

Nuclear buttons for everybody

The Pokhran-II nuclear tests seem to have sharply polarized the Indian scientific community, and the deep schism that exists between the two opposite viewpoints has found extended expression here and elsewhere. At the risk of belabouring the obvious, I would still like to make a few observations in this connection.

The main pro-nuclear argument is that the world does not take us seriously unless we exhibit, quite explicitly, the possession of a nuclear capability. Let me flip this argument around. Do we take Pakistan more seriously, now that they have also clearly exhibited their nuclear capability? No, whether such a perception is warranted or not, most Indians still regard Pakistan as a precarious banana republic, desperately bleeding its coffers to feed its nuclear ambitions. The world perceives us in exactly the same light. Some of our learned colleagues seem to think that an expenditure of Rs 50,000 crores for nuclear weaponization (at a very conservative estimate) over the next decade is a manageable matter for our country, after drawing suitable comparisons with corresponding figures for the US. I note here that the US has compulsory school education, drinking water, and electricity for nearly its entire population. If we must compare, sixty per cent of our population is *barefoot*, and every summer many of our people die of heat-stroke, for lack of water. Have these barefoot, heat-stricken citizens of our country (no less Indian citizens than you or me) ever been consulted about whether they can spare this trifling sum of Rs 50,000 crores for such a purpose? Far from it, even the 500-and-odd members of the Lok Sabha were in the dark about our abrupt change of nuclear posture! This is how a banana republic functions, not a democracy that all of us would like to be proud of, as we smugly point fingers at other banana republics.

The second, and even more tenuous, argument is that a nuclear capability bolsters India's national security. After the 1962 border confrontation with China, we have had two military engagements with Pakistan, both conventional ones. On both these occasions it was abundantly demonstrated that our conventional forces were quite sufficient to safeguard our sovereignty. Perhaps some hawks within the Pakistan establishment have realized that a conventional war is

not a winning strategy *vis-à-vis* India. As a result, we find ourselves completely at sea in dealing with the newest idiom of war, euphemistically known as 'low-intensity conflict', which is usually fought by proxy. Herein lies the *real* threat to our national security. Recent events in Kargil clearly establish that our nuclear capability did nothing to prevent a major infiltration of our territory, and serious losses of men and material on our side. Since dropping nuclear bombs there is decidedly out of the question, does our strategic thinking dictate that we stage a Republic Day-type parade of our nuclear weapons in the Kargil region? By way of an object lesson, both the US (in Vietnam) and the (then) USSR (in Afghanistan) were involved in long and bloody entanglements, in which their nuclear superpower status won them exactly nothing.

This brings me to my final contention, and one that has been sometimes overlooked in this debate. The fact, plain and simple, is that nuclear weapons are *not military weapons*! No military strategist would suggest dropping a nuclear bomb to eliminate a guerilla hide-out, a troop convoy, a radar installation, or even an air force base. Hard experience has shown that nuclear weapons are good only for one thing – devastating all life and levelling everything over vast areas, and rendering them uninhabitable. In contrast to conventional bombs, nuclear bombs are, *by definition*, instruments of genocide. No better than other instruments of genocide, such as the gas chambers of Dachau. A civilized world outlaws gas chambers. The reason it has not succeeded in outlawing nuclear weapons has to do with the arrogance of the super-powers, who are obviously not enthusiastic about relinquishing their self-appropriated right to push the nuclear button and bring all of mankind to a chilling end. In this insane contest for the licence to commit mass execution, India's nuclear stand thus far, to wit, 'no-nuclear-button-for-me-only-if-no-nuclear-button-for-you' was a patently wiser one than the post Pokhran-II stand of 'nuclear-button-for-you-so-nuclear-button-for-me'. The former stand pointed to the world a path of sanity, whereas the inevitable corollary of the latter policy is – 'nuclear-buttons-for-everybody', the very antithesis of sanity! Pakistan just proved it within two weeks of us. To our future generations, will we bequeath a

world wherein each man has a nuclear button which he has to continuously resist pushing but, in the same breath, continuously threatening to push, in order to get his way? When individuals pursue this doctrine, it is universally abhorred as 'terrorism'. When governments pursue it, why does it acquire the more polite nomenclature of 'strategy'?

The end of evils like slavery, colonialism, or apartheid would never have been achieved if each country had decided to become a slave trader, or colonizer, or officially racist. The final campaign is always fought in the arena of men's minds, and on that battlefield, the simple conviction of *being right*, and striving for what is right, is the only weapon that always has and always will inevitably triumph by its continuous use. Contrast that with nuclear weapons, which purportedly triumph through their continuous non-use! That they triumph even more by continuous non-existence is only a conjecture, but a conjecture worth investigating. Except for some of its perpetrators, nobody regards a Hiroshima or Nagasaki as anything but a never-to-be-repeated blot on human history. No rational person would contest the truism that a nuclear weapon is *wrong*, because it is an instrument of genocide, and genocide – the slaying and maiming of innocent people – for whatever end, is wrong. By extrapolation, a thousand nuclear weapons in the hands of one country, or a thousand different countries are a thousand wrongs, and even a thousand wrongs do not make a right. It is the most tragic irony that one group of nuclear scientists loses sleep over how to safely dispose of nuclear reactor waste so that humans are shielded from the tiniest quantities of radiation, and another group of nuclear scientists loses sleep over how to reduce all mankind to nuclear waste by the creation of ever more diabolical thermonuclear bombs.

All of which just reminds me of the words of Martin Luther King, 'We may have guided missiles, but we have misguided men'.

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