

The cost of deterrence

Earlier this month, India marked the 20th anniversary of the nuclear tests at Pokhran, which signalled its de facto status as the sixth nuclear power nation of the world. On May 28, 1998, just a fortnight after India's tests, Pakistan responded with a similar nuclear test, marking its emergence as a rival nuclear power to India.

On the occasion of this anniversary, while the development of South Asian nuclear capability has been analysed through the lens of India's quest for nuclear power, it is also important to consider how the balance of strategic nuclear power has evolved over the past two decades.

First, it is clear that Pakistan's assertion of nuclear parity and India's 'no first use policy' for its nuclear weapons provided Islamabad with the power of deterrence. 'Deterrence' in this context implies one side discouraging the other from undertaking an action by instilling a fear of disproportionate consequences. In the nuclear context, deterrence is a powerful force because of the overwhelmingly destructive nature of these weapons.

Pakistan's nuclear test in response to India was a case of the country deterring India from undertaking any major action, conventional or nuclear, against it, even if the situation demanded it. The December 2001 Parliament attack and the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks are two such instances where India's potential for military action seemed to have been deterred by Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. It is difficult to say what course of action India could have taken on both these occasions had the two neighbours remained non-nuclear power states. Being a responsible state which values the life of its citizens, India couldn't afford to risk a nuclear strike by Pakistan in the face of Indian escalation, especially as India likely believed Pakistan's intention of using its nuclear arsenals, including "theatre nukes". In this context, nuclear weapons programmes reduce the power gap between two unequal conventional weapon states. Under multiple game-theoretic scenarios, the deterrence effect of nuclear weapons makes nuclear war less likely.

However, there is also the issue of responsible use. Some argue that a less responsible nuclear state is likely to intimidate a more responsible one by threatening to use nuclear weapons against the latter without fearing its own annihilation, in the event of a massive retaliation. To a certain extent, the argument goes, this reflects the value of life imputed by the government of the smaller nuclear power to its people.

In building a nuclear arsenal, there is also the issue of cost, which, in the case of emerging countries such as India and Pakistan, is considerable. The past few decades of a nuclear South Asia have not only been a story of nuclear deterrence, but also of proliferation and an arms race that has consumed on a vast scale scarce resources that could arguably have been deployed for non-military, welfare purposes.

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