

Ten Years of the Bomb

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It is ten years since India and Pakistan went openly nuclear. The dangers of a nuclear South Asia are becoming more and more apparent, yet the Governments of the two countries continue to build their arsenals. Both countries continue to produce plutonium for more and more bombs, both countries have been testing new kinds of deliver vehicles and both countries have conducted war games assuming the use of nuclear weapons. The pursuit of nuclear weapons is beginning to take, as elsewhere in the world, a logic of its own. South Asia awaits a strong peace movement that will make the Governments of India and Pakistan see reasons.

In the 10 years since the May 1998 nuclear weapons test by India and Pakistan, the bomb has largely faded from view in south Asia. But the bomb is not gone. The nuclear logic continues to unfold relentlessly.

In both India and Pakistan, the nuclear tests were sold to the public as guaranteeing national security. It did not take both countries to discover that the bomb was no defence. The Kargil followed barely a year after the nuclear tests. The war proved that the bomb would not defend India from attack and was no guarantee for victory of Pakistan. It only showed that two nuclear armed countries can fight a war and that in such a situation leaders in both countries will threaten to use nuclear weapons.

But Kargil was not enough to teach caution and restraint. A little over two years later, India and Pakistan prepared to fight again. An estimated half a million troops were rushed to the border, and nuclear threats were made with abandon.

What lessons have been learned? None, other than that they need to be better prepared to fight a war. Both countries have carried out major war games that assumed the possible use of nuclear weapons.

Effects of a nuclear war

Political leaders and military planners seem impervious to the fact that a war between Pakistan and India in which each used only five of their nuclear weapons on the other's cities could kill several millions people and injure many more.

The effects of a nuclear war could be much worse if India and Pakistan use about 50 weapons each. They have made more than enough nuclear weapons materials to do this. Recent studies using modern climate models suggest that the use of 50 weapons each by the two countries could throw up enough smoke from the burning cities to trigger significant cooling of the atmosphere and land surface and a decrease in rainfall that could last for years. This could, in turn, lead to a catastrophic drop in agricultural production, and widespread famine that may last a decade. The casualties would be beyond imagination.

India and Pakistan are still producing plutonium and highly enriched uranium that are the key ingredients in nuclear weapons. Nuclear policymakers in both

countries obviously do not think they have enough weapons. They have never explained how they will decide how many weapons are enough.

For the past decade the two countries have also been waging a nuclear missile race. Both India and Pakistan have tested various kinds of missiles, including ones that would take as little as five minutes to reach key cities in the other country. Some of the tests are now carried out by the military, not scientists and engineers. These are user trials and field exercises. They are practising for fighting a nuclear war.

There is more to come. Pakistan has been testing a cruise missile that could carry a nuclear warhead. India has tested a ballistic missile that can be fired from a submarine. It is reported that the plan is eventually to have a fleet of five submarines, with three deployed anytime, each armed with 12 missiles (perhaps with multiple warheads on each missile) with a range of 5000 km. Pakistan already has a naval strategic command and has talked also of putting nuclear weapons on submarines.

It is a familiar logic that South Asia has still not learnt. The search for nuclear security is a costly and dangerous pursuit that will take on a life of its own and knows no end. It took almost 20 years to go from an American President declaring the bomb the “greatest thing in history”, to a successor recognising that nuclear weapons had turned the world into a prison in which man awaits his execution. This hard-won recognition has still not come to south Asia.

Only when an active and sustained peace movement is able to awaken people and leaders to this terrible truth can we move to the next stage in resisting and eliminating the bomb and all that it represents.

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