

## India & Nuclear Disarmament

### Chasing a Dream

**Rekha Chakravarthi**  
*Research Officer, IPCS, New Delhi*

In June 2008, India rekindled the disarmament debate by hosting an international conference on "Towards a World Free of Nuclear Weapons." This conference was a transparent attempt by New Delhi to assert its position as the world's oldest crusader for nuclear disarmament when the debate to eliminate nuclear weapons had gained momentum internationally, following two op-ed articles by the American "Quartet" calling for a world free of nuclear weapons. Walking a fine line between responsibility and realpolitik, India's efforts towards achieving universal nuclear disarmament has often been dismissed as rhetoric and a sham, especially after the 1998 nuclear tests (Lanice 2008).

While presenting a six-step approach towards nuclear disarmament in April 2008, India's Permanent Representative to the UN, Nirupam Sen, reaffirmed that the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan (A World Free of Nuclear Weapons) was "the most comprehensive initiative on nuclear disarmament." Can India then help transform its (and the world's) rhetoric into reality?

#### NUCLEAR INDIA: THE DISARMAMENT LEGACY

Independent India's foreign policy, in its early years, was shaped by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's idealistic world view. In 1940, Nehru stated that, "both because of our adherence to the principle of non-violence and from practical considerations arising from our understanding of world events, we believe that complete disarmament of all nation states should be aimed at, as in fact an urgent necessity, if the world is not to be reduced to barbarism." China's nuclear test in 1964, two years after the Chinese invasion in 1962, set the stage for India's nuclear weapons pro-

gramme. Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri gave the green signal for a peaceful nuclear explosion in 1964, yet, in his speech in Parliament he also maintained that India would never make the bomb (Menon 2000).

India conducted its first nuclear test in May 1974, with four major developments in the decade from 1961-1971 having shaped India's decision to test. First, the psychological impact of India's humiliating defeat in the Sino-Indian border conflict in 1962 followed by the Chinese nuclear test in 1964 required that India exercised its nuclear option. Second, India's attempt to obtain security guarantee from the West were rebuffed. Third was the emergence of the NPT as a discriminatory nuclear order. Fourth was Pakistan's clandestine weapons programme with Chinese assistance after the Indo-Pak war in 1971.

Following Pokhran-I, India continued to defend its goal of nuclear disarmament. In 1988, at the third Special Session on Disarmament (SSOD III), Rajiv Gandhi spoke about a "world free of nuclear weapons" and presented the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan seeking a "binding commitment by all nations to eliminate nuclear weapons in stages, by the year 2010." In the same year, however, amidst reports of a growing Sino-Pakistan nuclear nexus, Rajiv Gandhi also gave the go-ahead for India's weapons programme (Menon 2000).

The official position on India's need to weaponize has been that, the reluctance of the international community to proceed with universal disarmament and the deteriorating security vis-à-vis China and Pakistan compelled India to obtain the bomb. In essence, India has argued that it has always been a 'reluctant nuclear power.'

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tially been twofold – arguing for universal disarmament on the one hand and keeping the nuclear option open on the other, in the absence of universal nuclear disarmament.

The NDA government tested in 1998 and justified this on the basis of threats to national security; yet, Prime Minister Vajpayee reiterated India's commitment to nuclear disarmament which was subsequently included as India's principle objective in the Draft Nuclear Doctrine. India continues to argue on both sides of this issue, hence its position on nuclear disarmament is largely regarded as rhetoric. Having said that, it should be noted that the pursuit of disarmament in the US and elsewhere has also been two-sided and rhetorical.

## II THE INDIAN DEBATE ON DISARMAMENT

The Quartet's proposals for eliminating nuclear weapons were warmly welcomed in New Delhi. However, after the 1998 tests there has not been any serious domestic political debate to assume greater responsibility for disarmament. A more confident India since 1998 has only reiterated its traditional position on disarmament. While most believe that nuclear disarmament is in India's interests, there are different opinions on how India should proceed as a nuclear state to approach the disarmament issue.

First, there is a school of thought that believes pursuing nuclear disarmament is chasing a chimera. According to this group, the Quartet's initiative is an attempt to restore some credibility into the international nuclear regime before the NPT review conference in 2010. The international system has always operated on the realist paradigm where national interest remains the principal force motivating nation states and changes in the world order will only result from national interests and not through idealism. The Western powers have not taken any real responsibility to eliminate nuclear weapons after the end of Cold War; they have

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been retained for their influence and prestige. Moreover, the US, Russia and China have strengthened their nuclear capabilities. India, therefore, should not spend its diplomatic capital on pursuing chimeras and instead enhance its deterrent posture. Nuclear weapons may not serve military purposes but they continue to have political utility; otherwise, there is no reason why France and Britain have retained their nuclear arsenals.

Then there are the pacifists who, in stark contrast to the nuclear proponents, support disarmament on moral grounds. Nuclear weapons defeat the very spirit of humanity, and world peace cannot be attained through the bomb. For the pacifists, disarmament is not chimerical; seeking security and political influence by developing nuclear weapons is. These weapons do not serve any military, political or economic objectives. In fact, by diverting economic investment from development to defence, they only serve the interests of the elites. Moreover, the expenditure involved in developing and maintaining nuclear weapons is in addition to the expenditures incurred on supporting and strengthening conventional forces. Therefore, it is an unnecessary burden on the national economy.

A departure from the two groups is a section of strategists and academics who believe that global nuclear disarmament is desirable but not feasible. According to them, the US and Russia are at the top of the nuclear chain and they will have to lead the process of weapons elimination before other states can follow suit. India cannot lead the process nor can China because their nuclear arsenals are nowhere close in size to those of the US and Russia, and it would not make much difference if they did give up their weapons.

Finally, there are some who believe that India should offer some concrete commitments other than rhetoric by agreeing to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and help in concluding a verifiable Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT). At the regional level, India should take an initiative to start a dialogue with China and Pakistan and take steps to reduce nuclear risks in the region. India should also propose an updated version of the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan, including a no-first-use commitment by all states possessing nuclear weapons, sharp reduction of all stocks of fissile materials, limit any further production, and exercise complete inventory control over any weapons usable fissile material.

## III

## DISARMAMENT: A CURIOUS CASE

Reviving the disarmament debate now are former American officials George Shultz, William Perry, Sam Nunn and Henry Kissinger or the Quartet/Quad, as they are referred to. All four are veterans of the Cold War, and now, disarmament converts. Their proposal stems from a realist perspective and not any idealistic fervour, which has usually informed the disarmament objective. What has motivated these four elites to seek disarmament? They may be driven by changes in the nature of threats or a shift in perception about the usefulness of these nuclear weapons.

Consider the shift in perceptions. First, the nuclear weapon states are aware that the possibility of using nuclear weapons to resolve any conflict among them or with other nations is very low or non-existent. It is, therefore, also accepted that nuclear weapons do not serve any other military objective, except for deterring nuclear weapons. Second, even if nations have doubts about a possible use being available for these weapons for whatever reason, what is the cost to achieve that end? In other words, it would be economically unsound, considering how interdependent the world economy has become. Third, nuclear weapon states have an added responsibility to be 'responsible nuclear powers,' that is, they are expected to be wise enough not to use these weapons against anyone for military purposes. The nuclear club includes former world powers, current superpower and an aspiring world power. India, not a part of P5, is a declared nuclear weapon state that also aspires to regional/global power, and carries the historical baggage of championing the goal of disarmament. None of the other nuclear and aspiring nations (Pakistan, Israel, North Korea and Iran) can afford to taint their image by using these weapons. Fifth, there can be no guarantee that nuclear weapons will never be used. This perception derives from the unpredictability of human behavior. Apprehension regarding the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, or political instability in any state which possesses nuclear weapons posits an ever present danger.

There are also changes in the nature of the threat. First, the international nuclear non-proliferation regime has been diluted considerably, especially under the Bush administration. NPT breakaway countries like Iran and North Korea have seriously injured the regime. More countries are expected to weaponize in the volatile Middle East if Iran goes nuclear. Second, AQ Khan and his 'nuclear

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Walmart' continue to pose proliferation risks with no evidence of his nuclear trafficking network having been dismantled. Third, the danger of terrorists getting hold of these dangerous weapons, especially fissile materials, is considered to be the most serious threat to the world. Fourth, the probability of a nuclear exchange between strong powers is considered to be low, but is relatively higher in the case of poorer countries that have less to lose. Fifth, as long as nuclear weapons exist so do the possibility of nuclear accidents. This means that nations will have to incur increasing expenditure in securing weapons that are no longer war-fighting instruments.

So much for the revival of disarmament debate, consider the curious case of why the debate may finally lead nowhere. Once again, there are real problems, but also those of perception. Consider the real ones. The first real problem is that if anyone is serious about eliminating nuclear weapons, then who will lead the process? Since the nuclear chain is top heavy with the United States and Russia possessing 95 per cent of the existing nuclear weapons, they must live up to their commitments under the NPT to eliminate their nuclear weapons. Only thereafter can they expect other nations to follow. Second, how sound is the first argument? In other words, not all nations possess nuclear weapons because the US and Russia have them. Will Iran give up its pursuit of nuclear weapons if the US, which is conventionally the most superior power and an ally of Israel, reduces its stockpile to zero?

This leads to the third reason, the importance of addressing the security deficiency among nations. Tensions between states have historical, territorial, political, ideological dimensions and de-weaponization may not restore cordial relations among nations. Fourth, the absence of international verification means. Even if countries commit to disarm, how can this be verified? How does one build trust and cooperation between states to install a transparent verification system? Fifth, nations have to build a national consensus before

committing to disarmament; it is very difficult to convince domestic constituencies (scientific, defence, political lobbies) that nuclear weapons are not attributes of the military and technological prowess of a nation.

Finally, nuclear weapons also possess symbolic value. They continue to be viewed as levers of power. Nations associate prestige, influence, and deterrent value to nuclear weapons. Disarmament is not just about eliminating nuclear weapons but also about devaluing the political power that nations derive from them. Both arguments, therefore, square off inconclusively, because each positive has a negative point .

#### **IV CONCLUSIONS**

Historically, the Indian nuclear narrative has moved back and forth between Nehru's idealistic worldview and the realist-driven international system. New Delhi has been unable to resist the temptation to assert its status as a nuclear weapon power, while championing the cause of global disarmament. Hence, India's has positioned itself as a 'reluctant nuclear power.' The process of developing an ideology is part of the evolutionary process of a nation state, so there is nothing wrong with India's struggle to locate itself within Nehru's idealism or the West's realism. The problem, however, is that by claiming to be a reluctant nuclear power India cannot become a global power. Does this mean India should unequivocally clarify its position? There are two ways possible. The classic response would be for India to give up its call for disarmament or commit to it in real terms rather than follow a dual policy. Another way to consider is that perhaps in India's rhetoric lies its realpolitik.

Post- 1998, however, there has not been any serious domestic political debate on disarmament. The debate centered largely around the CTBT. While there was a strong consensus before the 1998 tests against joining the CTBT, after Pokhran this debate has fragmented. One view now is that India should sign the CTBT provided the US and China ratifies the treaty. A variant is that India should oppose the CTBT because it aims at non-proliferation rather than disarmament, while providing a technological edge to the P5 states, especially the United States.

Another set of arguments revolves around India's minimum credible deterrent which is unspecified

in terms of numbers. A contrary viewpoint is that India should unilaterally disarm. This, however, is a question of morality and can be pursued only on grounds of morality. By doing this India would set an example to the world, but it would not necessarily be an inspiration for other nations to follow. While disarmament is an ideal pursuit, there is also a need for all nuclear nations to be on the same page in thought and action for the pursuit of such a goal.

The Quartet's attempt is seen to be an extension of the American non-proliferation agenda rather than the pursuit of disarmament, the idea being to downplay the US' offensive nuclear posture. The US does not bear a singular responsibility for eliminating nuclear weapons, but what matters ultimately is that any initiative is matched by practical measures.

Says Admiral Raja Menon in his book *A Nuclear Strategy for India*, "An international system without nuclear weapons could be a system without armaments. Creating such a world, as Nehru wanted, is certainly a worthwhile goal, but is it Utopian or not is the question. The chances of creating a new world order are far higher if it originates from one of the power centres of the world, which India is not" (Menon 2000). Perhaps what India needs is not a debate on disarmament but a decision on where India sees itself as an aspiring power. One of the biggest steps in this direction will be a break from its idealist-realist struggle, but this is not applicable to only its nuclear policy.

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**INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND  
CONFLICT STUDIES**

**B-7/3, SAFDARJUNG ENCLAVE, NEW DELHI**