

## Between Illusion and Reality

THEY ALWAYS DOWNPLAY IT—NUCLEAR WAR. BUT THE NUCLEAR regime remains as complex as it was when the first atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Millions of people across the world continue to live under the shadow of nuclear war. And the nuclear situation is nowhere so volatile as in South Asia. ‘Nuclear weapons are not for war fighting. Nukes are for strategic purposes only and that is where they should end’. That is how Indian army chief General V K Singh reacted when asked about the Chinese action programme specifically designed to bolster Pakistan’s nuclear strike power. In other words, wars, if the General’s words are accepted at their face value, will finally be won or lost in conventional way, relying basically on the eternal cannon fodder—ground troops. And yet nuclear arms race in the sub-continent is eating vital natural resources and national wealth that could have been otherwise utilised to create jobs and offer decent living standards for the impoverished and marginalised millions. Nuclear weapons programme is essentially poor man’s burden in the sub-continent but the sub-continentals don’t bother about it. They are all interested in arms bazaar, rather nuclear arms bazaar, not social welfare and equity.

Even though they are talking about strategic balance and black-mailing power in geopolitics, limited nuclear war cannot be ruled out in certain flash-points, particularly in the Middle East and South Asia. Not all nuclear weapons countries adhere to the principle of ‘no first strike’. At least it is unlikely if any war prolongs in the Middle East and South Asia, albeit war strategists know well nuclear war cannot be a win-win situation for the warring parties despite advantages and disadvantages in terms of number of warheads and capability to use them.

That Pakistan’s nuclear programme is India-specific is a fact of life. And many believe and not without reasons, that Pakistan won’t hesitate to nuke its opponents in case of another dismemberment. As for India, Pakistan is the major target, no doubt, but India’s wider game plan doesn’t dismiss China as a potential threat to its security and integrity. Both India and China have traversed a long way, witnessing many ups and downs, between diplomatic sweet nothings and real business, since the 1962 border war. And the basis of that war remains—boundary dispute. Dozens of high-level diplomatic conclaves have failed to resolve the issue and it is unlikely for them to call it a day in the near future.

For one thing as long as India had borders with Tibet there was no problem despite differences in the perception of the actual line of control. It all started when Tibet lost whatever semi-independent status it used to enjoy prior to Chinese revolution. Now India shares borders with China, not Tibet. And China means Han domination in every sphere of Tibetan life. India recognises Tibet as an integral part of China and yet India is the only country that shelters the Tibetan government-in-exile as also huge Tibetan refugees, not only for humanitarian grounds.

Beijing seems to have reconciled itself with the India-backed Tibetan reality, half-hearted though, but it has not budged an inch from its 1962 position on the boundary question.

On every occasion, both domestically and internationally, Chinese leaders reiterate China's oft-repeated policy of peace and harmony and dialogue as the best way to resolve any contentious issue. But actions on the ground don't always tally with the declared policy. Of late China's assertive military exercises along the disputed line of control in the Himalayas betrays China's stated stand and reflects its impatience though Manmohan Singh just ignore them to show the world that they have no option but to remain defensive, even in the wake of provocation, because of legacy left by history. They—Singh and his colleagues in New Delhi—would like to dismiss all these border irritants as 'necessary evils'. But Mountain Strike Corps, raised by the Indian army may definitely have a broader perspective, not aimed at thwarting Pakistani offensive only.

India's desperate effort to increase nuclear energy capacity even by surrendering sovereignty is in reality designed to enhance nuclear weapons capability while utilising civilian nuclear programme as a cloak. And it has a Chinese dimension because of increased Chinese strategic presence in Pakistan and Sri Lanka—the most troubled regions in South Asia. There hardly remains any big-power strategic vacuum in any part of the globe. With partial withdrawal of America from Pakistani soil, China is stepping in to make its presence felt and Pakistan too is obliging China even by reporting to the Beijing authorities its day to day 'progress' in India-Pakistan bilateral ties. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Han Lei, briefing the press in Beijing on November 3, 2011 while addressing Pakistan's decision to grant most favoured nation status said 'both India and Pakistan are important countries in South Asia and their improving bilateral relations are vital for the area's peace, stability and development'. Ex-facie he had no compulsion to comment on a subject that is not directly related to China. For all practical purposes Islamabad is actually assuring its all weather Chinese friends that any improvement in bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan is in no way going to hamper their strategic partnership.

At the time of writing India and China began talks to put in place a mechanism for management of the border between the two countries as per suggestion mooted by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao during his visit to India in 2010. After the two-day parley they agreed not to disagree to set up a working mechanism on border management. It is not clear whether this mechanism means maintaining the status quo or going beyond the status quo.

Meanwhile the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has come to the field to bat for overseas nuclear suppliers by specifically demanding dilution of the controversial Civil Liability for Damage Act for its too much rigidity in the event of an accident. The Act is very soft on the global players but CII wants a more softer version still. What the General is saying—or not saying—in respect of nuclear weapons does matter little in the real world of politic and tragedy is nobody is prepared for the worst. □□□