

view from india

Bottling the Nuclear Genie

Remaining outside the global Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, India takes the view that all countries, not just some, should get rid of nuclear arms and let “atoms for peace” flower.

by M.R. Srinivasan

President Eisenhower announced the “Atoms for Peace” plan in 1953 with the expectation that the world would find a way for using nuclear energy solely for peaceful purposes. The great military leader and statesman he was, he realized the inhuman consequences of using nuclear weapons in a future war.

In 1955, the United Nations held the first conference on the peaceful uses of atomic energy in Geneva, under the presidency of Homi Bhabha of India, the founder of India’s atomic energy programme. The United States, USSR, and United Kingdom released into the public domain information on nuclear energy development, which until then had been held as military secrets. In the follow up conferences in Geneva in 1958, 1964 and 1971, information on applications of nuclear energy for production of electric power, industrial, medical and agricultural uses and related research and development was declassified.

In the decade following the “Atoms for Peace” plan, the United States, USSR, United Kingdom, and Canada assisted other countries in building research reactors. India received help from the UK and Canada in building its first two research reactors, and its first two nuclear power stations were built by the United States and Canada. Simultaneously, the United States and USSR assisted other countries in building their early nuclear power units.

The Treaty Against Nuclear Weapons

In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States, USSR, and United Kingdom had been working on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and it opened for signature in 1968. The treaty effectively divided the world into two camps, one consisting of countries possessing nuclear weapons (the P-5, namely China, France, United Kingdom, United States, and the Russian Federation, then the USSR) and the other of the large number of countries not possessing them.



India’s Rajasthan Atomic Power Station, where the first unit went on line in 1972.

To be treated as a nuclear-weapon State under the NPT, a State should have conducted a test before 1 January 1967. From the time the treaty was negotiated, India held that it was discriminatory because it required States not possessing nuclear weapons on that date to give up their sovereign right to develop these weapons, without any binding obligation on the nuclear-weapon States to eliminate theirs.

At present, India, Pakistan and Israel have not acceded to the NPT. At various NPT review conferences, held at five-year intervals, the non-nuclear-weapon States have complained about the slow progress on nuclear disarmament. The P-5 have trotted out unconvincing reasons for this state of affairs.

Expectations & Realities

Along with negotiations on the NPT, discussions took place on setting up an international agency under the United

Nations. It would assist countries of the world in harnessing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and carry out inspection functions to ensure that any assistance received by a country from another was used exclusively for peaceful purposes and not diverted to developing any nuclear weapons or explosive devices. The IAEA was established in 1957 in Vienna.

India has been a member of the IAEA Board of Governors from its inception. The developing countries, as a group, have felt that, over the years, the IAEA has been more engaged in inspection activities than in promoting the peaceful uses of nuclear energy among its Member States. In the early years of nuclear energy development, it was the expectation that nuclear power would be a major source of elective power worldwide. However it now accounts only for about 17% and most of it is in industrially advanced countries. Among other countries, only South Korea, India, and China and Taiwan have continued to build nuclear power units.

Strong anti-nuclear sentiment in the advanced countries has effectively capped the nuclear capacity in them. This situation continues despite concerns on global warming, which should have spurred greater reliance on nuclear power. Many developing countries which are deficient in energy sources could use nuclear power to propel their economies, if the technology and investment capital were available.

Nuclear Policies & Prospects

What is the situation with regard to the spread of nuclear weapons during the last half century? The world witnessed a frightening build up of nuclear arsenals by the United States and Soviet Union. Only in recent times have they agreed to bring down their nuclear weapons to the range of 2200 to 2700, though no time frame for the reduction has been fixed. There does not appear to be any commitment to return the weapon-grade material irreversibly into the civilian domain.

China, which entered the P-5 nuclear club last, has been working on building up its nuclear and missile capabilities over the years. The United Kingdom and France have limited numbers of nuclear weapons. These three countries take the view that reduction of their arsenals could be considered only after the United States and Russia have reduced their arsenals substantially. India, Pakistan and the undeclared nuclear State, Israel, have modest numbers of nuclear weapons and can be expected to dismantle them only after the five nuclear weapon powers have significantly disarmed.

It may be recalled that India had its first nuclear test in 1974 and had restrained itself from overt weaponisation. Due to deterioration in its security environment in the 1990s, India went ahead with a test programme in 1998 and announced creation of a credible minimum deterrent. However, India



voluntarily announced a moratorium on further tests and a “no first use” policy. Unfortunately, many of the nuclear-weapon States are not prepared to accept a “no first use” restraint. Furthermore, India continues to champion universal nuclear disarmament.

In 1988, India had proposed to the United Nations Special Session on Disarmament a time bound programme of elimination of all nuclear weap-

ons from the world. While the timetable then suggested may have been unrealistic, the approach was a workable one. The then USSR welcomed the proposal but the United States rejected it outright.

Bottling the Nuclear Genie

It has become fashionable to argue that the nuclear genie is out of the bottle and cannot be put back. However, mankind must ask itself the question whether it would like to live in a world where nation-states possessing nuclear weapons, not infrequently, indulge in nuclear brinkmanship and where terrorist groups may get access to nuclear weapons and demand unacceptable terms from civil society.

In the decades following the Second World War, there was a greater urge towards a nuclear-weapon-free world. In recent times, there is weariness to talk about universal nuclear disarmament, dismissing this goal as utopian. Sadly some of the recent actions of the sole superpower, the United States, suggest that use of nuclear weapons is contemplated under certain circumstances. Development of new nuclear weapons with special features in being pursued. Recent events have shown that the United States can achieve its global agenda using its extremely sophisticated and formidable conventional military prowess.

It is therefore an opportune moment for the United States to once again recall Eisenhower’s call for “Atoms for Peace” and search seriously for ways and means to achieve quickly a nuclear-weapon-free world. Such a move will also catalyse using “Atoms for Peace” in activities which can benefit mankind by providing abundant energy and improving medical and industrial practices.

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