategic situation than use nuclear weapons even when there is no threat of retaliation. Therefore, carrying out a nuclear threat of retaliation is in prospect becomes even less credible. The conclusion necessarily follows that when the theoretical basis for their existence itself is deeply flawed, the rationale for their acquisition surely comes under cloud.

After the exposition of flaws in the concept of nuclear deterrence, let us examine the arguments against India having nuclear weapons. In the Indian perspective, the following arguments could be advanced:

1. Nuclear weapons are not relevant in the context of India's security and geopolitical interests. India's primacy in South Asia can be ensured by conventional armaments and by diplomacy based on good neighbourliness and peaceful co-existence with as many countries as possible.
2. As a non-nuclear power, India is not likely to be attacked by a nuclear power. There is overwhelming international sentiment and some commitments from the nuclear powers against a nuclear power attacking a non-nuclear power with nuclear weapons. It is true that nuclear powers have so far not attacked a non-nuclear power with nukes even though the two types of powers have been engaged in 'local war'.
3. Nuclear weapons create a special kind of insecurity and invariably call for a continuing escalation in nuclear armaments without ensuring security. Nuclear weapons set an upper limit on the possible level of conflict between adversaries. This creates incentives for other forms of confrontations below the nuclear threshold.

4. Far greater problems will arise when India decides to match the latest technologies in the world. G.G. Mirchandani says, "Military weapons have a tendency to go out of fashion and become obsolete in a very short time. The Indian government would have to keep up with their day-to-day development". This may push up India's defence spending to around 10% of the GNP. Even with that level of spending on India's part, China won't be impressed; it will have moved far ahead. America and Russia also won't be impressed. They could shoot down every missile India might launch. Pakistan might be impressed, but she already enjoys parity with India.
5. In order to meet the commitments of nuclear weapons programme, India may not find enough resources to maintain the necessary high level of conventional military preparedness which is more relevant to India's security and regional status.
6. Maintaining a nuclear deterrent requires a very high level of managerial ability. It becomes necessary to maintain an early warning system; to indulge in war-gaming nuclear scenarios; to maintain a national command authority. Given the way India generally functions, is it necessary not to go in for a tool so dangerous that the slightest error can be catastrophic.
7. Again, after India became a nuclear power, it has developed a vested interest in maintaining a severely restricted and monopolistic international nuclear power regime and be infected by the resistance to nuclear arms control and disarmament, so evident among the existing nuclear powers.
8. Not only this, India has joined the nuclear club as a very junior member, way behind China and as an equal to Pakistan. This has diminished rather than enhanced India's status as a leading member of the international community.
9. By going nuclear, India has also gone back on its long-cherished policy to oppose nukes at a time when a grassroots anti-nuclear weapons movement appears to be emerging on a global level as a strong constraint on the hitherto unhindered nuclear race.
10. In the 1960s, India suspected China of using its nuclear force as a means to intimidate its neighbours. Today, there is no reason to believe that India's neighbours would feel differently after India went nuclear. The tendency to act as the Big Brother in South Asia has been reinforced after India acquired nuclear weapons. This has not only made regional cooperation more difficult, but has also prompted some of the smaller neighbours to seek protection from other nuclear powers like China, America and even Pakistan.
11. It has further spurred and strengthened a China-Pakistan strategic cooperation much to India's chagrin.
12. By pursuing the nuclear option, we have allowed Pakistan to become our strategic equal, with disastrous consequences. Conventional weapons are best to take care of Indian security.
13. Moreover, to have a reasonably credible nuclear deterrent, it is not enough just to produce weapons; a sustained process of continuous quantitative and qualitative refinement of both nuclear weapons and their delivery systems would involve a prohibitively very high cost, beyond India's capacity to afford.
14. Nuclear bombs are more damaging to the surface of the earth than an earthquake apart from contributing to the environmental pollution.

For India's nuclear weapons to be credible, the same needs to be capable of frightening off any other adversary nuclear power from undertaking a nuclear first strike against India. But it is difficult to anticipate what would be a credible Indian deterrent. Credibility will be determined by India's perceived threat from other nuclear powers and the way other nuclear powers perceive the threat from a nuclear India. Our nukes definitely are no deterrence to the great powers. They may or may not be viable against Pakistan and China, but, will be no threat at all to the US and other great powers.

Would nukes in Indian hands ensure peace and security between Indian and its neighbours? Suppose Pakistan makes a surprise attack and takes Kashmir. Is the Indian government going to attack Pakistani cities with nukes? It requires no sophisticated thinking to completely rule out the possibility of an Indian nuclear retaliation. For the sake of argument; let's imagine that India had nukes since 1947. The 1947-48 war with Pakistan would have probably been fought nevertheless, but the Pakistanis would have taken greater care to pretend that their regular army was actually only guerrillas and more really Kashmir's. An Indian threat would have been as incredible as it would have been ineffective. India would have to get into Kashmir and clear out the Pakistanis the same way as it did, by conventional fighting.

India's next major war was with China in 1962. If India had nuclear weapons in 1947, China must have had that before 1962. The border war would have taken place nonetheless and neither side would have used nukes. The Ussuri river border clash occurred between a nuclear USSR and a nuclear China, while in 1979 Vietnam was not deterred by China's nuclear weapons from fighting a large scale war with that country. Nor did China even threaten to use nuclear weapons against Vietnam even though it failed to achieve its war objectives.

Then came 1965, by which time India would have faced a nuclear Pakistan, according to our imaginary scenario the Pakistani attack on Kashmir began as an infiltration. Only when Pakistanis saw that they were getting nowhere did they use their regular troops at Chhamb. As far as the Pakistanis were concerned, they were still fighting over a disputed border; no international frontier was crossed, so the attack at Chhamb might still have taken place. With both countries nuclear-armed, the only conclusion that we can definitely draw is that 'Operation Riddle' would not have taken place; both attacks were across an international frontier against very sensitive Pakistani areas. India would have been deterred by Pakistani nuclear weapons, whereas Pakistan might not have been deterred by Indian nuclear weapons from attacking Chhamb.

However, Pakistan would have taken much greater pains over its infiltration offensive in Kashmir. The quick and easy option of using regular forces to attack Chhamb after the infiltrators became bogged down would not have been there. The 1965 war would have taken a different course, possibly to India's disadvantage since the Indian counter-offensive would probably not have been launched, though there is no intrinsic reason why the war could not have been fought at all.

1971 war would certainly have been fought differently if both sides were armed with nuclear weapons, India would have been less concerned about the prospect of Chinese intervention. But the overt attack in the East, and then the offensives in the West which went deep into

Pakistani territory, could not have been mounted. Indian would have supported the Bengali rebels just the same and Pakistan would have fought a far lengthier and far bloodier war.

For one thing, with nuclear weapons Pakistan would have felt safer in the West, and it would have dispatched, say, five regular divisions in the East instead of just three. An Indian conventional offensive might have been rendered impossible, or at least far more difficult and costly, even if India had risked launching it. But for the Indian conventional intervention, the guerrilla war, actively supported by India, would have continued perhaps for years, and a more radical Bangladesh would have finally emerged.

After the foregoing deliberation and discussion, it becomes crystal clear that the theoretical basis for the existence of nuclear weapons is deeply flawed, so the rationale for their acquisition and effectiveness comes under serious doubt. It is just preposterous to think that a nuclear deterrence can secure a country's security. As for India, with the prohibitive costs involved in terms of economic political, diplomatic, positional and moral losses, it would be wise enough for her to renounce the nuclear option. The arguments *ipso facto* applies to other nuclear powers as well.

The solution to the great nuclear challenge of our times can be found only on the basis of hope and faith, trust and confidence, courage and wisdom. The only possible goal is and ought to be comprehensive and complete disarmament, which would consist of a complete freeze on the production of nuclear weapons, their delivery system and a total ban on testing of nuclear weapons with immediate effect, and a phased programme of reduction or neutralising the existing stockpiles.

Salient Points

- Nuclear deterrence means a balance of nuclear power among a very limited number of nations, which these nations can use to prevent nuclear war, etc.
- Deterrence has not fulfilled one of its early expectations that, armed with nuclear weapons, nations will not be required to maintain large conventional forces.
- There are many weaknesses in the concept of deterrence itself which arise because of a basic error: that of confusing defence with deterrence.
- Arguments against India having nuclear weapons are as follows:
 - o Nuclear weapons are not relevant in the context of India's security and geopolitical interests.
 - o As a non-nuclear power, India is not likely to be attacked by a nuclear power.
 - o Nuclear weapons set an upper limit on the possible level of conflict between adversaries.
 - o This may push up India's defence spending to around 10% of the GNP.
 - o India could be infected by the resistance to nuclear arms control and disarmament.
 - o India has joined the nuclear club as a very junior member.
 - o Nuclear bombs are more damaging to the surface of the earth than an earthquake.
- Our nukes definitely are no deterrence to the great powers. They may be viable against Pakistan and China, but, will be no threat at all to the US, etc.
- An analysis of India's war with neighbours since Independence indicate that it is just preposterous to think that a nuclear deterrence can secure a country's security.
- As for India, with the prohibitive costs involved in terms of economic political, diplomatic, positional and moral losses, it would be wise enough for her to renounce the nuclear option.
- Comprehensive disarmament is should be the goal.

Glossary

Repulsive: causing repugnance or aversion

Gasp: a sudden, short intake of breath, as in shock or surprise

Entomological: the branch of zoology dealing with insects

Reprisals: an act or instance of retaliation