

India is Erasing Her Own Memory

Praful Bidwai

Ten years ago this week, India blasted its way into the global nuclear club by conducting five explosions at Pokhran. By declaring herself a nuclear weapons State(NWS), it joined what it had long described as the 'Atomic Apartheid' system- not to reform it, but as one of its hegemons. In another of policy rupture, India also embraced the doctrine of nuclear deterrence, which it had for 50 years deplored as 'morally repugnant' and strategically irrational.

The fateful decision to cross the nuclear threshold was taken in secrecy, without discussion in the cabinet security affairs committee and even the pretence of a strategic review promised in the BJP manifesto Even the defence establishment was in the dark about it until May 9. But, according to the present RSS chief, K.S.Sudarshan, the Sangh parivar was privy to it and mandated it.

Former National Security Adviser, Brajesh Mishra has since confirmed that the decision was taken on April 7 and 8 by just four men, one of whom – Prime Minister Vajpayee- was an elected leader. The others, besides Mishra, were the atomic energy and Defence R&D Organizations heads who had a partisan stake in India going nuclear.

Such opacity in respect of a momentous policy change is itself reason enough to question its false prestige-driven rationale. But 10 years after the tests, even stronger arguments suggest themselves persuasively. Nuclearisation has created greater volatility in South Asia, making both India and Pakistan more insecure. Today millions of their citizens have become vulnerable to attacks by nuclear- tipped missiles, which cannot be intercepted or recalled. Missile flight-time between cities is as short as three to eight minutes.

Over the past decade, India has been drawn into not one, but two nuclear and missiles arms races- with Pakistan and more ominously with China. The three countries' military spending is rising at rates that are among the world's highest. Since 1998, India's defence spend has nearly tripled to 30 billion dollar. This masks the always-gross disproportion between India's military and social-sector budgets even more obscene.

This can only aggravate social insecurity, in addition to strategic instability. As India long argued, the logic of arms race is cruel: you don't quite decide how much more you spend on arms, your adversary does. India is erasing her own memory.

Nuclear weapons have encouraged adventurist and reckless behaviour in our region. Neither Pakistan's Kargil incursions nor Pervez Musharraf's 1999 coup, which decisively set democracy back, can be understood outside the nuclear context and the dangerously false confidence the bomb generated among the Pakistan's men in uniform. In South Asia, even the comfortable assumption of the nuclear deterrence theory-- that nuclear states don't go to war with each other – stood demolished a year after Pokhran II.

Kargil was a serious conflict, involving 40,000 troops and top-of-the-line weaponry. The disclosures that Pakistan came close to readying its nuclear missiles in 1999 and that India and Pakistan were twice at the brink of a nuclear confrontation in the 10-month eyeball-to-eyeball stand-off after the December 2001 Parliament attack should warn and worry all sensible citizens not devoted to the bomb. We may not be so lucky the next time around. The heaviest component of the costs of going nuclear has been moral-political. India, the land of Buddha and Gandhi, lost a good deal of its global moral stature as a force of peace and moderation. This, not raw power, was long the source of prestige we enjoyed. The second setback is India's retreat from the global disarmament agenda.

After Pokhran, India turned against its own demand for a special disarmament UN session, like the 1988 session where Rajiv Gandhi presented his thoughtful plan for global nuclear elimination. The UPA's promise of reviving the plan sounds hollow. It will acquire credibility only if India seizes the initiative by announcing unilateral nuclear-restraint measures and making concrete proposals for complete nuclear disarmament.

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