

A degenerating nuclear logic

*Pak-def
New
24.1.03*

Achin Vanaik

Are our memories so short? Doesn't anyone remember that veritable deluge of voices in the summer of 1998 from the ranks of our 'strategic establishment' assuring us that regional stability would be enhanced by first India and then Pakistan going openly nuclear? The wondrous workings of deterrence would usher in greater nuclear security for both countries as well as reduce the likelihood of conventional military conflict and tensions. There were those in the anti-nuclear camp who pointed out that this was inverted logic. That militarisation-nuclearisation are the symptoms and expressions of political hostility and cannot themselves undo or lessen that hostility since they can never address the deeper causes sustaining those hostilities. Indeed, that such nuclearisation would only exacerbate tensions. But their voices were simply ignored or dismissed.

Four-and-a-half years down the line who was right? Can anybody doubt or deny that relations between India and Pakistan are more embittered than in decades? That the presence of nuclear weapons, far from being a soothing balm, has simply added a dangerous, and new, layer of tensions to a situation of already abiding unease? The easy way out to explain this is to assign all the blame to Pakistan. Even if one accepts such a one-sided assessment that effectively exculpates India from all responsibility for the deterioration in mutual relations, it still exposes the lack of foresight by the pro-bomb lobby in India that was earlier so keen to claim all kinds of healing powers for the nuclearisation of the region, which incidentally was initiated by India not Pakistan?

Remember, too, the oft-repeated claim that there would be no competitive arms race between India and Pakistan! Yet both countries test, accumulate more weapons-grade material to make more and better warheads, expand the range of their missiles, put in place nuclear command and control systems which they assure us will work and make matters safer, even as both Governments indulge in a language of irresponsible nuclear arrogance and brinkmanship that was rarely ever witnessed between the US and the former USSR even at the height of the Cold War. The reason for this contrast in styles and patterns of political behaviour is obvious. The conflict between the US and the USSR was primarily ideological yet abstract - a clash between two systems upon which the passage of time would be left to pronounce comparative judgment. The con-

flikt between India and Pakistan has long been directly political-territorial, repeatedly involving military engagement (conventional wars), and now with the rise of religious extremism in both countries (and the hatreds inspired by such extremism) far more dangerous even in its ideological dimension.

This is the context in which we have to view the latest developments of the setting up of a Nuclear Command Authority in India with its claim of institutionalising alternative chains of command (should the 'enemy' launch a pre-emptive 'decapitating' strike), and the dilution of its previous No Use commitment to non-nuclear states that are now warned that they can face nuclear attack even if they use chemical or biological weapons, though a huge chasm in terms of consequences still separates nuclear weapons from even these weapons. The degenerative logic of seeking security through nuclear weapons has now taken hold. The Musharraf Government in the typical fashion of nuclear bomb buffs has to claim various virtues for Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. So he declares that but for its nuclear power India would have launched a conventional attack on Pakistan. Moreover, he warns, Pakistan will reply 'unconventionally' to any future conventional Indian assault.

The obvious follows. The Defence Minister, George Fernandes (not alone by any means), seeks to 'reassure' the Indian public that even if a couple of Indian cities are bombed, India will devastate Pakistan in reply. What an extraordinary state of affairs! Not one 'expert' is prepared to inform the Indian public that actually carrying out a second strike can never be an act of security retrieval or enhancement (once a first strike has taken place one's security has gone) but can only be an act of revenge.

Moreover, it is a senseless act of revenge because it only initiates a further action-reaction chain of nuclear exchanges. Nor is anyone prepared to point out that if today India has the capacity to inflict more damage on Pakistan than vice versa, in due course Pakistan will acquire the missile range and stocks of warheads capable of effectively wiping out all of India, and that it is little 'consolation' for India to be able then to wipe out Pakistan several times over!

For all the current talk of being able to inflict "unacceptable damage" on the other side, the honest truth is that no can know for sure that after a significant or substantial or massive enemy first strike whether enough would be left over to inflict unacceptable damage in a retaliatory second-strike, besides the fact that such an act is merely irrational revenge. It was the con-

stant search for the always-elusive 'credible' second-strike capacity that drove the US and USSR to an arms race that reached truly insane levels, and that will drive India and Pakistan to emulate them on a much lower but still constantly escalating scale. Fear of a decapitating first strike has pushed India into developing 'alternative' chains of command. No doubt Pakistan with much less strategic-territorial depth has done the same. Shorn of its euphemistic tone what this means is that both countries are committed to a certain level of dispersion and delegation of authority to use nuclear weapons away from the Prime Minister or even the very top-most layer of political control, since decapitation can itself be very substantial. This dispersion-decentralisation of authority is itself a risk, and furthermore, there is still never going to be any guarantee that such alternative chains of command will adequately survive a massive first strike.

One should, therefore, expect a new kind of 'infighting' to now emerge within the Indian pro-nuclear lobby itself. There are going to be a number of voices now calling for abandoning the No-First-Use posture, since this might be read by Pakistan as an invitation to launch a massive first strike sometime in the future, for moving towards very high levels of preparedness such as provided by a "launch-on-warning" posture. It will then be argued that to make deterrence truly effective it is necessary to do this because only then is a massive second-strike attack against Pakistan virtually guaranteed so that it cannot hope to destroy India's retaliatory capacities through a huge first-strike no matter how decapitating or destructive this might be. So Pakistan will never strike first. Deterrence through a launch-on-warning posture is, of course, yet another level of madness in nuclear strategic thinking but that does not mean it won't come about. From 1982 to 1992 Russia made a No-First-Use pledge but like the US, it nonetheless in the 1980s adopted a launch-on-warning posture.

Even as regional nuclear disarmament is the only genuine assurance against use of nuclear weapons in South Asia, there is also the need for promoting nuclear risk-reduction measures as a transitional measure. It is a striking indication of the deep irresponsibility of the two Governments of India and Pakistan and of their respective pro-nuclear strategic establishments that to this date, the only serious efforts at drawing up, publishing and publicly distributing such risk reduction proposals have come from the ranks of the nuclear disarmament movement.

The Hindu, January 23, 2003