

Operation Shakti: A Decade Later*

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Introduction

In the concluding decades of the 20th century, it became clear to most political and military leaders that the post World War II concepts of active war fighting in a nuclear conflict, developed mostly during the Cold War, were no longer relevant in the new geo-political context. Nuclear weapons are political instruments of deterrence. On rare occasions, they can be used for coercion.

But it is also clear that nuclear weapons are not mythological. They are real. They exist in the global, regional and bilateral security calculus and thus cannot be wished away. Therefore, it would be irresponsible on the part of any leader-civil or military-to sermonise that these are political assets only, never to be used in war. If in spite of all diplomatic efforts, a crisis escalates beyond the acceptable security threshold and the existence of the nation is at stake, nuclear weapons, if available, are likely to come into play.

After the 1974 peaceful nuclear explosion, when 'Buddha smiled', India's nuclear weapons programme was resumed by Rajiv Gandhi. Thereafter, India went through a 'Yes-No' period for over a decade. An effort was made to carry out a nuclear test in 1995 but was cancelled at the last moment. Meanwhile, the window for nuclear tests and weapon development continued to close slowly due to Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT) pressures. Three aspects stood out clearly during this period. These were:-

- (a) Lack of clarity, ambivalence and ambiguity at policy making level.
- (b) Extreme diplomatic and economic caution.
- (c) Military being kept out of the nuclear decision making loop and programme.

Operation Shakti

Nearly seven months after I had taken over as Army Chief, Director General Military Operations informed me that although there was no official information, 58 Engineer Regiment supporting Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) at Pokharan had intensified its activities. Both of us understood its significance. Earlier, 8 Engineer Regiment had maintained two deep shafts in the area dug in 1981-82, added some more shafts and had gone through similar activities in 1995. The newly installed National Democratic Alliance regime had already declared that it favoured India becoming a nuclear power state. So when a call came asking me to meet Prime Minister Vajpayee at his residence on a holiday morning without indicating any agenda I had some idea of the information and discussion that was likely to take place. Similar calls had gone to other two Service Chiefs. We met Mr Vajpayee, Principal Secretary Brajesh Mishra and Secretary, DRDO Dr APJ Kalam on a bare dining table in Prime Minister's residence, then 5 Safdarjang Road. A few days later, India conducted Operation Shakti on May 11-13, 1998 and became a nuclear weapon state!

Throughout this period, Engineer units of the Army were associated with DRDO and Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) scientists for field trials and support at Pokharan. It is very unlikely that any political leader or nuclear scientist would remember their contribution on the 10th anniversary of Operation Shakti. I must do that to acknowledge and compliment the Corps of Engineers, particularly its six regiments, 62, 113, 107, 267, 8 and 58 Engineer Regiments, which were deployed at Pokharan from 1973 onward till the success of the mission in May 1998.

The reaction in military circles after the successful nuclear tests was of 'great satisfaction'. Ever since 1979, when Mr K Subrahmanyam, Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee had informed the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) about Pakistan's efforts to go nuclear (China had conducted nuclear weapons test in 1964), the COSC had recommended 'nuclear deterrence' as the best security option in the light of these strategic developments. On May 11, 1998 it was better late than never!

International Reaction

Immediately after the tests, the international reaction led by the United States was immediate and severe. President Clinton imposed economic, military and technological sanctions and went out of his way to make China an ally against India's nuclear weapons requirement and aspirations. The Indo-US cooperation slate was wiped clean. Following the USA, similar sanctions were imposed by many other countries.

A decade later, all that is history. India and the USA are not open ended 'natural allies', but Washington is keen to develop and maintain strategic partnership with India now and is prepared to sign the Indo-US Nuclear Deal that would enhance India's nuclear energy, technological and strategic capabilities. Unfortunately, many of our political leaders have not learnt the basic lesson from this episode. National interest and security is the ultimate goal of any Government, which must be pursued relentlessly without fear or favour.

After the tests on May 11-13, 1998, Prime Minister Vajpayee made the following important policy statements outside and inside the Parliament:-

- (a) India seeks a credible minimum deterrence.
- (b) There will be no first use of its nuclear weapons.
- (c) Nuclear weapons will never be used against non nuclear countries, and
- (d) A unilateral moratorium on future nuclear weapons tests.

India's Nuclear Doctrine

India's nuclear doctrine was drafted by the first National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) in August 1999. It was an extremely well crafted document. To their credit, the NSAB consulted the military establishment both inside and outside the Board. But then the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) did not give official clearance to the doctrine for nearly two years. No one knew whether it was an official policy or just a draft. The Prime Minister's Office and External Affairs Ministry kept it ambiguous and used its contents depending upon the occasion. As a result, there was no clarity on operational mechanism. Much later, the COSC, DRDO and the AEC were asked to prepare papers for operationalisation of the capability, including additional establishments and procedures required for this purpose.

Operationalisation of the nuclear doctrine was officially reviewed in January 2003. The CCS by then decided to share something with public. The press release had eight one line statements restating important contents of the doctrine. It made public the formation of the National Command Authority, the Political and the Executive Councils. According to the press release, the CCS reviewed existing command and control structures, state of readiness, targeting strategy for retaliation and operating procedures for various stages of alert and launch. The CCS approved the appointment of C-in-C, Strategic Forces Command and the arrangements for alternate chain of command.

Since this last review, publicly, we continue to remain silent on strategic and operational aspects of our nuclear doctrine except, the not so frequent missile tests. So whatever improvement may have taken place so far, it has made little impact on our nuclear capability, credibility, and deterrence. Some weaknesses of the 'Yes-No' period continue to bug the system. A major reason, I feel, is that the military, the end user, is neither consulted adequately nor given political directions and resources to progress the multiple issues for an assured and effective operationalisation.

Credible Minimum Deterrent - How Credible Is It?

What are the challenges in our 'credible minimum deterrent' index that we face today? Some obvious doubts and weaknesses that need to be addressed are:

- (a) Technical claims of Pokharan II have been challenged by some scientists, which need to be allayed convincingly. We need not be worried about the challenges made in the Western media. But many of our own scientists including former chairman of the AEC have created doubts in the minds of the public and more importantly of the end users i.e. the Armed Forces. This doubt is compounded by the fact that our DRDO scientists are well known for tall claims and over optimistic public statements.
- (b) Our long term policy on fissile weapons and thermo nuclear weapons is not yet clear. What progress has been made in this regard? Do we have adequate fissile material for war heads to be made for the ever dynamic strategic environment?
- (c) How long are we going to take to develop the triad i.e. land, air and naval based launch systems? The Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile Agni 3 was successfully tested some months ago. It is yet to be inducted into India's strategic arsenal. The time taken to develop Agni system shows that the current progress is far too slow. Why is the Government unable to push this programme? Is it a political or technological problem?
- (d) The nuclear doctrine calls for greater integration of security and foreign policy elements and policies. Has this been achieved?
- (e) Do our political leaders have any idea, and the will, to employ nuclear weapons in times of crisis? The present lack of consensus on serious foreign policy and strategic issues like the Indo-US Nuclear Deal and our policy towards the USA and China do not inspire confidence.
- (f) We have the Strategic Forces Command, an inter-Services entity for strategic command and control. Have the Services developed a joint operational doctrine on the employment of nuclear weapons? Why have we not been able to interface the nuclear capability with conventional capabilities and plans in our military strategy and force structuring so far?
- (g) Has the Strategic Forces Command been able to interact and interlock with multiple other agencies involved in the operationalisation? Having confidence is no assurance. Have they done adequate training and rehearsals? The nuclear doctrine calls for multiple agencies involved with storage, movement and assembly of devices. Will these agencies be able to achieve tasks in various contingencies in the 'shortest possible time frame'?

Need for Politico-Diplomatic-Military Synergy

In any future conflict scenario on the subcontinent, politico-diplomatic-military factors will play an important role. A careful and calibrated orchestration of military operations, diplomacy, and domestic political environment would be essential for its successful outcome. Continuous control of the 'escalatory ladder' would require much closer political oversight and politico- civil- military interaction. During a conflict situation, all participants must

remain in constant touch with political leadership. It is, therefore, essential to keep the military leadership in the security/strategic decision-making loop and having a direct politico-military interface.

Then there is also the psychological aspect of the nuclear deterrence. We should remember that if a nation speaks too much about its nuclear arsenal/deterrence (political rhetoric) it is not appreciated by the international community. But if it does not speak, or conveys too little, its nuclear deterrence does not become credible.

There is a general impression that due to poor strategic and operational understanding at political levels and as a result of turf war between civil, science, technical and military bureaucracies, the military tends to be excluded from the nuclear decision making loop. In the new environment, military advice is needed at the highest level during all grand-strategy considerations because finally, when the military is called upon to act, the time for preparation and decision making would be at a premium. For this reason, amongst many others, India needs a Chief of Defence Staff at the earliest.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Operation Shakti created political, economic and technological difficulties for India initially. But before long, political and strategic advantages began to accrue. Besides enhanced security, we have also achieved enhanced status in the international community. There is a feeling amongst many strategists that the gains that we made soon after Operation Shakti have been frittered away because we have succumbed to foreign pressures and lack of political consensus within the country. We have not been able to pursue a clearly laid nuclear deterrent policy with determination. This must be done in the interest of national security; political differences notwithstanding.

And when India's political parties are fighting over the 10th anniversary celebrations of Operation Shakti, I am reminded of Ernest Renan's quote "What constitutes a nation is not speaking the same tongue or belonging to the same ethnic group but having accomplished great things in common in the past and the wish to accomplish them in the future."

.*Operation Shakti was the code name for nuclear tests conducted by India from 11-13 May 1998.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXVIII, No. 572, April-June 2008.