

India's Nuclear Fizzle

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Suspicion has now turned into confirmed fact: India's hydrogen bomb test of May 1998 was not the fantastic success it was claimed to be.

Last week's dramatic revelation by K. Santanam, a senior RAW official with important responsibilities at the 1998 Pokhran test site, has essentially confirmed conclusions known from seismic analysis after the explosion. Instead of 45 kilotons of destructive energy, the explosion had produced only 15-20. The bomb had not worked as designed.

Why blow the whistle eleven years later? An irresistible urge to tell the truth or moral unease is scarcely the reason. Santanam's "coming clean" has the stamp of approval of the most hawkish of Indian nuclear hawks. Among them are P.K. Iyengar, A.N. Prasad, Bharat Karnad, and Brahma Chellaney. By rubbishing the earlier test as a failure, they hope to make the case for more nuclear tests. This would enable India to develop a full-scale thermonuclear arsenal. As is well known, a thermonuclear (or hydrogen) bomb is far more complex than the relatively simple fission weapon first tested by India in 1974, and by Pakistan in 1998. Advanced weapons needs fine tuning to achieve their full destructiveness – France had to test 22 times to achieve perfection.

By generating a pro-test environment, India's nuclear hawks hope to make life difficult for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's moderate government whenever India's signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) comes up for discussion. Santanam's revelation has been spurred by the fear that if President Obama succeeds in his initiative to revive the CTBT – which had essentially been shot dead by the US Senate in 1999 – the doors on nuclear testing could be shut world-wide. A race against the clock is on.

There are not the only ominous developments. India has begun sea trials of its 7000-ton nuclear-powered submarine with underwater ballistic missile launch capability, the first in a planned fleet of five. India became the world's 10th-highest military spender in 2008 but now plans to head even further upwards. In July 2009, Indian defence minister, A.K. Antony announced that for 2009-2010 India plans to raise its military budget by 50% to a staggering \$40 billion, about six times that of Pakistan.

On the Pakistani side, the desire to maintain nuclear parity with India has caused it to push down the pedal as hard as it can. Although the numbers of Pakistani warheads and delivery vehicles is a closely held secret, a former top official of the CIA recently noted in a report released this month that: "It took them roughly 10 years to double the number of nuclear weapons from roughly 50 to 100."

This is bad news for those Pakistanis, like myself, who have long opposed Pakistan's nuclear weapons. Our Indian friends and colleagues – who have opposed their country's bomb with far greater vigor – have failed even more spectacularly in stopping their nuclear juggernaut. It is little satisfaction to note that post-1998 developments have repeatedly confirmed predictions, made by Pakistani and India anti-nuclear activists

separately, that the loud claims of “minimal deterrence” by nuclear hawks on both sides are a proven sham. Only the sky is the limit.

Stuck with an arms race that is fuelled by India’s new found economic strength, what should Pakistan do? Before contemplating alternatives, one must calmly scrutinize India’s motives, and disaggregate the threats that Pakistan faces both externally and internally.

First, an unpalatable truth – India’s nuclear planners want to play in the big league, not with Pakistan. While nuclear Pakistan is indeed seen as troublesome, it is a side consideration. India’s new-found aggressive and dangerous nationalism now actively seeks new rivals and enemies across the globe. This potentially includes its present allies, Russia and the US. But it is strongly focused upon neighboring China.

An example: this month’s article by Bharat Verma, the hawkish editor of the influential Indian Defense Review, makes the preposterous prediction that China will attack India before 2012, leaving only three years to Indian government for preparation. He claims that a desperate Beijing is out “to teach India the final lesson, thereby ensuring Chinese supremacy in Asia in this century” and China is working towards an end game rooted in the “abiding conviction of the communists that the Chinese race is far superior to Nazi Germany”. Verma’s solution: India must arm itself to the teeth.

Pakistan should find reassurance in this kind of thinking, warped though it is. It indicates that India’s China obsession is doing most of the driving, not hostility with Pakistan or the Muslim factor. Certainly, India’s military expansion deserves a full-throated condemnation both because of the unnecessary tension it creates, as well as the diversion of resources away from the actual needs of India’s people. But the lesson for us is that we need not panic or fear an Indian invasion. Pakistan already has enough military muscle to stay safe in this regard, even if India increases its nuclear arsenal many-fold.

On the other hand, Pakistan is not safe from dangerous internal threats. These are: population growth, terrorism, and provincial tensions.

Pakistan’s population is out of control. From 28 million in 1947, it has shot up to 176 million today, roughly a six-fold increase over sixty years. This exploding population bomb makes it impossible to provide even basic education and health facilities to a majority. Shrinking per capita availability of water is inevitable, and is certain to become a source of serious internal violence as well as growing tensions with India.

Terrorism, fortunately, is not yet out of control. But recent army victories and the elimination of Baitullah Mehsud, while welcome, are from decisive. The epicenters of terrorism are highly mobile. Religious radicalism has penetrated deep into the core of Pakistan’s society, particularly its youth. The real problem lies in our cities, not the mountains.

Nationalist struggles, with those in Baluchistan being the most serious, are a third important threat. They are indicative of the deep unhappiness felt by a good fraction of Pakistanis living outside Punjab. While too inchoate to seriously threaten the federal structure at this point, circumstances could rapidly change.

These are serious existential threats. But they cannot be met by following India's path. Would tripling Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and missile inventory, or having thermonuclear weapons, reduce their severity even marginally? Instead, the way to create a viable Pakistan lies in embarking on an emergency population planning program, building a sustainable and active democracy on the back of a welfare state, restructuring the economy for peace rather than war, remaking the federation so that provincial grievances can be effectively resolved, eliminating the feudal order, and creating a tolerant society that respects the rule of law and does not discriminate between citizens.

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