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Commentary *Praful Bidwai*

# The Consequences of Going Nuclear

An interview with Praful Bidwai

*Praful Bidwai is a highly regarded journalist who lives in New Delhi. Analytical acumen and lucidity mark his articles in leading Indian journals and newspapers. Siddhartha, a writer and activist, based in Bangalore recently interviewed him about the implications of the Indian nuclear tests.*

**Siddhartha:** Praful, a few weeks after the nuclear detonations the country's mood has gone sombre. Many are left wondering if we have gained anything at all from the tests.

**Praful:** We haven't gained anything; we have lost a lot. To put it negatively, we have gained disrespect and notoriety. What we have actually lost is a great deal. First, we have lost our security. We have degraded our security *vis-à-vis* our neighbours — in particular Pakistan and China — in a very serious way. For instance, we risk a nuclear arms race not just with Pakistan but, more importantly, with China. China has not treated us so far as a nuclear adversary, and our trade relation with China had

improved considerably with two agreements in 1991 and 1996 establishing a great deal of economic co-operation. For instance, our trade with China increased thirty per cent last year and we have working groups dealing with issues such as demobilization, weapons reduction across the border and so on. Now all that will be lost.

China is economically three times bigger than India and has a much more stable economic growth rate. As a missile and nuclear power, it is thirty years ahead of India. To get into a nuclear competition with China would be strategically disastrous and would ruin India economically.

**Siddhartha:** Getting into competition with Pakistan would be equally disastrous, wouldn't it?

**Praful:** Absolutely! The risk of a Pakistan-India nuclear confrontation is very high. I think we must realize that India and Pakistan are closer today to the possibility of a nuclear confrontation and a nuclear exchange than the Warsaw Pact and NATO were at any time during the Cold War, barring perhaps the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. This is a grim situation. Any number of issues could turn into a flash point, such as Kashmir or border exercises. There is so much war mongering on both sides. There is a history of miscalculation with Pakistan and India, which is why we had the terrible 1965 war. These things lead to a very serious possibility of a nuclear attack.

**Siddhartha:** The possibility of nuclear attack could get greatly enlarged because of political and domestic issues in both countries.

**Praful:** Yes, and a weak and unpopular government could be tempted to use nuclear weapons to start a war as a means to achieve popularity or win the coming elections. In addition to that, there is the possibility of an accident or a panic nuclear attack. Between the two great blocs during the Cold War, on at least one hundred occasions serious false alarms were sounded and emergency procedures triggered off. There was a misreading of intentions, a breakdown of communication links and protocol, and all this happened in spite of scores of confidence-building measures, hot lines, early warning systems and a great deal of transparency. We do not have the same opportunity to prevent conflict escalating. At the height of the Cold War the lag time between a missile leaving the border and hitting the target between either of the two blocs was at least thirty minutes.

**Siddhartha:** What is the lag time between India and Pakistan?

**Praful:** In the case of India, it is down to just three minutes. Within three minutes you can do nothing to prevent conflict. You will act in a knee-jerk way. A general sitting in New Delhi, when told of the launch of a missile by Pakistan, will take retaliatory action. He will not know what the missile has in its nose cone, a nuclear weapon or a conventional warhead. So there could be a knee-jerk response leading to the destruction of whole cities and hundreds of thousands of people. Calculations show that a simple, crude Hiroshima-type bomb dropped over Bombay would lead to eight million early deaths and much more devastation later, over a period of time. In a nuclear attack the survivors would envy the dead, such would be the effects.

To put it very simply, before the 11 May, India had decisive conventional superiority over Pakistan in the order of three to one. Today Pakistan, by going nuclear in response to India, has become an equalizer. All we have achieved is that we have reduced ourselves to being the equal of a country one-seventh our size.

Besides the security implications, look at what this has done to us in the international community. India's reputation is mud. It has never received the kind of reprimand from the Security Council it did recently. India has to face sanctions and it has had no friends — only Iraq's Saddam Hussien has come to India's rescue. No other country has approved of India's action. Our voice, which used to be taken seriously in the United Nations, is not trusted anymore. If there were a vote today in the UN General Assembly, India would not be able to win the support of more than ten countries on any issue. Ten out of the world's 185 countries.

**Siddhartha:** The tests have succeeded in internationalizing the Kashmir issue, have they not?

**Praful:** Effectively, Kashmir has been internationalized and we are going to be under increasing pressure from the various international forums like the United Nations, individual states, the Arab states and Pakistan to show progress in bilateral discussions on Kashmir. I think the pressure on us is going to be very very strong.

**Siddhartha:** What are the likely effects of the economic sanctions against India?

**Praful:** The impact of the sanctions is going to be serious. There are three kinds of costs that we need to talk about. Direct costs in terms of aid being cut-off, especially programs like education, health, social security, employment-generation, water supply and so on. The poor will suffer most as a result. The second effect is in

terms of holding back multilateral loans. The third and most important effect is going to be the loss of investor confidence, which is already in evidence: the fall in the value of the rupee, which is down to forty-three against the US dollar. If capital starts pulling out of the country, which is very likely, the Indian economy will not be able to bear the shock. We are going to have an increase in inflation, which could result in a very serious crisis indeed. To contain the crisis, the government is tempted to restrict monetary expansion and credit. As a result growth will further slow, leading to high inflation and serious problems.

**Siddhartha:** Isn't this likely to hike up defence expenditure considerably in relation to development expenditure?

**Praful:** The government is spending twice as much on defence as it is on education, health, social security, unemployment and other essential services. This is completely unacceptable. The real priority for India is to get out of the club of the ten most backward countries, rather than to join the club of the five advanced nuclear countries.

Nuclear weapons, contrary to what the hawks say, are very costly. It takes a lot to make them and to create the control, command and communications and intelligence structure that is necessary to maintain and deploy them. These alone account for more than half the cost of the nuclear weapons program.

Let us look at some of the costs. Contrary to what is being asserted by the hawks, a 1985 defence ministry study shows that the cost of creating a small, so-called nuclear deterrent, is in the order of 7,000 crores (US\$ 1.75 billion) in 1985 prices, which would translate roughly today to 20,000 crores (5 billion US\$), including the import component. Twenty thousand crores represents half our defence budget today. Even if it were spread over three years, we would be talking about a twenty per cent increase every year in the defence budget just to create that so-called nuclear deterrent of ten to twenty crude nuclear weapons. Can we afford this?

Our defence budget is already too high. But all this assumes that there is no arms race. Now that is not in India's hands. What if Pakistan builds threatening kinds of missiles; what if they are nucleated; what if China revives some of the programs it suspended? Then we may have to respond to an arms race and that would totally ruin us. This is exactly what happened to the Soviet Union. It collapsed under the burden of its military expenditure.

**Siddhartha:** What is the way out now?

**Praful:** I think we have to return to the path of sanity, and that means that the government should admit to the people that what

we did on 11 and 13 May was a horrible mistake, that it was a departure on all past policies. Second, and very importantly, there must be no further tests. Never again. There must be permanent abstinence from nuclear testing and from related preparations, including missile development. Third, I think we have to make a unilateral declaration that India will never use nuclear weapons, irrespective of circumstances. In doing this, India will then be able to instil confidence among the people and the government of Pakistan. It is not good enough to talk about No First Use. We have to go beyond this and say that nuclear weapons shall never be used. Nuclear weapons are not legitimate weapons of war. They are weapons of mass destruction and should not exist in the civilized world. Their existence and acquisition does not give any security to any state.

I think it is very important for India to take this initiative and then propose bilateral discussions with the government of Pakistan and move in that direction. We should return to the disarmament agenda internationally as well as reach bilateral agreements for nuclear restraints.

Today Pakistan is unlikely to be reassured of India's intentions merely by the No First Use agreement. There is a resistance to such a demand in Pakistan for the simple reason that the military establishment thinks that will compromise Pakistani security given the enormous superiority that India has in the non-nuclear, which is to say the conventional, sphere.

**Siddhartha:** There is a general feeling that the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) is a discriminatory treaty which by and large favours the P-5 members. What are your feelings about this?

**Praful:** This is not correct. There are a lot of misconceptions about the CTBT. It is usually equated with the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and called discriminatory, a trap, a conspiracy and so on, and this is not correct. Unlike the NPT, which makes a distinction between the nuclear weapons states and non-nuclear states, the CTBT makes no such distinction. Secondly, it — unlike the NPT — imposes equal obligations. The NPT obligations on non-nuclear states are much more severe than on nuclear weapons states. In the CTBT, obligations are equal upon all states and it is quite severe and strict, and the obligations are verifiable kinds of obligations. All those states that have the temptation to carry out nuclear tests are prevented from doing so through a strict system of monitoring which respects their sovereignty.

I believe that a lot of misinformation and illiteracy regarding the CTBT was promoted by the hawks who wanted to conduct tests and wanted to put India on the nuclear path, not because they wanted a more comprehensive treaty. The CTBT prohibits nuclear

test explosions and this is adequate in the sense that scientists agree that non-explosive testing or sub-critical testing and computer simulation can give you a few ideas about nuclear weapons design, although you cannot actually make those designs. There has been a debate in the international scientific community and this is the conclusion they have come to, but there has been no such debate in the Indian scientific community.

Another criticism of the CTBT is that it is not a disarmament measure. I think this is in some sense a valid criticism: it is not meant to lead to immediate elimination of all nuclear weapons. But it was never meant to. When Nehru proposed it in 1954 it was meant to be a measure to prevent further nuclear development, whether by new states or those already possessing nuclear weapons. And the idea was that we had to have a nuclear restraint measure that created the conditions for further measures in a step-by-step process. Now, complete elimination of nuclear weapons is desirable, although I can't have that this afternoon. More realistically and reasonably, this will happen only step by step, and in this process the CTBT is an important step and an effective process.

It is a politically effective step too. You think the Republican Right in the United States is opposed to the CTBT because it is a third-rate facade? Or does it oppose it because it is an effective restraint measure that is going to cripple US weapons laboratories, stop them from developing new designs? Of course it knows it is an effective restraint measure. It is very important to put this in perspective and recognize that this is a treaty that could be improved upon, but India lost the chance in 1996 to improve upon it. India took a completely sanctimonious and fraudulent stand in opposing the treaty and lost the chance to tighten some of its provisions. At any rate it is a good treaty and not a discriminatory one. It is not necessarily a perfect one. It is not going to lead automatically to disarmament. But India should in a dignified fashion say, 'Yes, we will sign it and we want everybody to sign it', and then engage in serious negotiations to bring about the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. Some modified version of a plan that Rajiv Gandhi himself submitted to the United Nations. I think that is where the real return to sanity and the way forward lies.