

Fearless Ignorance
by Pervez Hoodbhoy

Last week, as a million Indian and Pakistani troops glowered at each other on the border, in a public debate in Islamabad former chief of the Pakistan Army General Mirza Aslam Beg declared "we can make a first strike, and a second strike, or even a third". The dreadful vision of nuclear war left him unmoved; he observed "You can die crossing the street, or you could die in a nuclear war. You've got to die someday anyway."

Across the border, similar sentiments. India's Defence Minister George Fernandes, in his interview to The Hindustan Times, was explicit - "We could take a strike, survive, and then hit back. Pakistan would be finished." Indian defence secretary, Yogendra Narain told Outlook Magazine "we must be prepared for total mutual destruction".

The "unthinkable" is taking hold in South Asia. But while foreign nationals stream out of both countries and numerous world leaders call for peace and restraint, away from the borders few Indians or Pakistanis are losing much sleep. Stock markets have flickered, but there is no run on the banks or panic buying of necessities. Schools and colleges, which generally close at the first hint of a real crisis, are functioning normally.

A fatalistic Hindu belief that the stars above determine our destiny, or the equivalent Muslim belief in "jabr" (predestination), certainly accounts for part of it. Conversations and discussions often end on the note "what will be, will be", after which people shrug their shoulders and move on to something else. But other reasons may be more important.

Close government control over national television, especially in Pakistan, has ensured critical discussions of nuclear weapons and nuclear war remain off-limits. Instead, at Pakistan's public squares and crossroads stand missiles and fibre-glass replicas of the nuclear test site. For the masses, they are symbols of national glory and achievement not death and destruction.

Nuclear ignorance is almost total, extending even to the educated. Some students at my university in Islamabad, when asked, said a nuclear war would be the end of the world. Others thought of nuclear weapons as just bigger bombs. Many said it was not their concern, but the army's. Almost none knew about the blast, firestorm, or radioactivity unleashed by a nuclear explosion.

Ignorance and its attendant lack of fear make it easier for leaders to treat their people as pawns in a mad nuclear game. How else to explain Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee recent exhortations to his troops in Kashmir to prepare for "decisive victory" and General Musharraf to threaten to "unleash a storm"?

More profound and dangerous still is the willed ignorance of the supposed security experts. At a recent meeting this January in Dubai, I heard senior Indian security analysts say that they are "bored" by Pakistan's nuclear threats and no longer believe them. K. Subrahmanyam, an influential Indian hawk, believes that India can "sleep in peace". The urge to clear the road to

limited strikes across the Line of Control in Kashmir, and so settle scores with Pakistan, has blinded them to the realities of nuclear weapons.

Indian denial of Pakistani capabilities is not a wholly new phenomenon. Senior Indian defence analysts and even a former head of India's Department of Atomic Energy argued in the 1990s that Pakistan did not have the capability to make nuclear weapons. Their advice was listened to at the highest levels. In March 1998, as a member of a Pugwash group which visited Delhi, I met Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral. In response to my concern about the nuclear danger on the subcontinent, he repeatedly assured me that Pakistan did not have the capability of making atomic bombs. Two months later, Pakistan followed India in testing nuclear weapons.

These experts have also misjudged Pakistan's intentions and drives. While security analysts argued that a nuclear South Asia would have stable deterrence and restraint, flush with its new-found nuclear confidence Pakistan launched its war in the Kargil area of Kashmir. It was not deterred either by India's conventional weapons or its nuclear weapons.

The present crisis has brought to light a further twist. Some leading Indian strategic thinkers now argue that the US would restrain the use of nuclear weapons by Pakistan or, if need be, destroy them preemptively.

It is an enormous leap of faith to presume that the US has the will or even the power to destroy Pakistan's nuclear weapons. Tracking and destroying even a handful of mobile nuclear-armed missile is no easy feat. During the Cuban missile crisis, even though it had aerial photos of the missile locations and its planes were only minutes flying time away, the US air force reportedly could not ensure more than 90% effectiveness in a surprise attack against the Soviet missiles on the island. More recently, in Iraq, US efforts to destroy the Scuds had limited success.

Nonetheless, there are great dangers here. With the US as safety net, India may be emboldened to act. Pakistan may back itself into the "madman" approach to nuclear weapons, which is to threaten to use them wantonly. A single bomb on a single South Asia city would be a catastrophe. Ignorant and fearless, India and Pakistan could well add a new chapter to well-worn textbooks on the theory of nuclear deterrence.

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