



Rethinking A Dangerous Game of Chance

by Faisal Bari

Why does a country, in this day and age, need to gamble on nuclear weapons?

A Pakistani Educator takes a close and personal look at South Asia.

In South Asia, the main arguments fall in the following categories. India says it needs them to show to the world that it is a world power that should have a seat on the Security Council, that should be taken seriously in the world and that should be taken at par with China. Pakistan says that it needs them to protect itself from India and to have some form of parity, in power terms, with the much larger India.

Then there are a host of smaller arguments too. Nuclear capability shows technological capability, it shows advancement in science and technology, and it can have spillovers in other areas of science, technology as well as industry.

But do any of these arguments make any sense? Will India be taken more seriously if it has nuclear capability? But India has had them since 1974, if the world was not taking it seriously even then, what will change now? India is a one billion strong large country with tremendous potential and actual achievements in all areas of human endeavour. Whether it is pure science (the Nobels that Indians have won bear testimony to that), technology (India's IT industry and heavy industry), social science (again look at the number of academics India has produced), commerce and trade, religion or the arts (Indian cinema, sculpture), India has made worthy contributions in all fields. This is more than enough for anyone to take India seriously. A gadget, called the nuclear weapon, and one that has the power to kill millions, can evoke fear in others but not awe or respect. In fact, the immorality of the implicit or explicit threat

involved in keeping this weapon, can only reduce respect, it cannot increase it.

The same is true of Pakistan. The world will not think of us any differently if we have this weapon. Since 1998 we have only added to our isolation by keeping this weapon, it has not endeared us to the world in any way. The bomb also does not convince anyone in the world about our scientific ability or technological advancement.

This is fairly old technology (the bomb has been around since 1940s), and more importantly, the modular nature of technology allows us to do something more advanced in one field without similar progress in a broad spectrum of fields. Our human development indicators show, much better, where we actually stand.

We do not think of these issues in an organised, cool and detached manner. We entangle the issue of nuclear weapons with patriotism. The Prime Ministers have been quoted as saying that "only a traitor of Pakistan will freeze or downsize the nuclear programme." This is, to say the least, a strange thing to say for surely the nuclear programme is not an article of our faith, and the programme is for us and not the other way round.

A good source for all of these arguments, and more, is *Out of the Nuclear Shadow*, edited by Smitu Kothari and Zia Mian (Oxford University Press, 2003). The editors, established names in this area, have brought together a very nice variety of articles on the issue of the nuclearization of South Asia. We hear enough jingoistic talk; this book gives us the other side. And with the likes of Eqbal Ahmed and Amartya Sen colouring its pages, the book is a must read. It also has an excellent article by Arundati Roy

on “The End of Imagination”. Such is truth regarding the nuclearization decision.

I think most people will agree that nuclear weapons, which target civilians by hundreds of thousands, poison the earth and the surroundings, are difficult and costly to build and maintain, have a tendency to have costly accidents and so on, are a weapon that the world can do without. I think that most people will agree that if we can have a nuclear-weapon-free world that would be better for all. If they allow this, then the position of the existing countries that have stockpiles of nuclear weapons, and these include most of the developed countries, comes out in very poor light. They, and here India, Pakistan and even the aspirants have a point, are not in a position to tell the rest of the world that they should not have these weapons. But this does not mean others have a “right” to develop these weapons either. The “rights” based talk does not make sense here. If someone is doing something that is morally objectionable and odious, it neither gives the others the right to do it, nor does it make it a better outcome for the world. So India and Pakistan should not base their decision on “rights”. There are no rights to nuclear weapons.

India and Pakistan can point out the hypocrisy in the position of these other countries, and then say that they are making a “strategic” decision to have nukes because of this. But it is, as mentioned above, a “rights” issue. On strategic grounds let us look at the decision of India and Pakistan to have nuclear weapons. India wanted to be taken seriously in the world, and has justified its weapons on the basis of possible threats from Pakistan and of course China. But none of these reasons seem to be valid. We have already said that countries are not taken seriously due to nuclear weapons; they are taken seriously on the basis of their overall development, economic excellence and overall position in the world order. Look at China and Japan. India’s relations with China have improved tremendously and are not a source of the kind of threat that should have forced India into nuclearization, and Pakistan could never have threatened India to the extent that it would need nuclear weapons.

Pakistan has cited India as the main reason for its 1998 explosions. This position needs more careful consideration. It is true that Pakistan lives in a relatively hostile environment and needs to have reasonable level of protection. But does this mean that we should have the ability to destroy almost all of South Asia? That is the question. By having the capability of destroying Delhi, Bombay and some of the other larger cities, what does Pakistan want to stop India from doing? The general impression is that if Pakistan’s existence comes under question, and our back is against a wall, we might threaten to use these weapons or actually use them. This sort of strategic thinking is very iffy. In game theory, the way to rigorously analyse such situations, such

games are usually characterised by multiple equilibria and these tend to be very sensitive to the assumptions one makes. In this case we seem to be assuming that even in these dire straits we will have the ability to launch a nuclear response, the other side would not have taken out these weapons already, that the world will sit quietly by and watch us die and kill lots of the “enemy” too. Change these assumptions a little and we could have a very different result. What makes us think that we will ever be in that tight a situation, and even in such a situation the rest of the world will just let us drift towards a nuclear holocaust?

Then there are the arguments that nuclear weapons provide deterrence. This too is very iffy. We did not have a war with India for 30 years even though we did not have nuclear weapons and they had exploded a device in 1974. But even after our explosions in 1998 Kargil did happen. So where is the evidence for deterrence? Even the Cold War does not give us any comfort on this count. We cannot say that the USSR and US did not fight due to nuclear weapons. There is no counterfactual possible here.

There is definitely resistance to thinking against doing away with nuclear weapons. Part of it might be genuine, but a lot of it is also drummed up jingoism and misplaced patriotism. Strong interest groups have a stake in keeping these weapons and in trading on the constituency of fear. Needed are clear thinking, and a consensus at the level of the society on this. We should be thinking about what we need to do multilaterally in world fora, bilaterally in talks with India and unilaterally, for ourselves. We should keep in mind that nuclear weapons have a cost too. They are expensive to build, expensive to maintain, and have a certain probability of costly accidents. Should poor and developing nations, like India and Pakistan, be really in this game?

But cost aside, the main argument that India and Pakistan need to flesh out is the reason for these weapons. There is no moral justification for these weapons, for us, or the rest of the world. What we have to think about is if there is a strategic justification for them and if that is really there. The usual discourse says there is, but most authors in the *Out of the Nuclear Shadow* book think there is not. We need to hear them too to make up our mind more dispassionately. Only then will India and Pakistan, together and even unilaterally, move forward on this issue.

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