

LIGHTING THE NUCLEAR FIRE by Pervez Hoodbhoy

A nuclear war is said to have no winners, but Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee seems to think otherwise. His exhortations to Indian troops in Kashmir to prepare for sacrifices and "decisive victory" have set off widespread alarm. It seems plausible that India is preparing for a "limited war" to flush out Islamic militant camps in Pakistan administered Kashmir. But with swift reaction and counter-reaction, it is far from clear whether the combat can remain confined. Meanwhile, as cross-border artillery shelling intensifies, five Indian naval vessels are rapidly moving towards the Arabian Sea. On Thursday, Pakistan's stock market suspended trading for the day and, as fighter aircraft circle the skies over Islamabad, foreign diplomats start their exodus from the capital.

Events shall take their course in the days and weeks ahead, but there is much to reflect upon as we cross the fourth anniversary of the Pokhran and Chaghai nuclear tests. With free debate on sensitive issues largely proscribed in both countries – particularly on national television – the only voices to be heard are those of militarists and establishment strategic analysts. Not surprisingly, nuclear affairs are now being guided by wishful, delusional, thinking.

The most frightening delusion is India's trivialization of Pakistan's nuclear capability. This relatively new phenomenon has gained astonishingly wide currency in Indian ruling circles. Although Pakistan's nuclear tests had dispelled earlier scepticism, senior Indian military and political leaders continue to express doubts on the operational capability and usability of the Pakistani arsenal. Still more seriously, many Indians believe that, as a client state of the US, Pakistan's nuclear weapons are under the control of the US. The assumption is that, in case of extreme crisis, the US would either restrain their use by Pakistan or, if need be, destroy them. At a recent meeting, I heard senior Indian analysts say that they are "bored" by Pakistan's nuclear threats and no longer believe them. Should one laugh or cry?

Wishes are being confused here with facts, and expediency with truth. Four years ago, to their chagrin, Indian militarists realized that they had shot themselves in the foot by forcing Pakistan's nuclear weapons out of the closet. This had been subsequently rationalized by claiming that a stable peace based upon a "balance of mutual terror" was now imminent. But after the upsurge of Kashmir militancy, denying the potency of Pakistan's nuclear weapons has become more convenient because it clears the road to a limited war.

One notes another massive change in the attitude of Indian militarists. For years they had insisted that all matters, including nuclear issues, be settled only bilaterally. Suggestions that nuclear weapons in the possession of India and Pakistan were more dangerous than those possessed by the West, Russia, and China had been angrily rejected. How dare anyone suggest that India and Pakistan are in any way less responsible, reasonable, and rational?

Bilateralism has now bit the dust. Having cut off direct communications with each other, both adversaries have thrust disaster prevention into the hands of diplomats and third-tier leaders of western countries. A continuous stream of officials from America and Britain has passed, or is

due to pass, through Islamabad and Delhi. These include Christina Rocca, Chris Patten, Jack Straw, and Richard Armitage. The subcontinent's fate now hangs in their hands.

Pakistani nuclear misperceptions and miscalculations have been no less severe than India's.

Pushed into the nuclear arena first by India's tests in 1974, and then again in 1998, Pakistan soon became addicted to nuclear weapons. Countering India's nukes became secondary. Instead, Pakistani nukes became tools for achieving foreign policy objectives. They created euphoric hyper-confidence and a spirit of machoism that led to breath-taking adventurism in Kashmir. The subsequent Kargil war of 1999 will be recorded by historians as the first actually caused by nuclear weapons. Believing that a nuclear shield made Indian retaliation impossible, Pakistan coyly disclaimed any connection with the attackers who were extracting heavy Indian casualties from their high mountain posts in Kargil.

These illusions were soon to be dispelled. As India counter-attacked, a deeply worried Nawaz Sharif flew to Washington on 4 July 1999, where he was bluntly told to withdraw Pakistani forces or be prepared for full-scale war with India. In an article published last month, Bruce Reidel, Special Assistant to President Clinton, writes that he was present in person when Clinton informed Nawaz Sharif that the Pakistan Army had mobilized its nuclear-tipped missile fleet. Unnerved by this revelation and the closeness to disaster, Nawaz Sharif agreed to immediate withdrawal, shedding all earlier pretensions that Pakistan had no control over the attackers.

Other pretensions continued. Today, in spite of General Musharraf's soothing statements, there is little doubt that militant camps shelter under Pakistan's nuclear umbrella. Having operated openly for over a decade in full public view, and with obvious state backing, only magic - or massive military action - can eliminate them. Whatever Pakistanis might choose to think, the rest of the world remains incredulous of the continuing official Pakistani position that it provides "only diplomatic and moral support" to the people of Kashmir. Earlier denials of military involvement in Kargil, or of providing military support to the Taliban regime, have hugely diminished Pakistan's international credibility.

It is now a matter of survival for Pakistan to visibly demonstrate that it has severed all links with the militant groups it had formerly supported, to be firm about providing "only diplomatic and moral support", and to implement what General Musharraf promised in his Jan 12 speech. To run with the hares and hunt with the hounds – and imagine that the world will not know – has become impossible. War is around the corner.

Difficult though this course of action is, it is also essential if the people of Kashmir are to be spared from the brutal rapaciousness of Indian occupying forces. Although our generals have yet to swallow this bitter pill, the fact is that Kashmir cannot be liberated by force. The "bleed India" policy, an apparently cheap option for Pakistan, was vociferously advocated for over a decade. This has totally collapsed – Pakistan has bled no less than India.

Even more important than the fate of a few million Kashmiris is that of India's huge Muslim minority, which equals or exceeds the population of Pakistan. Without Pakistan's decisive action on cross-border insurgency, the Muslims of India will become the target of state-sponsored

pogroms and ethnic cleansing. The massacres of Gujarat provide a chilling preview of what may lie ahead at the hands of a fundamentalist Hindu government.

Terrible dangers lie ahead. Lacking any desire for political settlement or accommodation, or even a strategy for achieving victory, jihadists in Kashmir now operate as a third force independent of the Pakistani state. Their goal is to provoke full-scale war between India and Pakistan, destabilize Musharraf, and settle scores with America. Hence the possibility that they will soon commit some huge atrocity – such as a mass murder of Indian civilians – which would turn India into a mad bull dashing blindly into a nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Many observers have noted that the Srinagar, Delhi, and Jammu attacks on Indian civilians coincided with the visits of high officials from Western countries. Could the forthcoming visit by Richard Armitage provide a trigger for the next atrocity and a nuclear war?

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