

## OUR BLIND NUCLEAR PROPHETS

by  
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Having thrown away several hundred, I still have in my possession about a hundred newspaper articles on the nuclear issue written in Pakistan and India over the past decade. The authors, overwhelmingly, are establishment nuclear “experts” and “strategists”. These people, actively assisted on both sides by the state and its media, have effectively monopolized discussion on nuclear policy. This is unfortunate because, with only rare exceptions, these “experts” have been wholly wrong on every major prediction about nuclear matters on the subcontinent. If they were doctors, the patient would have died long ago. It is surely time for a second opinion.

Let us look at specifics. For years, the rival nuclear tribes in Pakistan and India pleaded for converting their respective country’s covert nuclear program into an overt one. They promised a nirvana if their totem, the bomb, was brought out of the basement, and warned of the direst consequences otherwise. But May 1998 came and went, and we still await the experience of nuclear bliss. So let us ask these establishment “experts” a few hard questions.

The first question is: why did Indian and Pakistani defence budgets go up, rather than down, after the May 1998 tests? This was not supposed to happen. The nuclear medicine men had promised that if the bang could be shown to be big enough, national security would be eternally guaranteed; the threat of nuclear response would deter territorial violations by the other; and the need for conventional arms would evaporate. Some Pakistanis cheerfully wrote that after going nuclear, little more than salaries for soldiers would be needed. Because national security would become solid as a rock, defence budgets could be slashed, and (at last) funds would go into development and education. The argument was so seductive and simple that many well-meaning people were taken for a ride.

What have we seen? In the aftermath of the test, acquisition of battle tanks, artillery, aircraft, surface ships, and submarines is now claimed, by many of the same people, to be more urgent than ever before. As is well known, in the last year India increased its defence budget by a staggering \$4 billion. This 28% increase amounts to Pakistan’s entire current defence budget. On its side, Pakistan would have loved to match the increase. However the chaos following its tit-for-tat tests rendered Pakistan nearly bankrupt and today it teeters on the brink of economic collapse. Therefore Pakistan was able to squeak through a mere 11% increase in rupee terms. Because the rupee crashed in value from Rs 46 per dollar before the May tests to about Rs 62 per dollar today, this amounted to an effective decrease.

A second hard question: whatever happened to “minimal deterrence”? In the good old days, having only “just enough” was the mantra, and a mere half-dozen nukes was all that anyone seemed to want. Our generals, at least in the early nineties, were generous. They were satisfied with possessing the ability to nuke just Delhi and Bombay. In those gentle

times a mere half-dozen nukes was all that they wanted. But now, if Dr. A.Q.Khan is to be believed, Pakistan has enough bombs and missiles to take out every Indian city from Amritsar to Bombay, and Mysore to Calcutta. You name it, we've got it, is his claim. Meanwhile the centrifuges of Kahuta whirl away on three 8-hour shifts every day, 7 days a week. Elsewhere, Shaheen missiles move steadily along the factory production floor.

Movements on the other side of the border have been similarly steady. The late General K. Sunderji used to speak and write of needing just enough fission weapons to "take out" the major Pakistani cities. Then, in August 1999, along came the Indian Nuclear Draft Doctrine. This evil piece of work starts with a preamble that nuclear weapons are "the gravest threat to humanity", but concludes that India needs "sufficient, survivable and operationally prepared nuclear forces" together with "the will to employ nuclear forces and weapons". It speaks of a triad of aircraft, mobile land-based missiles and sea-based assets, and requires survivability of the forces through a combination of multiple redundant systems, mobility, dispersion and deception.

The times have clearly changed. In a clear departure from General Sunderji's ideas of a fixed number of weapons, there is no specification of what minimum deterrence or flexible response might mean. Tactical nuclear war-fighting, once considered escalatory, is reported to be incorporated into current Indian military doctrine. But years ago, many hawks were wont to take personal insult if the possibility of an arms race was ever mentioned. At one seminar the Indian defence strategist K.Subrahmanyam, in response to a question, angrily retorted that "arms racing is a Cold War concept invented by the western powers and totally alien to sub-continental thinking". His Pakistani counterparts happily agreed. Nuclear philosophies, like that of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), have been routinely attributed to sick western minds only. Our hawks are mistaken in this belief, as in so much else.

The fact is that nuclear racing and doctrines, whether on the subcontinent or elsewhere, is always driven by the same implacable, mad, runaway logic. The urge to accumulate is irresistible. Should there be the slightest danger of the race slackening, a nuclear "expert" will point to the other side's latest acquisition and scream for help. With every passing decade, advances in technology make it easier and cheaper to create ever more deadly nuclear weapons, buy or make longer range and more effective missiles, and go for various hi-tech weapon systems that could not have been imagined just a while ago. There is little doubt that Pakistan and India are presently straining their economic and technological capacities to the maximum in seeking to make, buy, or steal as much nuclear and conventional materials of war as they possibly can.

The third, and final, question to my hawkish friends is: whatever happened to claims that a secure nuclear Pakistan would automatically improve relations with a secure nuclear India, and vice-versa? After Kargil, and the apparently indelible bitterness that that has created, these claims seem laughable now. However several "experts", with characteristic pomposity, had written that nuclear weapons make war between Pakistan and India impossible. Carried away by Fukuyama's "End Of History" article, they preached an equivalent "End of War" doctrine. The Lahore Declaration was seen as a vindication of

their beliefs, and used to implicitly justify the tests of May 1998. Subsequent events proved these claim completely nonsensical.

Kargil offers the very first example in history where nuclear weapons, by creating a presumed shield for launching conventional covert operations, were responsible for having initiated a war rather than deterring one. It was precisely the unrestrained propagation of false beliefs in nuclear security that brought India and Pakistan to the brink of a full-blown confrontation in 1999, which indeed could have been the very last one. After the smoke had cleared, it turned out that Pakistan had been severely humiliated and damaged. But, India lost over a thousand men and suffered much trauma. Perversely, it was actually the BJP that, by ordering Pokhran-II, actually fathered Kargil.

If there is a lesson to be learnt here it is that Indian and Pakistani hawks have colluded in bringing death, destruction, and the prospect of a nuclear graveyard for their peoples. Being engaged in a tribal blood-feud, their vision and judgement have been fatally impaired. They mistake patriotism as hatred for the other country instead of love for their own. Unfortunately for the peoples of the subcontinent, their monopolistic control over the media (particularly television) ensures that other voices cannot be heard. It is common for hawks to vilify opponents, block their access to the media, and even to physically intimidate and assault them.

Today an anxious world looks at nuclear-armed India and Pakistan. To calm these fears, the establishments of the two countries every so often issue soothing assurances, promising responsibility and statesmanship. When it cannot be done officially, it is done unofficially. The same people gather now to talk of peace and reducing the risks they foolishly helped create. Therefore, as part of a grand pretence, as well as to do their bit of globe-trotting and shopping, it is now usual for Indian and Pakistani hawks to fly together, dine and drink together, and congregate at conferences lavishly funded by international donors. Such meetings, as part of an implicit mutual compact, are intended to convey an impression that Indian and Pakistani nuclear weapons are well under control.

The most recent charade was a meeting in Islamabad, bringing together the Islamabad Policy Research Institute and the Delhi Policy group, and funded by the Hans-Seidel Foundation. As expected, the usual panoply of retired generals, admirals, air-marshals, and diplomats could manage little beyond tired reiterations of official positions. Meanwhile academics wedded to their establishments sought to achieve scholarly distinction by making profuse, but inane and irrelevant, references to Western strategists of previous decades. The event was finally capped by a participant in the conference, and the anchor-woman of a subsequent Pakistan Television program, who shrilly accused the Indian team of wanting to ferret out Pakistan's nuclear secrets.

Having spent 3 days at this particular meeting as an observer, I was left wondering whether such dialogues are merely unproductive or actually counter-productive. They bring together men of two tribes who can barely conceal their mutual animosity, but whose mind-sets and perceptions are cloned from the other. They can generate no recommendations, no discussions of relevance and substance, and no good will for future

initiatives. Both sides offer nothing and accept nothing, agreeing only in rejecting suggestions to reduce nuclear arsenals and delivery systems.

It is therefore a serious question as to whether all negotiations on nuclear risk reduction and nuclear crisis management are destined to fail similarly. There are no clear lessons to be learnt from history. Never before have two such poor, suspicious and bloody-minded neighbours, holding such immense powers of destruction, ever glared at each other so ferociously. Perhaps someday it may be possible to have substantive discussions on nuclear de-escalation, of which risk reduction measures could be a part. But prospects today are bleak as can be.

Xenophobic decision-makers, surrounded by screeching hawks, continue to drive a furious and insane race. Our nuclear tribals ecstatically worship monuments like the crater of Pokhran 98, now reduced to silently spewing radioactivity into the desert air, and the wretched mountain of Chaghi, so brutalized and disgraced that its face had turned ashen white. No sooner did the 648 seconds test flight of the Agni-II end that launch preparations for the Shaheen-II were rumoured to have begun. In such circumstances, nuclear exchange by premeditated design, misperception and miscalculation, or by accidental and unauthorized launch, is almost inevitable. If there is no nuclear catastrophe in the next few decades or sooner, it shall be purely fortuitous.

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