

INDIA & THE BOMB:

An arms race with Pakistan? By Sheldon Gordon



Since Indian scientists used plutonium from a Canadian-built reactor to set off a nuclear device in 1974, the

Indian subcontinent has been the scene of an undeclared nuclear arms race that could lead to overt deployment of nuclear weapons or even a preemptive attack on neighbouring nuclear facilities.

■ Despite Canadian qualms at the time, the Indian explosion of a so-called peaceful nuclear device in the Rajasthan desert did not raise the curtain on further nuclear tests, nor did it lead to the overt production or deployment of nuclear warheads by the Indian government. But, in the following decade, that prospect remained very real.

The late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi persisted in her refusal to make India a party to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty for the ostensible reason that the pact was discriminatory: it aimed to deny nuclear weapons only to those states which had not yet developed them.

India continued to expand its nuclear power production programme with the commissioning of new reactors. By some estimates, its nuclear reactors and reprocessing plants create sufficient plutonium for the production of 50 to 100 bombs a year. The 5,000 pounds of separable plutonium which India was estimated to have accumulated by 1984 would be adequate to build a nuclear armoury with the same number of weapons as that of Great Britain.

Moreover, the Indian armed forces have the means to deliver

nuclear weapons: nuclear-capable Canberra and Jaguar bombers are complemented by intermediate-range ballistic missiles, an achievement of India's space programme. But while these technical advances left no doubt as to India's nuclear capabilities, its intentions remained uncertain.

While it was New Delhi which initiated the nuclear rivalry on the subcontinent, the pace has been quickened by efforts in Islamabad to catch up. Pakistan, in recent years, covertly acquired and assembled the pieces for a uranium enrichment facility – a key element in a nuclear weapons programme – and its top atomic scientist boasted last year that the country had the capacity to produce a nuclear bomb if necessary.

The stealthy nuclearization of Pakistan would have alarmed India under any circumstances, but this development was particularly disturbing because it has cut across repeated – and unsuccessful – attempts in recent years to resolve other points of friction in their bilateral relations.

The scars inflicted by partition of the subcontinent, three Indo-Pakistani wars and the break-up of Pakistan itself have been all too resistant to conciliatory

diplomatic moves in recent years. Rival proposals for a no-war pact and a treaty of friendship have made no real headway. Periodic outbursts of rhetoric – and of artillery – over the disputed possession of Kashmir continue to foster mistrust between the two countries. In addition, India resents Pakistan's apparent readiness to provide sanctuary, arms and training for Sikh separatists who make repeated cross-border forays into India's turbulent Punjab state.

The tensions that result have been sufficient to cancel out the momentary bonhomie of Indo-Pakistani summits and the bilateral and regional steps to increase trade, transportation and other links. Suspicions are now so built-in that the mutual enmity feeds on itself. In that context, nuclearization becomes both a symptom and an additional spur to the tensions on the subcontinent.

Reports in the last two years that Pakistan was ready, if not necessarily set, to conduct a nuclear test have provoked controversy within India over how the 'superpower of South Asia' should respond to such an event. Because of the secrecy which surrounds matters of national security and the complexity which surrounds matters of nuclear science, the debate is limited to a relatively small number of politicians, military men, academics and journalists.

On one side of the debate is the country's military-industrial-scientific complex. Krishnaswamy Subrahmanyam, Director of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, is perhaps the most outspoken proponent of this pro-

nuclear school. A part-time adviser to the Ministry of Defence, Mr. Subrahmanyam claims to be an ardent opponent of nuclear arms who is forced by realism to favour India's possible acquisition of them.

"The pre-occupation with nuclear weapons is a cult, a totally irrational set of beliefs," he insists, "but once people are mad, you have to treat them according to their madness." He therefore favours a two-track approach for India: it should seek international disarmament, while at the same time developing its own nuclear arms so as to "establish its credibility" with the five declared nuclear weapons powers – the "nuclear dacoits." ["Dacoit" is derived from a Hindi word meaning 'gangster' or 'villain'.]

Subrahmanyam concedes that India has a lead over Pakistan in this regional nuclear arms race, but he insists that Pakistan is "more of a threat to India than the Warsaw Pact is to Canada." At first blush, this appears unlikely. An Indian arsenal that could menace Pakistan's major cities and nuclear installations would take no more than ten nuclear bombs, whereas for Pakistan to retaliate against India's major cities and military centres would require as many as a hundred bombs.

But if Islamabad's strategy were simply to knock out those Indian military concentrations which threatened its borders and to deter India from launching a counter-attack, it would need only a few bombs and the ability to convince India that it had an unspecified number in readiness