

## SINKING BILLIONS

**Praful Bidwai**

When Ms Gursharan Kaur, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's wife, broke a coconut on the hull of the INS Arihant amidst the chanting of Vedic verses, the Indian government took a step towards realising its post-1998 quest for a grand nuclear weapons power status.

When the submarine is commissioned in a few years, India will have a 'second-strike capability': Even if its land-or air-based nuclear weapons are destroyed/immobilised, India can still fire a nuclear-tipped missile at the adversary from the ship, which can stay underwater for months at a time and is therefore hard to detect.

The Arihant's launch has been called a great achievement of indigenous technology, which gives 'real teeth' to nuclear deterrence and enhances India's security without threatening others.

Dr Singh said: 'We do not have any aggressive designs, nor do we seek to threaten anyone...' But the rationale of nuclear deterrence is based on inducing terror through mass destruction weapons.

According to that doctrine, you prevent your enemy from nuking you by threatening 'unacceptable damage' through an attack which instantly kills hundreds of thousands or millions of civilians. Nuclear deterrence is a deeply flawed doctrine and was described for half-a-century by India as morally 'abhorrent' and strategically irrational.

However, what of the claim that the Arihant is an indigenous technological feat, which shows mastery of 'complex' skills of compacting the reactor which propels the submarine? In fact, the core of the Arihant technology lies in the reactor's design and construction. And that technology came from Russia. Scores of Russian engineers were sent to India to aid the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) and the Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO).

It was the Russians who supplied the vital designs, precision equipment based on their VM-5 reactor, and the technology of miniaturising the reactor.

At the launch, Dr Singh, Defence Minister A K Antony and Navy chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta all appreciatively mentioned Russia's 'cooperation' -- a euphemism for virtually building the reactor, fitting it with high-quality components and providing precision welding inputs.

Present at the function were 143 Russian engineers, designers and consultants who were crucial participants in the project. So much for the 'indigenous' technology claim.

In fact, the nuclear submarine project is a long story of failures on the part of the DAE and DRDO, two of the worst performing departments of the government, which have never completed a major project on schedule and without huge cost overruns such as 200 or 500 percent.

The submarine project was sanctioned in 1970 by Indira Gandhi. Then DAE secretary Raja Ramanna's original design of 1975 proved totally unviable and had

to be abandoned after about Rs 100 crores (or Rs 1 billion in today's terms) was spent on it.

The DAE learnt no lessons from this disaster. Indeed, when a critic with a reactor engineering doctorate, then navy Captain B K Subba Rao, voiced his doubts about its design, he was victimised. He was arrested on his way abroad for an academic conference and charged with espionage -- an accusation he successfully disproved after long periods in jail.

The project, codenamed Advanced Technology Vessel (ATV), was relaunched in 1975 under the DRDO, helped by the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Mumbai and the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research, Kalpakkam, and a large number of consultants in the public and private sectors.

This soaked up as much as Rs 2,500 crores (Rs 25 billion) in research and development (R&D) costs alone within two decades. But the project failed because the concerned agencies couldn't fabricate high-quality components and equipment.

In 1987-1988, India decided to try 'reverse engineering' by leasing from the USSR a Charlie-class nuclear submarine, renamed Chakra, for three years. This too yielded no worthwhile results in design or fabrication. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and the lease wasn't renewed.

Finally, in 1998, construction began on the submarine's hull. A basically Russian-designed compact pressurised-water reactor was eventually fitted into the hull after nine years.

Meanwhile, the cost meter kept ticking. India has so far spent a humongous Rs 30,000 crores (Rs 300 billion) on the ATV, with virtually no side benefits. This equals the entire budget of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act last year, which generated 45 million person days of employment. This makes nonsense of rational public-spending priorities.

But the government is planning to build 10 nuclear submarines. Work on two has already started. India has also negotiated the lease of yet another Russian submarine, a hunter-killer type, distinct from the Arihant, which is a ballistic-missile launcher. The lease will cost another Rs 350 crores (Rs 3.5 billion) -- although the Navy brass says it's not keen on the hunter submarine.

However, will the Arihant give India greater security via nuclear deterrence? Deterrence assumes that nuclear adversaries don't attack each other because they are fully aware of each other's nuclear doctrines, want to avert 'unacceptable damage' from retaliation, and hence will behave rationally at all times. Equally, it assumes there will be no strategic misperceptions or miscalculations, and no accidents whatever.

These assumptions don't hold in reality. During the Cold War, there were countless misperceptions and accidents with counter-strikes being averted at the last minute. Weather rockets were confused for missiles. Vessels carrying nuclear weapons collided with one another. The world was lucky that nukes weren't used. There were 20,000 false alerts which could have led to instant retaliation -- despite sophisticated command and control systems on which \$6 trillion were spent.

In the India-Pakistan case, no such sophisticated systems exist. There's a rich history of miscalculation from 1965, 1990, 1999 and 2001-2002 -- when war

almost broke out. Indeed, Kargil did happen -- a mid-sized military conflict with more than 40,000 troops. This falsified the deterrence premise that nuclear powers don't fight conventional wars.

Clearly, nuclear deterrence is too flawed and unstable a basis on which to build security. Even old warhorses like Robert McNamara, who recently died, came to that conclusion. India will go down that very slippery slope and court disaster while continuing to deprive half its population of minimum needs.

Yet there's no limit on how much we'll be asked to spend on the military in the name of the Holy Cow of 'security'. And India is only at the first stage of acquisition of a large arsenal of nuclear weapons and their delivery vehicles, including missiles, aircraft and ships of various description, along with the requisite command and control systems, and elaborate means to protect so-called nuclear assets, which inevitably become a liability.

Since the Pokharan II blasts of 1998, India's nuclear weapons pursuit is likely to lead to a runaway increase in arms spending -- over and above rising expenditure on conventional weapons. Since 1998, military spending has risen threefold in absolute terms, the highest such increase since Independence.

As India builds up its nuclear arsenal, its adversaries will also try to match it or retain their superiority.

The real danger is an uncontrolled arms race in which your adversaries, not you, become the decision maker.

Throughout the Cold War, India rightly warned against the degenerative and unstable nature of nuclear deterrence and a runaway arms race. It is repeating that historic folly on a continental scale—and possibly beyond, given India's (and China's) ambitious plans to build a blue-water navy, develop long-range inter-continental ballistic missiles and acquire 'Star Wars'-style ballistic missile defence systems.

Today, there's virtually no internal or external restraint on military spending—witness the 34 percent spurt in the defence budget in a single year, which will probably go through Parliament without a debate. This cannot be justified in the name of fighting terrorism.

One doesn't need amphibian ships, long-range fighter planes, aircraft carriers and nuclear-capable missiles to combat terrorism. Yet, so low is the accountability of the armed services that they can get away with wild budget increases, which they often don't fully spend.

Nothing illustrates this better than the latest CAG report on the acquisition of the Russian aircraft-carrier Admiral Gorshkov. This was first offered in 1994 as a 'free gift' provided India pays for its refitting and buys jetfighters to be put on its deck. A 'fixed price' contract was signed for \$974 million. The ship was to be delivered refurbished by August 2008.

Soon, Russia demanded an additional \$1.2 billion and pushed the delivery date to December 2012. But last year, Russia further raised the bill dramatically to \$2.9 billion. India is now negotiating hard, but it's unlikely that the price tag will be under \$2.5 billion. Besides, the ship won't even have a 'close-in' weapons system until 2017.

According to the CAG report, the supreme, if ugly, irony is that the 'Navy is acquiring a second-hand refitted carrier that has half the lifespan and is 60 percent more expensive than a new one.'

A CAG official describes the Gorshkov deal as 'the biggest defence mess-up' ever.

The Gorshkov case isn't unique. Other major arms deals, including the French Scorpene submarine (price tag, Rs 18,701 crores/Rs 187.01 billion) and British advanced jet-trainer (cost, Rs 8,120 crores/Rs 81.20 billion), are also marked by allegations of undue favours, huge kickbacks, and dilution of warranty and performance norms. This only underscores the need for greater accountability on the defence services' part and for strict Parliamentary oversight of military contracts. □□□