

The Nuclear Race in South Asia

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It will come to you as no surprise that I fully endorse the thesis that there should be a genuine commitment by the existing nuclear powers to a concrete timetable for nuclear disarmament. The recent and unfortunate nuclear tests of India and Pakistan should be seen as a part of this problem, not isolated from this international commitment to nuclear disarmament.

Having stated my agreement with these central propositions, what else I have to say to you in the contest of the India-Pakistan nuclear arms race may come to you as somewhat of a shock. I would like to take you into confidence about this issue, since I have been closely associated with it, and suggest a concrete strategy as to how we get out of this present mess.

Let me first state my credentials on this issue. I have passionately and firmly opposed nuclear tests by both India and Pakistan during the past two months and have written extensively on this subject. I have argued that India's nuclear test was a blunder, not so much a threat to its neighbours' security but to the human security of its own people. I have argued that it should be a matter of no pride for the two countries that powerful nuclear weapons are parked in their bunkers while hungry, powerless people are parked on their city pavements. I have argued that nuclear explosions are not going to save these nations, but that social and economic explosions may destroy them. I have argued that defense expenditures are already large and heavy (12 billion dollars a year, twice that of Saudi Arabia's arm procurement and with six times as many soldiers) and can get out of hand. Even a freeze of the arms race can finance a major part of the social agendas of both India and Pakistan. I have also argued, for good recourse, that we have seen this senseless blend before of "vast human deprivation combined with a vast nuclear arsenal" in the Soviet Union, with not very reassuring results.

I have written that no desperately poor nation has ever become a great superpower merely by exploding a nuclear bomb; the route to economic and political greatness is a difficult one. I do not defend the irrationality expressed on this issue: I greatly condemn it.

However, what concerns me even more today is the hysterical and hypocritical Western response to these nuclear explosions. I find this current strategy, if there is one, totally confused, largely immoral, highly counterproductive and plainly stupid. So let me take you behind the scenes, share some candid thoughts with you and suggest a possible constructive strategy.

First, let me tell you why Pakistan reacted with nuclear test explosions, for it is an indictment of the lack of a Western strategy, not an indictment of Pakistan's irresponsibility. After India's nuclear tests in early May, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan army debated whether or not to conduct their own nuclear tests and I am

convinced they were resolved not to test as long as they could be provided with the right security assurances. I argued at the time that Pakistan had a golden opportunity to benefit from India's mistake by holding back from nuclear tests, but insisting on concrete security guarantees from the United States, an end to the discriminatory sanctions by which Pakistan was denied advanced US military technology since 1990, and assurances that the Kashmir dispute could be resolved by international mediation. In fact, the Pakistani government began to explore three packages in which, if it abstained from nuclear tests, it could be provided with US security guarantees to protect it from any threat of attack by a nuclear-capable India. However, after several weeks of negotiations, no viable package was ever offered by President Bill Clinton's administration, and the best option Pakistan was presented with was merely a promise to review the Pressler amendment which had served as the basis of the US sanctions. The result was predictable: On May 28, and again on May 30, Pakistan exercised its option to test nuclear arms. But for those tests, I believe, the West deserves sanctions, not Pakistan.

Second, what amazes and greatly enrages me is the hypocrisy of existing nuclear powers on this issue. The nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) involved a two-part commitment: one by non-nuclear states to refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons, and another by the existing five nuclear powers - the US, Russia, China, France and Britain - to eliminate gradually their own nuclear arsenals. The latter commitment, naturally, never was honoured. The nuclear powers, in short, have violated their own commitments for 30 years, but they sit in indignant moral judgment on countries which have violated the same agreements for fewer than three months.

I am simply amazed by the hypocrisy of those who still control 30,000 nuclear bombs to condemn the existence of a few in the hands of India and Pakistan. I am simply outraged by the arrogance of those who believe that there is a God-given right for nuclear apartheid and that God Himself drew a line in the sand in 1967 that those who had exploded bombs before that date were the good guys and that those who were to do so later were nuclear tyrants and pariah nations destined to burn in Hell forever.

I am puzzled by the attitude of much of the international community, such as France and China, against India and Pakistan. India and Pakistan may in fact have done the international community a favour by raising the stakes in not undertaking nuclear disarmament, reminding the world that that commitment remains unfulfilled, and serving a warning that more nations may take this route unless the fundamental issue of nuclear disarmament is tackled first.

Third, the current predicament illustrates the bankruptcy of the existing Western disarmament strategy of economic sanctions against nuclear violators. Why destroy a region where you must have greater stability by imposing sanctions? Why, in doing so, lose your leverage to encourage those countries now to adopt more responsible nuclear policies? Engagement with India and Pakistan need not mean endorsement of their nuclear tests. In fact, engagement in this case could help prevent these desperately poor nations from considering the sale of their nuclear technology, and would help to prevent any debt defaults arising from sanctions which could push them to carry out such sales. Also, as it is, sanctions do not bite. In Pakistan's experience, sanctions - in the form of the Pressler amendment - could even be considered a gift, since the lack of US-supplied military technology encouraged Pakistan to develop its own facilities.

The West's strategy is also bankrupt in its failure to recognise new countries joining the nuclear club as nuclear powers. No gate-crashing is allowed, they have made clear. But that policy has made the Western powers slow in understanding reality, as they were when Communist China first acquired nuclear arms in the 1960s. They try to avoid dialogue with nuclear-capable states, but dialogue is exactly what is needed.

What could be a sensible nuclear strategy for these powers? I contend that they should admit India and Pakistan as members of the nuclear club, and then compel them to comply as nuclear states with the terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The nuclear states could then begin to draw up the first timetable for nuclear disarmament. The existing five nuclear powers could also warn India and Pakistan about the risks of nuclear confrontation, and invest real political capital into trying to resolve their outstanding disputes so as to avoid that confrontation. After all, the crisis in South Asia is as grave as any in the Middle East, Northern Ireland or Bosnia-Herzegovina; just as with those crises, the United States should respond by high-level mediation and visits by the US president. What the Western powers need to do, in short, is to help South Asia move from a nuclear arms race to a human development race, involving regional bodies like SAARC.

Finally, we need to go far beyond calls for nuclear disarmament and have a more practical package for global negotiations. We need a new Non-Proliferation Treaty; a new code of conduct for arms transfers; a new commitment to discourage arms spending, including less official developmental assistance and fewer export subsidies going to nations which concentrate their scarce resources on military spending.

We need more transparency, including better compliance with the UN Arms Registry; more open procurement practises; monitoring of corruption in arms sales, perhaps by groups like Transparency International; and IMF and World Bank involvement in ensuring that military debts and expenditures are accurately reflected and analysed.

Finally, we need a civil society movement for decreased arms spending in less developed economies, particularly on conventional arms, and the diversion of those funds to development purposes. Perhaps with such a strategy in place, we can stop not just the nuclear madness but the insanity of arms races in poor countries in general, and finally concentrate on the urgent task of improving peoples' lives.