

## **India's Nuclear Tests: What could the US have done?**

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We write this as a Pakistani and an Indian who have worked for peace and nuclear disarmament in South Asia for long. It is, therefore, with a sense of deep concern that we saw events of the last week unfold in India. However, being in the US, we also see the discussion in the US media on responses to India's nuclear tests. All these analyses miss a crucial point – the policies of the US towards its own nuclear weapons have driven the current race in South Asia to acquire nuclear weapons in many ways.

First, by its words, and more acutely by its actions, the US has made it clear that it values its nuclear weapons very highly. Hawks in both India and Pakistan have learnt this lesson very well. Indeed, the arguments they advance about India needing nuclear weapons to counter China, and Pakistan needing nuclear weapons to counter India, are straightforward extensions of US arguments from the cold war with the USSR. Recent proposals in the US seeking to use nuclear weapons to counter the potential threat of chemical and biological weapons only reinforce the lesson: if the US, with its gigantic military capabilities, needs nuclear weapons, then surely India and Pakistan also do.

Second, by not living up to its commitments under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty for the past thirty years the US has sent the unambiguous message that it does not honor treaties that it has signed and ratified. Undermining the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by investing in programs like the Stockpile Stewardship Program emphasizes this message. Therefore, South Asian hawks argue, signing treaties like the NPT or the CTBT is of no purpose because the US is not going to keep its part of the bargain.

Third, in opposition to the wishes of a large majority of countries, at the Conference on Disarmament and elsewhere, the US has blocked the implementation of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (World Court). On 8 July 1996, the Court stated that “there exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control.” The US, therefore, has shown that it pays scant regard to norms governing the behavior of the community of nation-states. Pro-nuclear advocates in South Asia reason that this proves that there is no way of achieving a non-nuclear world even if most of humanity is opposed to nuclear weapons, and if that is the case, then India and Pakistan should not foreswear these weapons either.

These arguments have resonated with citizens, especially the elite, of the two countries. It is worth noting that the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) managed to come to power in India only with the help of a dozen parties; the BJP itself won barely a quarter of the national vote. Yet, it has managed to get the support of an estimated 91% of Indians for the recent nuclear tests. This statistic is testimony to the growing Indian disenchantment with nuclear disarmament over the past many years.

Despite this large support, there are significant sections of Indians and Pakistanis opposed to these developments. Unfortunately, due to the kinds of reasons mentioned earlier, their arguments have been routinely dismissed out of hand. Further, by engaging primarily with the more influential “bomb lobbies,” and seldom with more moderate sections, the US and other international groups also made it possible for these elements to fashion “the Indian” or “the Pakistani” position on nuclear policy.

It is ironical that people at two ends of the spectrum in South Asia – those of us who have opposed nuclear weapons for years and those that have pushed for the development of nuclear weapons – are both critical of US nuclear policy. The difference, of course, is in the responses advocated. Unlike us, the nuclear proponents use the logic that US policy makers use in justifying their nuclear arsenals, to push India and Pakistan into acquiring these weapons. In the long run, things will change only if the nuclear weapon states get over their attachment to these weapons of terror. At the present moment, the only country that can lead a movement to lead the world away from these terrible weapons is the United States.

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