

CTBT and National and Regional Politics

C.P. Geevan and Meera Velayudhan

Published in Economic & Political Weekly, 33 (40): 2619-20 (October 3, 1998)

The article: 'Why India should sign CTBT: Returning to our own Agenda' by Praful Bidwai & Achin Vanaik (Economic & Political Weekly 33(38) Sept. 19, 1998) provides a detailed, much needed and timely account of the CTBT. It also examines the validity of the arguments advanced to oppose it. The authors present a highly technical, almost clinical, perhaps even to the point of being virtually non-political, exposition of the case for CTBT - almost with the innocence of a fervent peacenik. This, of course, makes their plea very compelling and persuasive, but only if such questions were purely apolitical, which unfortunately is not the case. To those who live in a black and white world without any shades of grey and who will stop at nothing short of a world absolutely free of discriminatory regimes, the case presented by the authors is compulsory reading.

It will be naive to presume that all decision-makers who oppose or support CTBT are political greenhorns and the decision-making vis-a-vis nuclear matters are unrelated to national and regional politics. The nuclear weapons programme in the sub-continent cannot be seen purely in a global context, as a pale shadow of the disarmament debate in Europe or America. Nuclear policy is not seen by the regimes in India, Pakistan and China as simple creatures of either the bi-polar arms race or apparent uni-polar world of the post-cold war geopolitics. That the rounds of N-weapon tests by India and Pakistan at Pokhran and Chagai took place when the rest of the world was on the verge of giving up their taste for N-arms, is a testimony to the regional and national moorings of the problem.

It can be safely assumed, for all practical

purposes, that when it comes to the nuclear question almost all the major national parties spread across the entire Left to Right spectrum, are fairly well informed about the issues discussed. Nevertheless, the authors may have enlightened some of the party think tanks as to the finer technical details. However, our contention here is that the N-policies have never in its history been decided purely on the technical or scientific basis. If that were so, there would never have been the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, since Japanese surrender was a certainty even without it.

Coming back to the regional context, it is a matter of extreme delusion (scientific, technical and political) to assume that India and Pakistan are building up a N-capability to ward off possible arm-twisting by the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS), the USA in particular and they are building up a retaliatory capability against USA. Nor was this the case when India and Pakistan assiduously built up the N-capability in the heydays of bi-polar N-brinkmanship, when children in Europe were tormented by nightmares of N-holocaust. Here, children in both countries are made to celebrate and worship the BOMB! The cat got out of the bag when, just days after the Pokhran-II, India dared Pakistan to either stop helping Kashmiri militants or face India's nuclear *Bhramashtra*! First, the test was justified as a response to the threat from China (enemy number-1) and then followed the challenge to Pakistan (enemy number 2) for a duel! It is now clear from some of the statements that what is being aimed at is second-strike capability, the enormous economic burden notwithstanding. The real delusion is not from the fairy tales of how two impoverished nations are standing up to the might of NWS, but the myth that just because a few test devices were tried

out, the countries are now 'fully equipped' - C³I (Communications, Command, Control & Intelligence), delivery systems, and all! However, the stark reality is that even New Delhi does not have a good enough conventional bomb-shelter not to speak of the preparedness for a nuclear confrontation.

Sadly, many of those who are opposed to the nuclear tests are working overtime against CTBT. Praful and Achin have shown how there is a convergence on this of the American Far-Right and of the regional Right and the mainstream Left. As indicated by the authors, the reasons for this are in the peculiarities and traditions of the ideological roots of these parties. It is, perhaps, too charitable to assume that some of these political forces in India 'have been a victim of, if not party to' a *misrepresentation* of CTBT. This is possibly not the case. For one, the thinking of these parties are a continuation of the cold war years - that the N-option is a necessary evil to ward off the western imperialism and stems partly from their refusal to learn from the collapse of former USSR despite its vast nuclear stockpile. While parties like BJP were openly arguing for a Nuclear India, the N-weaponisation was also, in effect, a hidden wish of the Left, just as there is a strong convergence between the two on promoting nuclear technology, neglect of environmental issues, lack of concern for social justice and hostility to human rights concerns. This is evident from the debates within and outside the Parliament. The nuclear establishment and defence research have always been looked upon uncritically as holy cows and not a single question has ever been raised on the functioning of the nuclear establishment.

The mainstream Left in India had always linked giving up of the N-option to that of global nuclear disarmament. They are only too willing to work within the legal framework of a 'secular, socialist, democratic republic' with private property, landlordism and monopoly capital. But they cannot accept partial nuclear disarmament or regional de-nuclearisation. While parties like BJP did not get worked up rejecting proposals for regional treaties, the Left deployed their think tank to help rebuff and often pro-actively shape state policies. They were little more than

mere critics of any initiatives for diffusing the tendencies for regional N-arms race. They have helped shape N-policy providing populist, ultra-nationalist justifications and often gone to the absurd extent of questioning the motives of some of those who have campaigned for limited disarmament as a necessary initial step. One incident that refuses to go away is the way late E.P.Thompson was harangued at one of his talks in New Delhi on the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. The authors' apprehension that their views may not find favour with the Left could be an extrapolation of their experience, and may be attributed to the deeper limitations of these organisations.

Interestingly, these parties always overlooked the possibility that once the N-option existed on paper, at an opportune moment a party in power may actually go for N-weaponisation, as is the case now. In fact, there was never an attempt to bring in any Act of the Parliament to restrain the arbitrary exercise of that option without taking the Parliament into confidence. Even after Pokhran-I, when India, in effect initiated the Indo-Pak N-race, there were no such moves in the Parliament. It was also overlooked that were India to go nuclear, it would inevitably and immediately make all its neighbours insecure and that given the levels of tensions and mutual distrust between India and Pakistan, the N-weaponisation will lead to a standoff between the two countries. It was also forgotten that in the event of an all out war, there is very little flexibility to prevent a N-first strike by either country.

Not only was the Left in part directly responsible for taking a militant, ultra-nationalist stand against CTBT, they also refused to even initiate a much needed national debate on the subject, although they had a major role in the policy making of the then central government. Curiously, it was revealed in the aftermath of Pokhran-II, that the then government had, indeed, started the moves for a N-test. All parties were thus part of a Right-Left axis of political convergence in which to be anti-bomb could be forgiven as a pacifist aberration, but to be in favour of CTBT was subversive and anti-national. The entire political leadership (cutting across party lines), the military establishment

and the bureaucracy also knew very well that Pakistan would have signed CTBT if India did the same. If a debate on CTBT were allowed, the nuclear issue would not have been so emotionally charged. It would have helped political parties to take a more balanced view and prevented the national policies from being hijacked by nuclear lobby and the hawks.

As Praful and Achin rightly argue, the simple reality was that signing of CTBT could have ruled out the series of nuclear tests in the sub-continent and prevented both India and Pakistan from yielding so easily to the temptation of nuclear weaponisation. Ethically, if world domination and nukes are bad, it is also evil to keep that option. If there can be no winners in a N-war, then there is also no intellectual virtue in that option. If, moreover, N-bombing is to be seen as a crime against humanity, then there is no moral justification in asserting the right to commit such crimes. In the face of renewed opposition to CTBT, the authors have helped to re-focus the debate back to the need for signing CTBT as a genuine necessity and not as one of capitulating to the pressures from NWS. It is clear that while there is any number of humane reasons in favour of CTBT, there is little technical merit in the opposition to it unless we do not want a return to the agenda for nuclear disarmament.

Comments on:

Praful Bidwai & Achin Vanaik

Why India should sign CTBT: Returning to our own
Agenda (*Economic & Political Weekly* 33(38) Sept. 19,
1998)