

Re-vitalizing Interest in Disarmament in S. Asia

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In recent years public opinion demanding universal nuclear disarmament, never very large at the best of times, has receded even further. It is vital for the long term survival of mankind that we understand the reasons behind this decline of interest in disarmament and reverse it. These reasons vary in different nations of the world depending on their state of nuclear weaponry, their current principal concerns and on where they are situated in the international geo-political order.

In the consciousness of non-proliferation advocates and security analysts in the US and Europe, the disarmament of existing nuclear weapon states has taken the back seat to addressing nuclear terrorism by non-state actors or rogue states.

In India too there has been a decline in interest in disarmament, but this decline has followed a different trajectory and has happened for different reasons. In order to combat it we need to examine not only the usual security issues in the Indian context, but also understand that nation's nuclear history and psyche.

At present, the prospects for disarmament in India are dismal. Any direct head-on call for disarmament will find practically no takers among India's decision making classes. In fact the climate for disarmament is worse in India and Pakistan than in the "official" nuclear nations. That is because these two countries consider themselves to be in a different stage of development of their nuclear arsenals, as compared to the others. Both America and the erstwhile Soviet Union gradually realized twenty-odd years ago that they had built up an absurdly large nuclear force of nearly 60,000 warheads. The process of arms reduction has been going on in both the US and Russia since then through bilateral treaty. The overall size of the British, French and Chinese arsenals seem to also have leveled off, at least for the present. UK has also brought down its nuclear arsenal to about 200 submarine based weapons.

By contrast India and Pakistan feel that their arsenals are still at the growing stage. They don't want to stop or even slow down the growth of their nuclear forces yet, let alone their weapon usable fissile material production. While our governments will always support, in principle, the evolution of some form of a worldwide disarmament process or FMCT regime, they will do so with the tacit confidence that the day of reckoning is far off. In the meantime they are continuing to protect and improve their capability for producing fissile materials and nuclear weapons as well as missiles to carry them. This is

best illustrated by the vigor with which India has insisted, as part of the Indo-US nuclear Deal, that its Fast Breeder and 8 other power reactors be placed outside IAEA safeguards on grounds of national security.

In fact the Indo-US Nuclear Deal has saturated the nuclear agenda in India and smothered all thoughts of nuclear disarmament in the region. Interest has become focused instead on how much the Deal will affect India's ability to make more nuclear weapons. While Indian hawks and critics of the Deal fret that it curtails our bomb-making capacity, international arms control activists read into the same Deal an enhancement of India's weapon making capability. Therefore the debate is only about how fast the Indian arsenal will grow (and Pakistan's, in response to that). Hardly anyone, either in S Asia or in the world at large is talking about how to stop the sub-continental arms build up.

Contributing to this climate is also the feeling of pride in both India and Pakistan over the technological achievement of having developed nuclear weapons and a perception that that this has placed those two countries on a higher rung in the world order. In this climate even use of the phrase "capping the arsenal" carries non-patriotic connotations.

Given this sad reality, any strategy to turn India towards the direction of arms control will have to start with modest goals initially and move in graduated steps. An attempt right now to argue for total disarmament will be met with indifference among the public and with derision in policy making circles. One has to abandon such an "all or nothing" approach for the present. The first step is to persuade people to stop further production of fissile materials and warheads. The question of reversing the arms race can be broached only after this first step is achieved.

Even the goal of getting people to agree to cap on the nuclear arsenal in the near future will not be easy. But if persisted with it has some chance on acceptance. This hope is based on a reading of the psyche of India's people and polity in matters of pacifism.

When India was re-born as an independent country 60 years ago, its image around the world and in the minds of its own citizens was identified with Mahatma Gandhi and his principles of non-violence. These principles had proven potent enough to win India freedom from the British and have acted since then as a worldwide model of struggle through peaceful protests. Correspondingly free India's early foreign policy was guided, at least initially, by pacifist principles. For decades our leaders urged total universal disarmament in the UN and supported moves towards it other world forums. The early initiatives of Jawaharlal Nehru, who offered to hold the first "Pugwash" Conference in India, and who brought out in 1956, at the request of Bertrand Russell, the monograph "Nuclear Explosions and Their Effects" as an official government publication are known to veterans of the Pugwash movement. More recently, a call for disarmament was raised by our past Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1988, along with five other world leaders, but it fell on deaf ears.

These Indian initiatives were, I believe genuine. At the same time, India's self image as the inheritor of Gandhian and Buddhist non-violent traditions, and its occasional claim to

moral high ground in the world community were not supported by other ground realities. Our country has been blighted with violence for millennia and has continued to be so even after Gandhi and the independence struggle. Starting from the Hindu-Muslim slaughter during the partition of India we have had numerous episodes of sectarian killings since then, in addition to wars with Pakistan.

Our nuclear policy also did not remain very Gandhian, as it evolved into one of studied ambiguity even as we were developing dual nuclear capabilities for both energy and weapons. Eventually, as everyone knows, India discarded the cloak of nuclear ambiguity, first by the so-called peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974 and then by the 1998 tests which were officially acknowledged as weapon tests.

But even as India slid from early idealism towards pragmatism to the point of building dozens of nuclear warheads, *the self-image on the part of the Indian intelligentsia that we are a peace loving country continues*. They view India's nuclear weaponry as a purely defensive – a “necessary evil” in response to the large arsenal that the Chinese have been putting together since the 'sixties and by the *de facto* nuclear capability of Pakistan.

I mention India's continuing self image of pacifism, justified or otherwise, because it is one of the very few positive levers that could eventually be used to revive a move towards disarmament in that region. The majority of even those Indians who support the nuclear weapon program are not extreme hawks. They have been led to believe that their nation's security requires a minimum nuclear deterrent. (By Indians I mean here mostly members of the decision making circles and the intelligentsia. To the common man and woman in India, especially the poor, the nuclear issue does not figure among their concerns, which are dominated by the need for food and shelter). The government's Nuclear Policy Doctrine, which emphasizes a no-first use policy, also calls for an arsenal only to establish such minimal deterrence. Regardless of whether you and I in this Pugwash meeting believe in nuclear deterrence or not, we have to take as given that most Indians do believe in some form minimal nuclear deterrence.

Given this, the public and its decision makers should be educated in what such deterrence really requires in the way of an arsenal. They have to realize that

1. Even a half a dozen modest 20KT bombs if dropped on a couple of cities like New Delhi and Mumbai in India, or Lahore and Karachi in Pakistan or Shanghai and Beijing will kill a million human beings.
2. That would be considered **unacceptable damage** by even a remotely rational leadership in any of these countries.
3. India already has more than enough fissile materials to make over a 100 weapons and has probably already assembled a few dozen of them
4. Therefore there is no need for India to make more weapons or to make more fissile materials. What we have is quite adequate for any reasonable nuclear deterrent.

The details of this argument have been fleshed out in several articles we have written over the years to urge ending further nuclear weapon production by India.^{1,2} If this simple logic could be accepted and absorbed by our political leadership, the process of stopping further arms production in India would become a feasible goal.

Seeking a ceiling on nuclear arms should not be misunderstood as approving of the existing arsenal. The only enduringly safe way out of the nuclear dilemmas which we face today is to abolish all weapons from the face of the earth. But clearly, getting countries in S Asia to start reducing their arsenals would not be possible unless one can first persuade them to stop making more weapons. Once that is achieved, progress towards total disarmament in the region can be envisaged.

That, however, is unlikely to happen unless the status of nuclear weapons is deflated globally. It is unrealistic to expect, after elevating nuclear weapons into a currency of power, that some countries can continue to have large arsenals while others are prevented through sanctions and military force from seeking the same currency. The US and Russia have to show the way by speeding up their own disarmament plans to bring their arsenals down to a few hundred weapons – in the same ballpark as that of other nuclear powers. Only then is a coordinated effort at further disarmament likely to be attempted by all of them together.

That would also be the only way of persuading other wannabe nuclear states in the future that nuclear weapons are no longer symbols of status and power. That in turn is the only route to the control of fissile materials and elimination of the dangers of nuclear terrorism.

¹ R.Rajaraman, “Towards De-Nuclearisation of South Asia”, paper presented in the 2nd Pugwash Workshop on South Asian Security, Geneva, Switzerland, 16-18 May 2003. see <http://www.pugwash.org/reports/rc/sa/may2003/SAS2003-rajaraman.htm>

² R.Rajaraman, “Potential Ground Zero” **The Hindustan Times**, Editorial page, 11th Jan. 2005; “Cap the Nuclear Arsenal Now”, **The Hindu**, Edit Page, 25th Jan 2005; “India-U.S. deal and the Nuclear Ceiling” **The Hindu**, Edit page, September 10, 2005;