

India's Disarmament Myths and Political Realities¹

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Summary

India's romance with nuclear disarmament has been a long one. The fact that Pandit Nehru was an avid champion of a world free of nuclear weapons injected nuclear disarmament into the very DNA of the Indian state. Even when India faced grave security threats, it saw, even though after 1964 in an increasingly rhetorical sense, an escape from the anarchic pressures of international politics in the high ideal of nuclear disarmament. However, this great passion for nuclear disarmament has created a rather strange psychological condition when it comes to India's politics on the issue: over a period of time, it has come to be uncritically assumed in India's world view that the country can never do anything inimical to the cause of nuclear disarmament. Even when India explodes the bomb, it is in the cause of a global nuclear zero.

¹ The title of this essay is inspired by an essay by Kenneth Waltz called 'Nuclear Myths and Political Realities' presented in his inaugural address as the President of the American Political Science Association in the year 1990.

Arming the Self for Disarming Others

India's romance with nuclear disarmament has been a long one. The fact that Pandit Nehru was an avid champion of a world free of nuclear weapons injected nuclear disarmament into the very DNA of the Indian state. Even when India faced grave security threats, it saw, even though after 1964 in an increasingly rhetorical sense, an escape from the anarchic pressures of international politics in the high ideal of nuclear disarmament. However, this great passion for nuclear disarmament has created a rather strange psychological condition when it comes to India's politics on the issue: over a period of time, it has come to be uncritically assumed in India's world view that the country can never do anything inimical to the cause of nuclear disarmament. Even when India explodes the bomb, it is in the cause of a global nuclear zero.

Does anyone remember George Fernandez saying after the 1998 nuclear weapons tests that "India can now pursue, with credibility and greater conviction, our long term campaign to rid the world of nuclear weapons"?² Politicians notwithstanding, a number of strategic thinkers have also argued that India's nuclear weapons tests were a service in the cause of nuclear disarmament.³ However, such virtuous rationalizations of India's quest for nuclear weapons are not restricted to the second Pokhran tests. Shrewd metaphors and unconvincing acts of legitimisations have always played a part in explaining away India's own violations of its undying spirit of nuclear disarmament in the past: Indira Gandhi herself designated the 1974 nuclear weapons tests as peaceful in nature as if the very physics of the atom would be subject to change depending upon the euphemism used to describe India's first nuclear test. Also, many nuclear pundits today contend that the reason behind Rajiv Gandhi's yes to the nuclear weaponeers after 1988 was the cold shoulder which his eponymously-named action plan for 'universal and time bound disarmament' received at the United Nations.

To put it simply, India's quest for nuclear weapons engenders from a very different kind of logic: to rid the world of nuclear weapons. And it is because of this logic of aggressive benevolence that nuclear disarmament, even in the present times, claims an extraordinary place in the hearts and minds of the Indian foreign policy and security community. Clearly, if there is a proverbial ostrich in international politics with its head buried in the sand when it comes to the issue of nuclear disarmament, it is India. Rather than accepting that the imperative of security and the aspiration for great power status have driven India's nuclear weapons programme, it instead attaches unnecessary virtues to it: recall the flutter in media and policy circles when the National Security Advisor defended the need for

² Quoted in George Perkovich (2000), "The Bomb that Roared", in *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 417.

³ Manpreet Sethi (1998), "The Indian case might help the Nuclear Disarmament Cause", *Strategic Analysis* 22(3): 495-498.

nuclear weapons on the pretext of national security at a recent conference in Vigyan Bhawan.⁴

The question which therefore demands an explanation is what purposes does the hallowed goal of nuclear disarmament serve for India? Among a host of arguments ranging from the achievement of world peace to the contribution of Indian civilization to global justice, only two arguments are worth their salt. First is the idea that India's strategic interests are better served in a world without nuclear weapons. And second, that pursuing nuclear disarmament increases India's profile in the world and its soft power. But can these arguments withstand critical analysis?

Contra Strategic Interests

The logic of India's strategic interests and nuclear disarmament serving them is quite straight forward. These strategic interests correspond to the wishes of many in the strategic community to establish Indian hegemony in the South Asian region, which stands challenged by Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapons capability. Since the 1988 Brasstacks crisis, and through the Kashmir crisis of 1990, the Kargil war of 1999, the military stand-off after the December 2001 attack on Parliament and the downturn in India-Pakistan relations in the wake of the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008, the Indian strategic community has come to realise that India has now become a victim of what Paul Kapur characterised as the 'instability-instability paradox'.⁵ By proclaiming artificial instability at the nuclear level - Pakistan's tendency to link all levels of conflicts with the possibility of nuclear exchange between the two South Asian neighbours - Pakistan has been able to fuel sub-conventional violence - terrorism and limited infiltration across the Line of Control - without giving serious thought to possible Indian retribution. In some sense, therefore, nuclear weapons have not only created an artificial parity between India and Pakistan but they have also created circumstances that favour Pakistan's proxy war against India. Nuclear disarmament would therefore set the situation right and India will finally be able to use its conventional superiority on its petulant neighbour.⁶ So goes the argument of nuclear disarmament serving India's strategic interests.

However, people who make such an argument do not understand strategy nor have a comprehensive understanding of what India's real interests are. Strategy is never made in a vacuum; it is a dialectic shaped as much by the actions and interests of the other side, as

⁴ P.R. Chari, (2012), "India: Double Speak on Nuclear Disarmament", available at <http://www.ipcs.org/article/india/india-double-speak-on-nuclear-disarmament-3711.html>.

⁵ S. Paul Kapur (2007), *Dangerous Deterrent: Nuclear Weapons Proliferation and Conflict in South Asia*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁶ See V. R. Raghavan (2010) (ed.), *India and Global Nuclear Disarmament: Defining India's Moves*, New Delhi: MacMillan.

it is defined by one's own goals and resources. And if this is the nature of strategy, to think that Pakistan would accept nuclear disarmament because it serves India's strategic interests is to engage in an exercise in self-deception. The very fact that India remains threat number-one for Pakistan is reason enough for the latter to hold on to its nuclear weapons and more dearly than ever.

Many would argue that if all causes of animosity between India and Pakistan – including and particularly Kashmir – were to be resolved, there is no reason for Pakistan not to embrace nuclear disarmament. There are two main problems with such an argument. First, identification of causes behind animosity does not make resolving those conflicts any easier. In fact, it often makes states realise the very enormity of the situation at hand and therefore restrains statesmen from any immediate action, insofar as states behave in an extremely conservative fashion when it comes to accommodating the interests of others and particularly that of their adversaries, until and unless the tyranny of circumstances demand so. Add to it the intricacies and ad-hocism of domestic politics and one can clearly see the problems in the argument. It is quite revealing that India and Pakistan, for more than 60 years now, have known well that Kashmir is the key to peace between them. This conscious acknowledgement rather than leading to a resolution of the conflict has instead led to many wars. The second problem engenders out of the very nature of international politics, which lacks any guarantee for the safety of individual states. In a self-help system, even states with perfectly benign motives constantly seek to enhance their security by accumulating economic and military power. The fact that India occupies a towering presence in the South Asian region with huge military capabilities is reason enough for Pakistan to be wary of India's motives and intentions, not to talk about the particularly bloody history of the India-Pakistan relationship which complicates the matter further. Under these circumstances, nuclear parity has enabled Pakistan to effectively challenge India's ability to coerce it even conventionally.⁷ And Pakistan sees this development not only through the lens of national security, but as a virtuous challenge to India's attempt at exercising hegemony in the South Asian region.⁸ Clearly, from the perspective of a smaller and vulnerable state, which to our dismay has not accepted India's hegemony in the region, these ambitions appear rather valid.

If, therefore, arguing in favour of nuclear disarmament as a strategy to deal with Pakistan is a serious strategic folly, what about the argument that disarmament serves India's interests? If India's behaviour in the past 60 years is any guide, it seems to be contented with the territorial *status quo* in South Asia. Nehru's last-ditch effort to settle the Kashmir imbroglio after the 1962 war, narrated in detail in Gundevis's account *Outside the Archive*,

⁷ Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur (2010), *India, Pakistan and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia*, London: Columbia University Press.

⁸ Naeem Salik (2010), *The Genesis of South Asian Nuclear Deterrence: Pakistan's Perspective*, New York: Oxford University Press.

provides serious evidence in this regard and so is the fact that India sought no territorial gains in the aftermath of the 1971 War with Pakistan. If territorial *status quo* has been India's real interest, then nuclear weapons have settled the issue once and for all. Not only along the border with Pakistan, but even with China, nuclear weapons have made any forceful usurpation of Indian territory a very inconvenient and dangerous exercise. However, there are two counter-arguments which need to be accounted for here.

First is the space provided for fomenting internal dissension in India, which nuclear weapons seem to have provided Pakistan. Pakistan, under the safety of its nuclear weapons, has tried to create trouble by assisting and abetting terrorist elements in Kashmir and other regions, so goes the argument. However, to singularly blame Pakistan for the internal conflicts in India is to remain wilfully blind to the structural deficiencies of Indian polity. It is a well documented fact that much before Pakistan entered the game, militancy in Kashmir was a spontaneous and indigenous response to the stifled political aspirations of the local people.⁹ All that Pakistan did was to make shrewd use of the Kashmiri discontent; it cannot be called the progenitor of the Kashmiri militancy. Of course, the Indian political class has made Pakistan and the nuclear stalemate a scapegoat for its own political failings. Nuclear stalemate between the two countries has actually done more service to India than is otherwise realised; it has shifted our attention to our own political failings and the need to set right the internal political, social and economic order in troubled areas like Kashmir. Also, the lesson from the collapse of Soviet Union is there for everyone to grasp: nuclear weapons play no role in the internal politics of the state, where peace and order is essentially a function of the politics of legitimacy and not military hardware including nuclear weapons

Nuclear weapons, in a very different way, also help India's diplomatic crusade against Pakistan's support for terrorism in India. Today, the world, by and large, accepts that Pakistan is a hotbed of international terror and its involvement in Kashmir is deemed unacceptable by most. But the situation was not always the same. In fact, many in the West, for a considerable period of time in the 1990's, sided with Pakistan's version of the Kashmir story. However, nuclear weapons have an uncanny ability to alter political values: what is politically acceptable and what is not. Revisionism of all kinds gets the boot and *status quo* is embraced for the simple reason that revisionism of any kind might induce instability in a nuclear dyad with grave political consequences.¹⁰ Also, since the *status quo* is

⁹ Sumit Ganguly (1997), *The Crisis in Kashmir: Portents of War, Hopes of Peace*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Also see Sumantra Bose (2003), *Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

¹⁰ Henry Kissinger (1957), *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, New York: Harper and Brothers. For a brief summary of the arguments made by Henry Kissinger see, Yogesh Joshi (2010), "Unlimited Weapons and Limited Wars: Confronting the Dilemmas of the Nuclear Age", IPCS Book Reviews, available at <http://www.ipcs.org/books-review/nuclear/nuclear-weapons-and-foreign-policy-259.html>. Also see Kenneth Waltz (2010), "Towards Nuclear peace" and "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities", in *Realism and International Politics*, Routledge: London.

easier to maintain than attempting a revision of existing boundaries, the former is generally preferred over the latter. The fact that the Cold War was ultimately won by a side which was considered to be a *status quo* power further cemented this perception among Great Powers and especially the United States. Here, the role of the United States and of the international community at large during both the Kargil War and Operation Parakram comes to mind. International pressure and especially of the US, many argue, was the real reason behind the arrest of escalation on both these occasions.¹¹ It is interesting to note that at the height of these crisis-situations, both Pakistan and India appealed to the world community with equal intensity but international opinion came to favour India's position rather than Pakistan's. Internationalisation of the conflict alone, therefore, cannot explain why the US and other major powers favoured India over Pakistan since both countries tried to internationalise the issue for their own benefit. The reason that the US sided with India and castigated Pakistan for its revisionist actions therefore emanates from what is politically acceptable and what is not under the shadow of nuclear weapons.

Second, some hyper-nationalists would claim that unlike India, Pakistan and China remain in illegal occupation of Indian territory and therefore, to be contented with the territorial *status quo* is against India's fundamental interests. But then it has always been very difficult to set right the wrongs done by history. Further, if one goes by that logic, why stop at the boundaries which the British bequeathed to independent India and not seek the territorial integrity of *Akhand Bharat*, an expansive depiction of India's true territorial extent encompassing some parts of Myanmar and Iran as well?¹² The material reality of nuclear weapons and the enormous destructive potential any territorial conflict going nuclear carries with itself, gives enough incentives for all states to at least accept the existing territorial equations, *de facto* if not *de jure*. This realisation over a period of time may also help in cementing this *de facto* status into juridically defined boundaries in South Asia. Even without use, nuclear weapons can create their own reality.

Hard Power Rendered Soft

Raymond Aron once said: 'In the present world, every great power is identified with a great idea'. Churchill meant the same thing when he said that 'Empires of the future' are 'the empires of the minds'.¹³ The second reason for India's constant support for nuclear

¹¹ Srinath Raghavan (2009), "A Coercive Triangle: India, Pakistan, the United States and the Crisis of 2001-2002", *Defence Studies*, 9(2): 242-260. Paul Kapur (2008), "Ten Years of Instability in a Nuclear South Asia", *International Security*, 33(2): 71-94. Pervez Musharraf (2006), "The Kargil Conflict", in *In the Line of Fire*, London: Simon and Schuster.

¹² For the concept of *Akhand Bharat*, see <http://www.akhandbharat.org/>.

¹³ Quoted in Christopher Layne and Bradley A. Thayer (2007), *American Empire: A Debate*, New York: Routledge, p. 7.

disarmament engenders from this ideological grandeur associated with the proselytizing nature of great powers. In some sense, given the historicity of India's involvement with nuclear disarmament, India has the right credentials to champion the cause of a world free of nuclear weapons. And with the rise of India on the global power scene, it not only has the moral authority but also the material power to drive the idea home. It also adds to India's soft power, an element of national power so much in vogue nowadays. However, these arguments, like is the case with all sorts of propaganda, hide much more than they reveal.

First, no great power in the history of international politics pursued an idea that did not serve its interests. If Britain fought for open seas, it was because its trade and indeed its economic existence were dependent upon it.¹⁴ And if for the United States the liberal economic order is a priority, it is clearly because it helps it to maintain its superpower status in the world.¹⁵ Moreover, none of these great ideas would have spread without the use or at least the threat of use of force.¹⁶ And since all great ideas are under-girded by both selfish interests and military power, they have engendered both awe and ridicule in equal proportion. Given the fact that nuclear disarmament neither corresponds with India's true strategic interests (as has been argued above) nor does India possess the necessary hard power to convince others about its necessity, championing the cause is at best a futile enterprise.

What about soft power or what E. H. Carr earlier called the 'power of propaganda'?¹⁷ May be, nuclear disarmament could help in augmenting India's soft power and its receptivity as a great power in the eyes of the global audience. However, we should note here that when India advocated nuclear disarmament for the first 50 years of its independence, it remained confined to the backwaters of global politics. And when it actually began to pursue overt weaponisation after 1998, it has received unprecedented attention from the major powers so much so that within a decade of the 1998 tests it has even been accommodated in the international nuclear order.¹⁸ Even though the real reasons behind the nuclear deal were geopolitical – the long term balancing of China – the nuclear tests were the political indicator

¹⁴ A critical reading of Niall Ferguson's book *Empire* makes this point amply clear. See Niall Ferguson (2003), *Empire: How Britain made the Modern World*, London: Allen Lane.

¹⁵ Christopher Layne and Bradley A. Thayer (2007), *American Empire: A Debate*, New York: Routledge. Also see Christopher Layne (2006), *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

¹⁶ John J. Mearsheimer (2001), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W.W. Norton.

¹⁷ E.H. Carr (1964), *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919-1939*, New York: Harper and Row.

¹⁸ Harsh V. Pant (2011), *The Indo-US Nuclear Pact: Policy, Process and Great Power Politics*, London: Oxford. Also see P.R. Chari (2009) (ed.), *Indo-US Nuclear Deal: Seeking Synergy in Bilateralism*, New Delhi: Routledge.

of the fact that India is ready to play serious geopolitics based on *realpolitik* considerations and has shed its high idealism which always made the West and especially the United States shy away from even thinking about any kind of strategic cooperation with India. Nuclear weapons tests therefore signalled seriousness of purpose on India's part and conveyed the same to the hegemon. Clearly then, influence increases with hard actions and not pronouncements about soft intentions.

However, there is another issue in associating soft power with the idea of nuclear disarmament. If nuclear disarmament is purely a propaganda tactic because it is impossible to achieve it in the first place, it is quite understandable and may be clever thinking on the part of those advocating it. However, when such subterfuge becomes the basis for India's activist *moralpolitik*, the subtle difference between policy and propaganda would dissipate rather quickly. The import of this is not lost on those who belong to the non-nuclear world, which was quite evident at the 2010 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference when many countries, even from the non-aligned movement, reserved especial criticism for the India-US civilian nuclear cooperation agreement.¹⁹ When India's actions in the nuclear field, where its appetite for the nuclear triad, fast breeder reactors and ballistic missile defence shows no signs of remission, the legitimacy of its pronouncements on the need and desirability of nuclear disarmament comes under serious strain. If symmetry between rhetoric and action is fundamental for the generation of soft power, as Nye argues, then clearly this divergence in India's *realpolitik* when it comes to building its own nuclear arsenal and its *moralpolitik* of preaching nuclear disarmament is surely not going to help India's soft image.²⁰ India's undoing in this regard is aptly captured in Adlai Stevenson's famous remark: "it is easier to fight for one's principles than to live up to them".

Conclusion

Disarmament has remained a hallowed goal of India's foreign policy without serious self-reflection. Even a sea change in India's global circumstances has not ushered a new line of thinking on the desirability and utility of nuclear disarmament. This is partly a result of a wrong reading of the Nehruvian legacy on nuclear disarmament, partly because of the lack of serious self-reflection within India's strategic and foreign policy community and also a part of that politically convenient myth-making exercise which feeds the narrative

¹⁹ Sharon Squassoni (2010), *The US-Indian Nuclear Deal and its Impact*, *Arms Control Today*, available at http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_07-08/squassoni

²⁰ Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (2011), *The Future of Power*, New York: Public Affairs. Also see Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (2004) *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs.

of India being a different kind of great power. However, as we saw, nuclear disarmament neither serves India's strategic interests nor does it help it in increasing its global influence.

The need, therefore, is to debate both the necessity and desirability of nuclear disarmament without being burdened by India's idealistic aspirations and unfounded assumptions about the heft that this premature superpower carries in the uncertain waters of international politics. But are the disarmament pundits listening?