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Strategic Policy-making and the Indian System

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Wages of Indiscretion

While the rationale as well as timing of former Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) scientist K. Santhanam's pronouncement about India's thermo-nuclear prowess will remain a subject of speculation for a long time to come, there can be little doubt that it is an indiscretion of monumental proportions. In the midst of the current brouhaha, we need to retain clarity on one issue; given that deuterium-tritium boosted-fission weapons can generate yields of 200-500 kilo tonne (kt) the credibility of India's nuclear deterrent is not in the slightest doubt. However, the same cannot be said about our scientific community, whose credibility has been the biggest casualty of the unseemly squabbling that has erupted amongst the nation's senior-most scientists.

Whatever the other repercussions of this episode, it will certainly upset and confuse the Indian Armed Forces. This strong, silent bulwark of India's security has so far accepted the claims and statements of DRDO and Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) scientists at face value, and borne the operational consequences of many failed scientific projects with admirable stoicism. Will they continue to do so?

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The Organisational Gap

The detachment of the Service Headquarters (SHQ) from most aspects of nuclear deterrence is well-known. The Army's missile brigade, the Navy's Prithvi-armed vessels and the dual-tasked Air Force units seem to form the only interface between SHQ, on one side and the Strategic Forces Command (SFC) as well as DRDO/DAE, on the other. There has, traditionally, been neither interest nor in-depth knowledge of the doctrine or philosophy of nuclear deterrence in the Armed Forces.

This is true all the way up to the top; and understandably so. The Service Chiefs must dedicate their time to dealing with operational and administrative issues of their own service, and since nuclear deterrence has been kept out of their purview, they see no need to spend time on it. It is only when a Service Chief becomes the Chairman of Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) and finds himself in the nuclear chain of command, that he scurries around to learn the nuts and bolts of deterrence. Unfortunately, in many cases, the Chairman's tenure is a mere few months and he finds himself passing on the baton to his successor before he has quite understood the nuances of this arcane subject.

While India has deliberately chosen to declare itself a no-first use (NFU) nuclear weapon state, our adversary, Pakistan – admittedly, the weaker one – not just believes in first use, but has often indulged in nuclear blackmail. It has unofficially declared some conventional 'red lines', the crossing of which will supposedly trigger a nuclear response. Thus, Pakistan has arrogated to itself the right to escalate a skirmish or encounter into a nuclear conflict. It is noteworthy here that Pakistan has taught the world a thing or two about leveraging nuclear capability and how to wage a low-intensity conflict with impunity.

Such a situation poses some uncomfortable questions about India's strategic policy-making. Does India have a system in place, by which our Armed Forces can transition seamlessly from conventional conflict to nuclear warfare? Can we absorb an enemy first-strike, launch a retaliatory nuclear strike and simultaneously continue to wage a conventional war? Do the Chiefs have trained and knowledgeable staff to oversee such a transition? Is the SHQ continuously working on every possible scenario, including the unthinkable: fighting a nuclear war?

The Historical Backdrop

The root cause of most national security traumas that India has suffered in her turbulent past has been a historical leadership deficit. The fate of people and nations has always been deeply influenced by the quality of leaders that they threw up at crucial junctures in their history. The roles played by Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin and de Gaulle are clear examples. Considering the fact that India has enjoyed reasonable political stability since independence, we have shown a distinct ineptitude in handling most dilemmas and crises that have confronted us, as also in safeguarding our national interests. This is a clear reflection of our inherently diffident attitude as a nation as well as the glaring lack of strategic vision that we demonstrate.

George Tanham, an American scholar, was possibly the first individual to cast a critical eye on the rationale for India's lack of strategic culture. In the mid-1990s, his study invoked much displeasure from the prickly Indian elite for postulating certain socio-cultural, historical and even geographic factors, which, he felt, had contributed to the introverted attitude of India's elite and the hubris, which prevented them from acknowledging it. According to him, this created a strange conundrum whereby India had collected all the trappings of power, without having a clue about how to use them.

If we go back in history, we find that ancient Vedic literature was the medium for conveying politico-military strategies and the options available to a strategic leader for conducting affairs of state, including diplomacy and war. Around the 4th century BC, we find a masterly treatise focusing on not just economic policy but also statecraft and military strategy. This was the *Arthashastra*, written for the guidance of kings and rulers, by Kautilya, the Prime Minister of the Mauryan Empire. As a guide for strategic leaders, it is a remarkable document rooted in realistic or practical considerations, or *realpolitik*, as opposed to idealistic notions. Ancient Indians were, thus, masters of strategy as well as the nuances of statecraft. In fact, a well developed and sophisticated politico-military philosophy was available to the strategic leaders of those times. But something obviously changed subsequently.

There is a theory that in the early part of the first millennium, India's socio-cultural milieu underwent progressive transformation by movements, which propagated spiritualism, asceticism and *ahimsa* (non-violence). Strategic awareness and pragmatism was, thus, superseded by excessive religiosity and spiritualism; overseas travel being declared taboo by Hindu orthodoxy was just one manifestation.

India, thus, stagnated intellectually and lost strategic focus; a situation that prevails till date. Ironically, a direct result of this was the long era of domination by foreign invaders that India underwent, which further eroded self-respect and engendered a deep sense of diffidence and timidity.

Post-independence Scenario

At independence, three main factors influenced India's policies and stance. Firstly, as an economically poor and militarily weak nation state, it was not confident of safeguarding its security interests. Secondly, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of *ahimsa* and passive resistance was more successful in the freedom struggle than the endeavours of people like Subhash Bose, who had raised Armed Forces, both in Europe and in Asia, to wage war against the British Empire. Lastly, there was a strong urge to keep the Armed Forces at a distance and out of the policy-making loop, since they were perceived, rather erroneously, as instruments of colonial oppression.

The leadership of newly independent India decided to adopt a lofty moral posture and pursued policies like non-alignment, universal disarmament, and Panchsheel. This was perhaps a pragmatic attempt by Jawaharlal Nehru to insulate the country from intervention and buy some time for developmental processes to take root. However, in his idealism, he completely overlooked the important role of military strength as a component of comprehensive national power. Consequently, by adopting a cautious and timid approach, India encouraged its neighbours to take unwarranted liberties.

Crisis situations are the crucibles for testing leadership and India has faced many in the past 62 years. In few of our predicaments or crisis situations (save the 1971 conflict), up to and including the Mumbai terror strikes on November 26, 2008 we have demonstrated clarity of strategic vision, coherent thought processes and resolute action. These are the lacunae that have earned India the tag of being a 'soft state'. Such attributes send wrong signals to our neighbours and can by themselves be a provocation for aggressive acts on their part.

India's Nuclear Programme

Apart from their intrinsic import, Mr. Santhanam's utterances also draw attention to a familiar lack of institutional coherence, consistency and accountability. Here, the genesis and evolution of our nuclear programme is relevant and bears brief examination.

India's nuclear programme was born from the vision of Dr. Homi Bhabha, who as far back as 1945 acquired funds to establish the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Mumbai. In 1946, the Indian Atomic Energy Commission was formed under Bhabha's chairmanship and it was sanctified two years later by an Act of Parliament, which shrouded all its activities in a dense cloak of secrecy. In those early years, no field of science appeared more promising and prestigious than atomic energy.

Fortuitously for India, Dr. Bhabha and Nehru had much in common as far as their Westernised background and outlook were concerned, and the two evolved a synergistic vision for India's nuclear plans. Both felt that the British had retarded India's industrial development and the fastest way to catch up with the world and, at the same time, ensure India's progress, was to produce cheap electricity from nuclear reactors. However, there are many indicators that show that the possibility of India producing nuclear weaponry was never far from the minds of both Dr. Bhabha and Nehru.

While Nehru was statesman enough to recognise that nuclear weapons would give India the standing that it yearned for in a Western-dominated world, his moralistic abhorrence of nuclear weaponry was a major constraining factor. He, therefore, deliberately chose an ambivalent stance, one that has endured to this day.

Dr. Bhabha, as a dedicated scientist, was not bound by any such belief or posture, and clear-headedly drove independent India's nuclear policies. He set about implementing his vision of a three-stage breeder reactor project, which included plutonium; an ingredient vital for a weapons programme. In fact, by 1964, India's first plutonium separation facility had become operational in Trombay. Subsequently, other elements of the programme were put in place. Having made a sound and early start, where did we then go wrong?

The Policy-makers

India's moral and cultural aversion to nuclear weapons, coupled with domestic preoccupations and economic stringency, can be blamed only in part for the indecision that has marked our halting progress in the nuclear arena. In the post-independence era, the high political stakes and sustained intensity of electoral politics of our evolving democracy obviously did not permit the political leadership to devote adequate time and attention to issues and policy-making related to national security.

The question that arises, then is: if it was not the political leadership, then who took the strategic policy decisions and guided the country's nuclear and missile

programmes, which have involved an expenditure running into thousands of crores and which have had a crucial bearing on our survival as a national entity? This is an interesting issue, one that has been dealt with comprehensively in an authoritative account by the American analyst and author George Perkovich.

According to him, in early October 1964, Dr. Bhabha announced that India had the scientific knowhow to explode an atom bomb within 18 months of a decision being taken to do so. A week later, when the Chinese undertook their nuclear test, on October 16, Dr. Bhabha spelled out the advantages of nuclear weapons in an address on All India Radio. He is then reported to have said that:

> "*(they) gave a state possessing them a deterrent power against attack from a much stronger state*".

He went on to quantify the costs involved, stating that a 10 kt 'explosion' would cost Rs. 17.5 lakh, while the cost of a 2 megaton 'explosion' would be Rs. 30 lakh, and a stockpile of 50 atom bombs would cost Rs. 10 crore.

That Dr. Bhabha proved to be well off the mark, in both his time and cost estimation of a nuclear capability is not really relevant. What must be noted is that for reasons, which may have been largely technological, he strongly advocated exploration of the nuclear weapon option; influencing not just the nascent Indian scientific community, but also the country's political leadership. Our politicians, constrained as they were by the nation's post-independence moral posture, may have expressed disagreement in public, but could not entirely ignore the advice, or resist the consistent pressure from the scientific lobby.

This created the paradigm that India's political leadership is seen following today. The task of charting the nation's path in nuclear and missile technology has been entrusted to the scientific enclave (consisting of DAE and DRDO scientists) while Indian statesmen maintain the high moral stance associated with universal nuclear disarmament. As a result, significant decisions, involving considerable expenditure, leading eventually to the evolution of a nuclear deterrent and a missile force have been taken on the exclusive advice of the scientific enclave. The Armed Forces have not been asked to take part in the process.

Here, it must be stated that while nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) protection are part of many military curriculums, the Indian Armed Forces, as an institution, have

not been exposing their officer corps to the nuances of either nuclear deterrence or nuclear war fighting.

This isolation, whether intentional or inadvertent, has been so complete that the Armed Forces have never been tasked to undertake an environmental assessment, a threat analysis or a strategic prognosis to assist crucial decision-making, warranted by, *inter alia*, the following seminal events:

- China's nuclear explosion in 1964;
- The prelude or aftermath of India's nuclear explosion at Pokharan in 1974 (Pokharan I);
- During the period of over a decade that Pakistan was known to be racing towards attainment of a clandestine nuclear capability;
- When the full scope of China's clandestine support to the Pakistani nuclear weapons or missile programme became known; and
- In the period leading up to, or after nuclear explosions at Pokharan on May 11, 1998 (Pokharan II).

There is considerable speculation on this issue in published literature. Some justify this segregation on the grounds that given the modest arsenal that our situation required and the minimalist attitude of India's polity, any association of the Armed Forces with the nuclear programme could result in demands for a large nuclear arsenal, resulting in a sub-continental arms race.

Whatever the veracity of this theory, a related incongruity that emerges is that no staff qualitative requirements (SQRs) have ever been asked for by the government nor written by the SHQ for strategic missiles and nuclear warheads to be deployed by the Armed Forces. In the absence of such SQRs, or even a dialogue with the end users, scientists and engineers have worked in what may be termed a 'strategic vacuum', and delivered what was best in their judgement, with many adverse or skewed consequences.

Lack of Independent Advice

A situation wherein the nation's nuclear weapon programme is largely conceptualised, controlled and operated by civilians may have been understandable when we were in an evolutionary era of testing or technology demonstration. But a decade after Pokharan II, such an arrangement loses its validity in the context of a nuclear weapon state with

a growing arsenal. While the nation can fervently hope that it will never be faced with a nuclear conflict, it is courting disaster to keep the Armed Forces isolated during peacetime from the systems and weapons, which they may have to deploy at extremely short notice.

India's unique policy of continued separation of the military from nuclear policy and decision-making is internationally an open secret. This issue not only receives frequent media attention and is analysed at great length, but it also invites incredulous comment and speculation, all of which serve to erode the credibility of its nuclear deterrent.

In the Indian system of governance, the Prime Minister holds all the levers of authority. With portfolios like atomic energy and space being the essence of national power, these traditionally remained in the PM's personal charge. Since the head of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) works very closely with the Prime Minister, the incumbent has traditionally tended to exert extraordinary influence on nuclear policies and decision-making. However, there is no institutional provision to provide for any checks and balances or for the Prime Minister to receive independent advice on any issue; nor does he probably have the time for such exploration. This has remained more or less unchanged since independence and the Santhanam controversy should induce us to cast our mind back over the events of the past decade.

Deterrence Credibility

Deterrence certainly lies in the mind of an opponent, and unless the potential adversary is thoroughly convinced of its credibility (in all its aspects), there is a very real danger of 'deterrence breakdown', an issue, of which we have not yet taken full cognisance. The deafening silence that followed Pokharan I exposes the total lack of military, political or technological strategy that guided India's subsequent actions in the arena of nuclear weapon development.

Equally unfathomable has been the logic and timing of Pokharan II, as well as some of the actions that followed. Having voluntarily and gratuitously declared (without consulting a single military person), a 'moratorium on testing' and offered a 'no first-use' guarantee within days of the 1998 tests, the Indian nuclear doctrine then bravely threatened to inflict 'unacceptable damage' on the originator of a first strike. Here, Santhanam's sceptical views have a significant bearing on the existing and future India-China-Pakistan nuclear equation.

India's claims, with regard to the performance of the nuclear devices tested, both during the 1974 test, as well as during the multiple tests carried out in 1998 have been vigorously disputed by sections of the international scientific community, and these arguments have often received support from within India. Without entering into complex details, the crux of the arguments that dispute Indian claims can be summarised as follows:

- That the yield of the 1974 explosion was significantly lower than the claimed 12-13 kt, due to a sub-optimal nuclear implosion; and
- While Western scientists accept that the 15 kt fission device detonated successfully many have divergent interpretations of the seismic data generated on May 11, 1998. As a result, they insist that the fusion-boosted fission trigger failed to ignite the fuel in the secondary, because of which the 43 kt thermonuclear test was unsuccessful.

In hindsight, Western critique of the 1974 test has served to cast doubts not only on that event but also on the 1998 tests in the analysis of which seismic data from the previous test was used as a comparative baseline. Thus, if the 1974 claims were erroneous, by inference, so were the 1998 ones. Indian scientists have decried this criticism as motivated attempts to belittle their significant achievements through a disinformation campaign. They are possibly right, and Dr. R. Chidambaram himself published a scientific paper in *Indian Nuclear Society News* of December 2006, which logically sets forth various data of the 1998 tests to validate Indian claims.

Nevertheless, it is regrettably true that this controversy did plant the seeds of doubt in the minds of Indians as well as our potential adversaries regarding the validity of the 1998 nuclear tests. Santhanam has, for reasons unknown, now revived all the old ghosts. The dogged assertion by our scientists that data generated by just three (simultaneous) hot tests is sufficient has added to the prevailing scepticism, especially when viewed against the history of 1,050 tests carried out by the US, 750 by the erstwhile Soviet Union and 45 by China.

The set of nuclear tests undertaken by China as late as July 1996 were understood to be an indicator of their modernisation programme seeking more accurate missiles and smaller warheads with better yield to weight ratios. If nuclear weapons are indeed "an integral part of India's national security", as asserted by our permanent representative

in the United Nations as recently as on September 23, 2009, it appears inevitable that at some point in the not too distant future, the need will arise for Indian scientists to validate new warhead designs; especially those to be used for underwater launch by our newly launched nuclear submarine, *Arihant*.

Conclusion

By their ingenuity and intellectual skills, India's scientists have scaled tremendous technological heights in the past 62 years and given the nation a great deal to be proud of. However, despite the best possible intentions and the most patriotic motives, it is possible for some members of the scientific community to go off track in their enthusiasm and divert considerable resources to scientific pursuits with uncertain benefits to national security. The only way to guard against this is to ensure that decision-making regarding major scientific initiatives takes place under close political guidance with military advice.

In the paradigm that India has chosen to follow, the scientific lobby enjoys unique and unfettered access to political authority. Unlike any other matter of national importance, where the Cabinet Committee on Security exercises ultimate authority, issues and proposals emanating from this enclave are dealt with directly by the Prime Minister, perhaps in consultation with one or two trusted bureaucrats or diplomats. This kind of structure makes it virtually impossible for any questioning of overstated scientific claims, or review and oversight of strategic policies and their implementation.

We have managed in this fashion since independence, and history will sum up the enormous price that we may have paid for this personalised style of functioning. Now that we aspire to be a major power, it is essential that we create institutions for oversight of technological endeavours and introduce institutional checks and balances which will help us take major decisions in a rational and logical manner.