

Ten Years After Pokhran and Chagai

We should be grateful for small mercies. There have been no celebrations in India in the 10th anniversary of the Pokhran nuclear tests of May 11 and 13, 1998, and there are no signs as yet of such events in Pakistan to mark the Chagai tests of May 28 and 30 of the same year. This is not because of any change of heart though. The governments in both India and Pakistan, their defence forces, their scientific establishments and the army of so-called strategic affairs experts that dominate the media are as firm in their belief today as they were a decade ago that their respective decisions to go nuclear have brought the two countries security and, of course, “prestige”.

All the fears and concerns expressed a decade ago when hysteria gripped public life in the two countries have either come true or remain as valid as they were in 1998. Correspondingly, none of the assurances of the proponents of “nuclear deterrence” have been borne out by the events of the intervening years.

Those who swore by the “Bomb” told us, in both India and Pakistan, that nuclear deterrence would prevent wars and ensure security. Yet, within a year of Pokhran and Chagai, the two countries fought a full-fledged war in the heights of Kargil. Worse was to come in 2001-02, when in the aftermath of the attack in Parliament, India and Pakistan engaged in their first full mobilization of their armies since 1971. That the two countries pulled back was not because they both knew the other had nuclear weapons, but because both knew neither could “win” a war.

They told us that since India and Pakistan both had nuclear weapons, this would prevent use by one or the other. But we know that in 1999, during the Kargil war, the Pakistani army began making initial preparations to assemble its nuclear forces. If it were not for US intervention and pressure, the unthinkable may well have happened. Likewise, the irresponsible talk during the 2001-02 crisis about the use of nuclear weapons (including at the top-most level by India’s defence minister of the time, George Fernandes, and army chief S Padmanabhan) took the two countries to the edge- just one step away from an accident/inadvertent use of nuclear weapons. The problem with deterrence is not just the possibility of a deliberate launch of nuclear weapons but the “accidental” use that would follow from an escalation in a military crisis.

They told us that nuclear weapons were far from expensive. But both the countries have sped along, developing and importing a range of complex and sophisticated delivery, defence, communications and intelligence systems. They have been steadily expanding their stock of fissile material and they are believed to be now capable of putting together in excess of 100 nuclear bombs each. India has in the past decade worked on and tested a range of missile system that can target both Pakistan and China, including most recently the intermediate range ballistic missile, Agni-III. It has already set its sights on a 5,000+

km intercontinental ballistic missile, the Agni-V or Surya. Defence officials now admit that India has been working on a nuclear submarine (the “advance technology vehicle”) that could carry nuclear tipped missiles. The latter, the Sagarika missile project, is also now in the open. When all these projects are completed, India would have its own nuclear “triad”, the battery of land, air and sea-based delivery systems considered essential for a nuclear weapons state but always a shallow intellectual justification offered by the “nuclear experts”. India has also been working on proposals on collaboration with the US, Russia, and Israel for deployment of expensive “anti-ballistic missile shields”. The list is endless. It is no wonder that India is now one of the biggest importers of military equipment in the world and is projected to remain so for over the next five years.

In both India and Pakistan, public discourse rarely questions the decision to go nuclear. Instead, apathy, even open support, marks public attitudes to nuclear weapons. The left in India is the only group of any significance to be openly critical of the government’s decision and even there, after an early vehemence this figures little in campaigns. It is unfortunate that the anti-nuclear movement – in India organized by a few peace groups, the left and non-governmental organizations - has been unable to make much of an impact. Until that happens the 1.3 billion people of India and Pakistan will remain hostages to the dangerous delusions of the nuclear lobby.

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