

Nuclear proliferation a false threat?

by Ashok Kapur

During the 1980s the emergence of "Nuclear Weapons powers" in the "secondary conflict zones" of world politics — in South Asia, the Middle East, Southern Africa and South America — is unlikely. The strategic environment of the near-nuclear weapon powers on the short list — India, Pakistan, Israel, Iraq, South Africa, Argentina and Brazil (most of these are located in the secondary zones of conflict and in the Indian Ocean "arc of crisis") — will remain predictable and manageable for decision-makers in those countries. They will continue to assess the nuclear factor as one of several (along with coercion, economic and cultural diplomacy and controlled nuclearization) that shape regional and international power politics. As in the past, these states will remain on a "low proliferation curve" — defined as the acquisition of the capability to explode a bomb, but with no phasal or inevitable movement towards weaponry decisions. Such decisions will remain subject to domestic bureaucratic vetoes and debates. The potential military use of nuclear power will remain potential during the 1980s. Bomb-making, and threatened bomb-making (keeping capability in undemonstrated form), will remain useful as a diplomatic resource in a non-crisis situation and as a military resource in a "back-to-the-wall" crisis.

The practice of nuclear ambiguity will continue to remain the common feature in the nuclear diplomacy of the near-nuclear states on the short list noted above. Nuclear ambiguity will continue to serve diverse aims of near-nuclear states: to accommodate unsettled policy debates between pro-nuclear and anti-nuclear arms advocates (Israel, India and Pakistan); to facilitate a promise not to explode a nuclear device in return for a transfer of modern conventional armament (Pakistan vis-à-vis USA); to facilitate a promise not to explode a bomb in return for diplomatic and moral support (South Africa vis-à-vis USA after threatened Kalahari test); generally to induce caution, pause and re-thinking among regional and international rivals by presenting the danger of escalation (Israel vis-à-vis Arab world, India vis-à-vis Pakistan); and to boost domestic morale.

Future of anti-proliferation

Disinformation by practitioners of anti-proliferation policy and by practitioners of near-proliferation policy will continue in inter-governmental and non-governmental communications. The total truth about the motives of the practitioners, the intended consequences of their public utterances, and their secret plans will remain difficult to discern. Nuclear proliferation study will probably remain cast as a world order issue. The dominant approach in USA

and Canada will probably continue to be that of "proliferation control," expressed as an analytical, technological and legal issue.

The intimate relationship between strategy and culture of governments will probably remain neglected. University professors, who are not normally responsible to anyone, will (with some notable exceptions) continue to remain incurious about the inner workings of the near-nuclear states' decision apparatus. They will generally avoid the study of Third World nuclear questions in a competitive bureaucratic context. Western analysis of Third World proliferation will probably remain intolerant of ambiguity in strategic matters. Deliberate misinformation and voluntary misunderstanding (not ignorance) will remain allies in the anti-proliferation advocacy of the St. Georges who seek to slay the dragon of irresponsible, unstable and unreliable Third World states.

Some mid-course corrections will continue to be made but in fact one distorted framework will be replaced by another distorted framework. For instance, in recent Washington writings, the notion of the imminence, inevitability and *instability* of nuclear weapons proliferation in the Third World has been replaced by the notion of imminence, inevitability and possible/probable *stability* of nuclear weapons proliferation. Some writers have attempted to balance the persistently one-sided and hysterical discussion of the dangers of a proliferating world, and by implication of the virtues of North America the good and the responsible anti-proliferator. I too reject the notion of imminent and inevitable nuclear weapons proliferation. It is therefore useful to examine the nature of proliferation among the near-nuclears in the secondary conflict zones.

Nuclear proliferation latent

Imminent or inevitable nuclear weapons proliferation is in reality latent proliferation. The latter contains a number of barriers against proliferation, although each threshold can also be viewed as a step towards proliferation in select and definable circumstances. The barriers/steps are: first, achieving access and mastery over nuclear science; second, acquiring the nuclear infrastructure of equipment and materials to (a) make a single nuclear bomb and/or (b)

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