

DEEPENING INSECURITY

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For more than 100 years now, scientists and writers of science fiction alike have fostered the illusion that some day humankind will have a weapon so terrible that the fear of its impact will end war for all times. (Representational image) | Photo Credit: [Getty Images/iStockphoto](#)

After 'Mission Shakti' — India's anti-satellite test — there is a feeling that India needs this form of deterrence for its security. To be visibly strong in order to deter any enemy from attacking is a concern that goes back to pre-historic times. But when this ancient urge is exerted by nations with nuclear weapons, it must be an occasion to revisit the arms race, the Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) doctrine and their long-term implications.

The doctrine emerged during the Cold War in the mid-20th century when the U.S. and the erstwhile U.S.S.R. had stockpiled so many nuclear weapons that if launched, the weapons could destroy both nations many times over.

Since there was eventually a 'détente', or a relaxation of hostilities between the two, it is tempting to think that MAD is a valid doctrine that should continue to be applied by all countries with nuclear weapons capability. What is the basis of this belief? And does it actually work?

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Having invented dynamite and unleashed it upon the world in 1867, Alfred Nobel believed that "the day when two army corps can annihilate each other in one second, all civilized nations, it is to be hoped, will recoil from war and discharge their troops".

Since then incalculably more destructive weapons, including nuclear bombs and chemical weapons, have been deployed but this has not ended war. On the contrary, the invention of increasingly deadly weapons has fuelled a global arms race.

Globally, the annual spend on armaments is now estimated to stand at about \$1.7 trillion. Estimates of the total number of nuclear weapons in the world range from 15,000 to 20,000, with each one of these weapons being far more powerful than the bombs dropped by the U.S. on Japan in 1945. The U.S. and Russia still maintain about 1,800 nuclear weapons in a state of high alert, ready for launch within minutes.

According to the Global Peace Index, in 2017, the economic impact of violence globally was estimated at about \$14.76 trillion, which was 12.4% of global GDP. Since 2012, there has been a 16% increase in the economic impact of violence largely due to the conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is vital to note that having competing weapons, in terms of quality and quantity, has not acted as a deterrent either in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or in the Syrian war or the prolonged conflict in Colombia. What did finally end the conflict in Colombia, after almost 50 years, was a protracted process of negotiation between all parties of the conflict.

The Global Peace Index also shows that over the last 70 years the per capita GDP growth has been three times higher in more peaceful countries. This is partly why, compared to 10 years

ago, 102 nations are spending less on military as a percentage of their GDP.

But that is a thin silver lining to a grim reality. Ban Ki-moon, while he was UN Secretary General, said, in 2009, “The world is over-armed and peace is under-funded The end of the Cold War has led the world to expect a massive peace dividend. Yet, there are over 20,000 nuclear weapons around the world. Many of them are still on hair-trigger alert, threatening our own survival.”

According to the website of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the failure of the nuclear powers to disarm has heightened the risk that other countries will acquire nuclear weapons. In 2017, the ICAN was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Theoretically, MAD is supposed to eliminate the incentive for starting a conflict but it also makes disarming almost impossible. This is partly why, long after the Cold War ended, the U.S. is poised to spend enormous amounts of money over the next 10 years in updating and modernising its nuclear arsenal.

The tragic irony of this trend is that nuclear defence, particularly with warheads riding on rockets of supersonic speed, actually deepens insecurity in both countries by causing millions of lives to perpetually be at the risk of instantaneous annihilation.

All through the Cold War and even now, the MAD doctrine has been opposed on both moral and practical grounds by a variety of disarmament and peace groups. The most prominent of these, War Resisters' International (WRI), which will turn 100 in 2021, has 90 affiliated groups in 40 countries. Such groups ceaselessly serve as a counter to all those who glamorise or justify war or an arms race. Above all, they constantly draw attention to the fact that the only true security lies in dissolving enmity by going to the roots of any conflict.

Once the joy about India's technological achievements, in the realm of missiles, has settled down, perhaps attention can shift to the much bigger challenge of seeking answers to a key question: what really makes us, the world a whole, more secure?

Rajni Bakshi is the author of 'Bapu Kutii: Journeys in Rediscovery of Gandhi'

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