

## **Interview of Pervez Hoodbhoy, nuclear physicist and peace activist**

**By Nadeem Iqbal**

**“Jihadists could soon commit some huge atrocity that turns India into a mad bull dashing blindly into a nuclear-armed Pakistan.” – Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy**

**Q: What are the chances of the present Pakistan-India military stand-off spiraling into nuclear war?**

**A:** The Americans, Russians, Europeans and Chinese are convinced that this is an extremely dangerous situation. Most embassies have already evacuated their people from Islamabad. Yes, we have seen crises in 1987, 1990 and then in 1999 in Kargil, but never such a prolonged one. India has threatened limited strikes, and these could easily spiral out of control.

**Q: But hasn't deterrence worked so far?**

There is little doubt that Pakistan's nuclear weapons stopped India from attacking after the Dec 13 attack by jihadists on the Indian parliament. So in that sense I agree with you. Deterrence did work, and it had also worked in earlier crises. But will it always work? Is it safe to assume rational behaviour will always determine outcomes? Consider the fact that there is now a third force operating independently of the Pakistani and Indian governments. Some militants in Kashmir crave a full-scale war between the two countries. These Jihadists could soon commit some huge atrocity that turns India into a mad bull dashing blindly into a nuclear-armed Pakistan.

**Q: You have contended that the Indians are trivializing Pakistan's nuclear capability. How does this affect the concept of nuclear deterrence?**

**A:** Some Indian leaders and top defence analysts suffer from the bizarre delusion that Pakistan does not have the capability or will to launch a nuclear strike. At a recent meeting this January in Dubai, I heard senior Indian analysts say that they are "bored" by Pakistan's nuclear threats and no longer believe them. Or, they argue, the Americans won't allow it to push the nuclear button, and would actually destroy Pakistani nukes if it tried to do so. I think they are hallucinating.

There is not the slightest reason to believe that the Americans would have the will – or even ability – to take such a huge step. Knowing where these bombs are at any one time does not mean that you can necessarily keep track of all future movements. To try target small, mobile objects is extremely difficult. Let us remember that in Iraq the US tried to destroy the Scuds but the success rate was rather small. There is no precedent in the world where a country has tried to destroy another's nuclear bombs. This would be fantastically dangerous because you would need to get every single one – a remaining nuke could unleash catastrophe.

I also find it terribly worrying that there is insufficient fear of nukes in both Pakistan and India. The efficacy of nuclear deterrence is predicated on the ability of these weapons to induce terror. But what if people just aren't afraid? Then deterrence may simply stop working. A new chapter may have to be written in textbooks dealing with the theory of nuclear deterrence.

**Q: Why are most people indifferent to nuclear war?**

In part, it's simple ignorance. The bulk of people in the streets simply don't have a clue of what these doomsday weapons can do. Only a miniscule number know of the nuclear fireball, radioactivity, and long-term effects. Even those who have heard of Hiroshima know nuclear war as a distant abstraction. But, perhaps more importantly, the sub-continental culture is deeply fatalistic. I see so many people say "what will be, will be", then shrug their shoulders and move on to something else.

**Q: Do you think India and Pakistan's nuclear weapons have effective command and control mechanisms?**

**A:** There are lots of nuclear command authorities, committees, and organizations. They have high-sounding names which give the impression as if these nukes would be under tight control. But the fact remains that it is physically impossible to safely control nuclear weapons when you have a common border, and the flight time of nuclear-tipped missiles, or of aircraft, is a matter of minutes. No early warning system can ever work in this situation.

Furthermore, there is a danger which is absolutely fundamental, and irremovable by any kind of technology. Obviously, if Pakistan were to keep all its nuclear bombs in one place, a single Indian strike could knock them off. Therefore, dispersal of missiles and bombs is absolutely essential, together with dispersal of authority and secret codes needed to launch them.

The danger of delegating authority is apparent – in times of crisis, or breakdown of communications, the lower tiers could make a fatally wrong decision. Or religious fanatics could decide that now is the time for final victory. So, in the end, the decision to launch nukes may well not be made at the top!

**Q: What is the significance of the medium and short-range missile tests recently conducted by Pakistan?**

**A:** Coming at a time of high tension I think these three tests have exacerbated the situation and constitute an excessive Pakistani reaction to India's provocations. We need to behave much soberly and refrain from actions that will inflame the situation. The world does not look at us kindly because of our support to militancy in Kashmir, and we risk alienating everybody around by making threatening gestures at this time.

**Q: What should the international community's role be in preventing nuclear war?**

**A:** There was a time when India used to say we needed only bilateral resolution of disputes and angrily rejected external intervention. That's now been thrown out of the window. India expelled Pakistan's high commissioner and now there is no direct communication channel.

So our fate is in the hands of foreign diplomats and third-tier Western leaders. What a shame! To see how concerned the West is about us, let me tell you that on 28 May 1998 – the day Pakistan carried out its tit-for-tat nuclear tests – when I turned on the TV in Boston, the top story of the day was about a dog which drowned in Lake Erie. But why should we blame the West? The rest of the world can only watch as we sink our knives deeper into each other.