

## Pokhran-II – A strategic blunder?

Nearly a year after Pokhran-II comes the expected test firing of *Agni-II*. This is a grim reminder that notwithstanding many spectacular peaceful applications, military aims dictate directions of Indian space research.

The past year has seen a continuing scientific debate in *Current Science* between apologists for a nuclear capability and its shocked, vocal opponents. May I sum up some aspects of the debate and add a couple of new questions.

Let me begin by making clear my basic position. I do not believe in the moral right of nations who already have a nuclear umbrella to advise India. International morality, always a doubtful proposition, seems to be at a particularly low ebb. If I should still feel compelled to write this letter it is because even from the point of view of realpolitik, Pokhran-II seems to me to be a strategic disaster.

The apologists, exemplified by Udgaonkar, have been stressing India's right and freedom to pursue nuclear deterrence in self-defence. No one questions that. But the real issue is whether it has indeed given us any additional security against China and Pakistan and whether it has not introduced a frightful dimension in our relation with the host of terrorists who are active in various parts of India and who maintain links with countries hostile to India. There has been a serious escalation in our relation with Pakistan even though good diplomacy on the part of the Prime Minister has reduced tension. India used to have an overwhelming superiority over Pakistan in conventional arms. That is now balanced by Pakistan's possession of a nuclear deterrent. And the consequences of use of tactical nuclear arms by terrorists have been ably developed by D. P. Sengupta in one of his letters in *Current Science*. This is a horrifying new possibility not addressed by any of the apologists.

What about possible benefits in our relation with China? This is a complex issue that deserves the serious attention

of historians and social scientists, not just a few strategists. Against one war must be set centuries of peace, cultural exchange and trade between these ancient civilizations. However, even here it is hard to see what positive gains have been made by India. The ambiguities in the situation have been made worse by the abundance of singularly unilluminating remarks emanating from the representatives of Government of India down to our ambassadors abroad. In spite of hyped up remarks about Jaswant Singh's strategic insights in *India Today*, it is hard to find anything of substance in his interview published by that magazine.

Since China has an overwhelming superiority in both conventional and nuclear arms, presumably India has acquired or is in the process of acquiring a nuclear deterrent. A nuclear deterrent can either be used to prevent a conventional war or neutralize a threat of nuclear first strike.

Let us take the second of these scenarios first. China has indicated she will not engage in a first nuclear strike. So far no country has started a war with a nuclear strike. Moreover, it is unclear what a country with overwhelming superiority in conventional arms can gain by a nuclear threat – except as a possible blackmail. Is that at all a reasonable scenario? Even if such a situation prevails, India will need to invest a lot more in acquiring a nuclear deterrence and keeping it safe from a superpower's awesome preemptive striking power. This can be done only at a cost to India's conventional army or by escalating the defence budget beyond acceptable norms.

I will argue if we must consider the worst case scenario of a conflict it will be a conflict along the same lines as before, i.e. on our long border with China. In that case, a nuclear deterrent is no substitute for a conventional response. Indeed, our real weakness in this respect is a failure to win over the people in the border areas through economic development and national integration. To believe

that these fundamental problems can be solved by having a few hydrogen bombs is utter absurdity.

The fact that China has emerged as a superpower, both economically and militarily, but still cannot tolerate any internal dissent or external criticism is a matter of concern. But it is a mistake to take a hard stand when both China and India are passing through rapid changes. We should strive to have a joint declaration with China that the Himalayas will be a region of peace. Our strength remains in our democracy and tolerance of plurality. Our weakness is a slow down of our economic growth. It is on those fronts, of poverty, illiteracy, public health, degraded environment, population pressure and unemployment that battles have to be won if India is to survive as a nation.

To sum up, Pokhran-II has destabilized our relation with Pakistan and introduced frightening possibilities of escalation of terrorism. Its impact on our relation with China is harder to assess but there is little to cheer us on this front too. I cannot see why Pokhran-II should not be described as a strategic blunder. Unfortunately, a nuclear capability, once acquired, cannot be put back easily. One has to fight merely to keep it from getting any worse. If *Agni-II* is any guide, we seem to be losing this fight too.

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*P.S.:* This letter was written before the escalation at Kargil, but those destabilizing events and Pakistan's continued stress on nuclear deterrence show where we may be heading. While one supports completely India's decision to evict the infiltrators, the need to reopen the debate on nuclear disarmament acquires new significance.