

India's position on nuclear weapons

It was over 54 years ago on July 16, 1945 that the US conducted the first nuclear weapon test. Shortly thereafter, it field-tested nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945 respectively to demonstrate to the world the destructive potential of the newly acquired weapon. The two Japanese cities were almost instantaneously destroyed, brutally killing more than 3,40,000 innocent men, women, and children (some of the victims succumbing to their injuries after many years of agonising existence). Hundreds of thousands of others who managed to survive the ordeal too had a harrowing experience.

The USSR carried out its first atomic test on August 29, 1949. In order to regain the advantage, the US on January 31, 1950 vowed to produce hydrogen bombs that would be a thousand times more powerful than atomic bombs. Following the US test of a hydrogen bomb the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru called for immediate suspension of all nuclear weapon tests in parliament on April 2, 1954. Jawaharlal Nehru was the first statesman to draw the attention of the world to the problem.

Responding favourably to Prime Minister Nehru's call for a 'standstill' agreement on nuclear weapon testing, the USSR on May 10, 1954 came up with a proposal for a nuclear test ban as the initial step toward nuclear disarmament. But the US was not amenable to the proposal. Therefore, again on July 12, 1956, India placed before the UN Disarmament Commission yet another proposal for 'Cessation of All Explosions of Nuclear and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction'.

India was among the first countries to propose a treaty for a comprehensive test ban. It was also the first nation to propose a nuclear non-proliferation treaty. But when the treaties took their final form, crucial clauses that India had proposed had been deleted from them, making the treaties discriminatory and redundant. India was left with no option but to consistently oppose these treaties in their present form. But by claiming that it was difficult to evolve a foolproof verification system, the US came up with the proposal of a Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT).

The decision to propose a PTBT was a calculated move by the US to sabotage the prospect of having to sign a CTBT, negotiations for which had reached an advanced stage at that time. The signing of the PTBT, which permitted underground tests while banning atmospheric, outer space and underwater tests not only succeeded in disrupting the peace movement but also misled the world into believing that it was a significant step in the direction of nuclear disarmament.

Many people are unaware that it was India that first introduced the proposals which led to the NPT and CTBT. Subsequently India refused to become a party to either of them because of the gross changes in the original drafts at the instance of the US, which qualitatively overturned the intent and purpose of these proposals.

Hence the CTBT a treaty to end all tests which was to serve as an initial step in nuclear disarmament, first ended up as a partial test ban treaty (PTBT) and left the door open for unbridled underground tests and remained de-linked from the issue of nuclear disarmament. Some 30 years later, the CTBT was resurrected, but just as before, it has ended up being yet another version of the PTBT and totally divorced from the issue of nuclear disarmament. The present CTBT has several peculiar features which give evidence of US double standards on disarmament issues.

India also had not only supported a no-first-use pledge but it had also vociferously pleaded for taking all steps for prevention of nuclear war.

One of the proposals made by the government of India as early as July 12, 1956 before the Disarmament Commission of the UN was on 'Cessation of All Explosions of Nuclear and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction'. Even at that time, the government of India had further proposed that the following initial steps in nuclear disarmament be taken: (1) Prohibition of the further use of fissionable material for military purposes [which would have amounted to a freeze on production of fissile materials for military use and a freeze on production of nuclear weapons]; (2) Prohibition of the transfer of fissionable material from civilian to military stocks; (3) Non-export or conveying of nuclear weapons to other countries by those countries manufacturing such weapons; etc.

Despite India's firm opposition, the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which was debated in the 18-Nation Disarmament Committee, was adopted on July 1, 1968. In protest

against the US proposals, India took a principled stand not to sign the dubious treaty that bound only the nonnuclear weapons states under the NPT. Under the discriminatory NPT, the nuclear weapon powers had no obligations to fulfil nuclear disarmament for them was to merely remain a distant dream. It was as though the nuclear threat to the world came from the non-nuclear weapon states and not from the nuclear weapon powers.

After the 1998 nuclear tests, the reaction of the international community was one of shock and condemnation. Reprimands and sanctions followed from individual countries including the US, Australia, Canada and Japan, as well as institutionalized groupings such as the G8, the EU and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The tests also led Pakistan to retaliate with its own series of tests.

India's claim to the status of a nuclear weapons state was not legitimized; indeed, far from winning an invitation to a permanent seat in the Security Council, it came close to being labelled a pariah state. Thus, in their immediate aftermath at least, the tests seemed to have brought few gains and considerable costs to the country. And yet India's show of defiance continued. Resolution I I72 of the Security Council condemned the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests and urged the two countries to sign the NPT and CTBT 'without delay and without conditions'. To date, neither has done so.

It is certainly true that something in the Indian negotiating style has changed. For instance, India justified its refusal to sign the CTBT in 1996 not by appealing to the usual arguments about 'nuclear apartheid' but by referring to 'national security considerations'. Even though it still refused to sign the NPT or the CTBT after the 1998 tests, it sent an important signal to the international community by taking on a no-first-use commitment. Rather than resort to the usual defiance, India launched diplomatic initiatives at several levels (including the non-resident Indian community in the US) to convince the West that it was going to be a responsible nuclear power.

In 2005 Prime Minister ManMohan Singh has surprised the world by entering into a nuclear cooperation agreement with President George W Bush, which legitimised India's acceptance by the US as a 'responsible' de facto nuclear weapons-state (NWS) and Washington's promise of resumption of civilian nuclear commerce. However in this deal it was also stated that India must take several steps including "identifying and separating civilian and military

nuclear facilities”; declaring “civilian facilities to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)”, “voluntarily” placing them under its inspections; continuing the nuclear-testing moratorium; and “working with the US” for a “Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty”.

One needs to note that the US civilian nuclear facilities are operated by private or municipal utilities. But it has placed only a handful of its 100- odd reactors under IAEA safeguards. The IAEA rarely inspects these, citing shortage of funds/manpower. The safeguards regime has always been unequal and based on the assumption that the five Nuclear Weapon States have the ‘right’ to divert materials to military uses because they are, so to speak, ‘legitimate’ possessors of nuclear weapons. Through this deal India agreed to “adjust US laws and policies” and “work with friends and allies to adjust international regimes” to enable full civil nuclear transactions are intangible or dubious.

Days after the Washington deal was signed, a committee of the House of Representatives resolved to block nuclear technology transfer to India a calculated signal opposing it. In the NSG too, the agreement was opposed by states like Brazil, South Africa and Argentina (which renounced their nuclear capability in the 1980s), and possibly by China, Germany and Japan. There was thus no assurance that Bush’s promise to ‘adjust’ domestic and international arrangements to facilitate nuclear commerce with India will materialise. In any case, the US is an inappropriate nuclear source for India. India’s main reactor technology (CANDU) uses natural uranium. The US only makes enriched-uranium reactors.

India’s experience with nuclear power has been, to put it mildly, unhappy. India sinks thousands of crores every year into nuclear power development. Yet, nuclear power contributes less than 3 per cent to electricity generation. The Department of Atomic Energy is one of the worst performing departments of the government, with a history of missed targets, grotesque cost overruns, gross mismanagement, lack of coordination between different programmes (e g, heavy water and uranium production), and an appalling safety and occupational health record. India’s nuclear reactors are among the most contaminated atomic plants in the world. They have exposed hundreds of workers to radiation in excess of DAE stipulated maximum permissible doses. Unsafe practices in plant operation and maintenance and storage and transportation of hazardous materials, are rampant in the DAE.

Popular opposition to nuclear power has also steadily grown, forcing the DAE to locate new plants at old sites. Protests against uranium mining projects in Meghalaya and Andhra Pradesh are the main reason why the DAE cannot procure enough uranium to charge its

reactors under construction. The DAE has avoided scrutiny of its activities by shielding itself behind the Atomic Energy Act, 1962 which empowers it to suppress any information. In India, wind generation (3,600 MW) has already overtaken nuclear power capacity (3,300 MW). Wind's potential is estimated at 70,000 MW-plus 10 times higher than nuclear electricity with indigenous uranium reserves.

Hence India should develop clean ways to harness nuclear energy, and should develop its independent nuclear policy without outside intimidation.