

Responsible Nuclear Behaviour and Kashmir

By

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'In the nuclear world, the true enemy is war itself', warned a nuclear submarine's second-in-command to his gung-ho captain, who was eager to pre-empt a nuclear war with Russia.

This sentence from the 1995 famous film 'Crimson Tide' holds a lesson in responsible behaviour for every hand that may itch to press the nuclear button. Responsible behaviour is not fiction; it is a real life requirement for all nuclear-armed states and is increasingly becoming an imperative for India.

Nuclear weapons are an immense source of power and leverage, which demand a requisite mindfulness on the part of nuclear weapon states (NWSs). The 1945 bombing of Japan ought to be enough an understanding for humanity to make use of nuclear weapons taboo. This lesson so far appears to be ingrained, as eight more states developed the much-enchanted elixir through the post-World War times. Not only have nuclear powers deterred their adversaries but quite paradoxically have been self-deterred because the probability of nuclear retaliation entirely rules out perceived advantages of coercion or nuclear use. However, 'nuclear war is inevitable unless we (collectively) make it impossible,' observed Sydney Harris, an erudite 20th century American journalist.

Among several other obligations for NWSs, a responsible posture calls for observing strategic restraint and shunning vertical proliferation. In 1962, the US and Russia (erstwhile Soviet Union) averted nuclear war by exercising mutual strategic restraint. Amongst several bilateral de-escalatory steps, Moscow withdrew nuclear capable missiles from Cuba and Washington withdrew similar short-range weapons from European soil.

In the wake of India's unilateral revocation of the special status of J&K and Ladakh, the nuclear question has once again brought the world on quite a similar verge of choice. The fact that both the obligations of strategic restraint and vertical non-proliferation have been almost absent in Indian strategic behaviour makes circumstances graver. In 2018, New Delhi undertook first deterrence patrol in the Arabian Sea, and deployed nuclear submarines and threatened a nuclear war during the February 2019 crisis in Kashmir.

In order to reflect a responsible posture as a nuclear-armed state, Indian behaviour over Kashmir dispute should have been rational and civilized. In such an arrangement, India would have ceased oppression; allowed a UN-sponsored plebiscite; let Kashmiris freely decide their future; and exercised restraint in its strategic behaviour. The current crisis can escalate to a nuclear catastrophe and it is a global compulsion to resolve the dispute.

At the peak of the cold war, both the US and Russia realized that the law of diminishing returns also applies to nuclear arsenals. Instead of vertically proliferating they thus chose to adopt comprehensive arms control measures, stabilize deterrence, and gain strategic stability. History has moved full circle and both Washington and Moscow are deconstructing the strategic stability they had painstakingly built since the 1960s.

In stark contrast, the Subcontinent is in nuclear peril, despite some bilateral arms control measures. For instance, both Islamabad and New Delhi have an agreement on not attacking their nuclear installations and they also pre-notify each other before conducting any long-range ballistic missile tests. That said, an essential component of arms control measures, their bilateral dialogue, has been dangerously frozen since 2008. Who should be blamed for this precarious situation? It is not difficult to judge who is upping the ante, as both Pakistan and India could be tested on the crucible of strategic restraint and vertical proliferation against the risk of nuclear war.

There is a history of wars and crises over Kashmir and since August 5, the risk of war has spiked. Unlike the European expanse as a battleground between the US and Russia, subcontinental powers sit eye-ball to eye-ball. Putin or Trump would have been close to three minutes to launch nuclear weapons, even though an ICBM would have taken up to 28 minutes to hit either capital. Khan and Modi wouldn't even get time to blink and will face the use-it or lose-it dilemma due to contiguous territories. Both leaders have this enormous responsibility to avert a war, save their peoples from annihilation, and resolve disputes sitting across the table. Diplomatic consultations are key conduits for ensuring peace.

Time is somewhat ripe for the two countries to take conscious steps towards peaceful co-existence. New Delhi blames Islamabad for abetting terrorism but a serving Indian navy officer was caught in Pakistan for steering acts of terrorism. Many other examples could be cited to substantiate that India has been running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. The least it can do is to accept that terrorism is a bilateral and even global challenge. As a matter of principle, both states can negotiate a treaty with verifiable measures to ensure that their soil and resources are not deliberately or inadvertently used for terrorism.

Revocation of the special status of J&K and Ladakh is an irresponsible act and perchance a shot in the foot. The infamous and erstwhile Articles 370 and 35-A of the Indian constitution gave a semblance of legality to its illegal occupation, which evaporated on August 5, 2019. Now the people of the occupied territory will be increasingly justified in resorting to all measures, including armed uprising that is enshrined in international law. New Delhi neither has legal locus standi nor any moral compass to govern Kashmiris. The only redemption would be to act responsibly, allow a plebiscite, and resolve other territorial disputes like Sir Creek.

India could reduce nuclear risk by exercising strategic restraint and shunning vertical proliferation. Instead, it has gone into overdrive. The fascist and Dr Strangelove mentality of the RSS is seeped into nuclear affairs as the radical outfit keeps crying red alert. While PM Khan was

diffusing the Kashmir crisis in February and offering peaceable resolutions, PM Modi was threatening to launch missiles and use nukes as firecrackers are used in Diwali. India is also reportedly developing hypersonic speed missiles, intercontinental ballistic missiles, lethal autonomous weapons, cyber weapons, nuclear-armed submarines, anti-ballistic missile defence, and anti-satellite weapons.

Responsible behaviour also calls for proportionality and minimalism. Some international estimates hold that New Delhi has fissile material to the equivalent of 2600 warheads. Even if these estimates were halved, India is the third largest nuclear power in the world and needs a big cache of fissile material for warheads to arm its huge variety of nuclear capable missiles and meet requirements of targeting armed forces and civil population in Pakistan, China, and other countries in its transglobal reach.

If Hitler were given even half of India's nuclear weapons, World War II would have been far more disastrous. Fascists of the 1940s pale in comparison to the Bhartiya Janata Party. The tiny influence that India's partners and allies have over the BJP must be put to test. It should be forced to act responsibly by establishing a strategic restraint regime with Pakistan, eschew vertical nuclear proliferation, and above all resolve disputes. PM Khan rightly pointed out that 'the world cannot ignore Kashmir, we are all in danger.'

The article was published by *The News International* on September 13, 2019, and is available at: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/525660-responsible-nuclear-behaviour-and-kashmir>.