

US-India Nuclear Deal Fuels an Asian Arms Race

Pervez Hoodbhoy

US-India Nuclear Deal Fuels an Asian Arms Race

By Pervez Hoodbhoy

For all who have opposed Pakistan's nuclear program over the years – including myself – the US-India nuclear agreement may be the worst thing that has happened in a long time.

Post agreement: Pakistan's ruling elite is confused and bitter. They know that India has overtaken Pakistan in far too many areas for there to be any reasonable basis for symmetry. They see the US is now interested in reconstructing the geopolitics of South Asia and in repairing relations with India, not in mollifying Pakistani grievances. Nevertheless, there were lingering hopes of a sweetener during President George W. Bush's furtive and unwelcomed visit in March 2006 to Islamabad. There was none.

This change in US policy thrilled many in India. Many enjoyed President Musharraf's discomfiture. But they would do well to restrain their exuberance. The nuclear deal, even if ratified, will not dramatically increase nuclear power production – currently this stands at only 3% of the total production, and can at most double to 6% if currently planned reactors are built and made operational over the next decade. On the other hand, Pakistan is bound to react – and

react badly – once US nuclear materials and equipment start rolling into India.

One certain consequence will be more bombs on both sides of the border. The deal is widely seen in Pakistan as signaling America's support or acquiescence, or perhaps even surrender, to India's nuclear ambitions. India will be freely able to import uranium fuel for its safeguarded civilian reactors. This will free up the remainder of its scarce uranium resources for making plutonium. Further, when India's thorium-fuelled breeder reactors are fully operational, India will be able to produce more bombs in one year than in the last 30.

Not surprisingly, important voices in Pakistan have started to demand that Pakistan match India bomb-for-bomb. Abdus Sattar, ex-foreign minister of Pakistan, advocates "replication of the Kahuta plant to produce more fissile uranium.... to rationalize and upgrade Pakistan's minimum deterrence capability". He has also written about the need to "accelerate its [Pakistan's] missile development programme".

This is a prescription for an unlimited nuclear race, given that "minimum deterrence" is essentially an open-ended concept. Pakistan has mastered centrifuge technology, and giving birth to more Kahutas would require only a political decision. Moreover, unlike

India, Pakistan is not constrained by supplies of natural uranium. Thus, at least in principle, Pakistan can increase its bomb production considerably.

Although nuclear hawks in India and Pakistan had once pooh-poohed the notion of an arms race, there is little doubt that India and Pakistan are solidly placed on a Cold War trajectory. As more bombs are added to the inventory every year, and intermediate range ballistic missiles steadily roll off the production lines, both countries seek ever more potent weaponry.

Many years ago, the nuclear powers crossed the point where they could lay cities to waste and kill millions in a matter of minutes. The fantastically cruel logic, known as nuclear deterrence, requires only the certainty that one nuclear bomb will be able to penetrate the adversary's defences and land in the heart of a city. No one has the slightest doubt that this capability was crossed multiple times over during the past few decades.

What action would best serve the interest of the peoples of India and Pakistan, as well as of China?

A fissile material cutoff is the easiest and most straightforward way to ease nuclear tensions. It offers the best hope to limit the upwards spiral in warhead numbers. Instead of threatening to create more Kahutas, Pakistan should offer to stop production of highly enriched uranium while India should respond by ceasing to reprocess its reactor wastes. Previous stockpiles possessed by either

country should not be brought into issue because their credible verification is extremely difficult and would inevitably derail an agreement. Years of negotiation at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva came to naught for this very reason. A series of "Nuclear Risk Reduction" talks between Pakistan and India have also produced zero results. The cessation of fissile material production is completely absent from the agenda; it must be made a central item now.

The arms race directly benefits Indian and Pakistan elites. Hence they are tacit collaborators as they woo the US and prove that their states belong to the community of "responsible nuclear states" that are worthy of military and nuclear assistance. The past has been banished by an unwritten agreement. Retired Pakistani and Indian generals and leaders meet cordially at conferences around the world and happily clink glasses together. They emphatically deny that the two countries had even come close to a nuclear crisis in the past. Being now charged with the mission of projecting an image of "responsibility" abroad, none amongst them wants to bring back the memory of South Asian leaders hurling ugly nuclear threats against each other.

But instances of criminal nuclear behaviour are to be found even in the very recent past. For example, India's Defence Minister George Fernandes told the International Herald Tribune on June 3, 2002 that "India can survive a nuclear attack, but Pakistan cannot." Indian Defence Secretary Yogendra Narain had taken things a step further in an interview with

Outlook Magazine: “A surgical strike is the answer,” adding that if this failed to resolve things, “We must be prepared for total mutual destruction.” On the Pakistani side, at the peak of the 2002 crisis, General Musharraf had threatened that Pakistan would use “unconventional means” against India if necessary.

Tense times may return at some point in the future. But Indian and Pakistani leaders are likely to once again abdicate their own responsibilities whenever that happens. Instead, they will again entrust disaster prevention to the US.

Of course, it would be absurd to lay the blame on the US for all that has gone wrong between the two countries. Surely the US does not want to destabilize the subcontinent, and it does not want a South Asian holocaust. But one must be aware that for the US this is only a peripheral interest – the core of its interest in South Asian nuclear issues stems from the need to limit Chinese power and influence, fear of Al-Qaida and Muslim extremism, and the associated threat of nuclear terrorism.

The Americans will sort out their business and priorities as they see fit. But it is unwise to participate in a plan that leaves South Asian neighbours at each others throats while

benefiting a power that sits on the other side of the globe.

Regional tensions will increase because of the deal. Given that the motivation for the US-India nuclear agreement comes partly from the US desire to contain China, the Pakistan-China strategic relationship will be considerably strengthened. In practical terms, this may amount to enhanced support for Pakistan’s missile program, or even its military nuclear program. Speaking at Pakistan's National Defense College in Islamabad a day before Bush’s arrival there, Musharraf declared that “My recent trip to China was part of my effort to keep Pakistan's strategic options open.”

By proceeding with the nuclear deal with India the US may destabilize South Asia. It will also wreck the NPT, take the heat off Iran and North Korea, open the door for Japan to convert its plutonium stocks into bombs, and bring about global nuclear anarchy.

This article was published in the Economic and Political Weekly (India) and The Friday Times (Pakistan), week of 17 April, 2006. It is published in a slightly abbreviated form at Japan Focus on April 23, 2006.

Pervez Hoodbhoy is professor of nuclear and high energy physics at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad.