

The Clinton visit & disarmament

By Arjun Makhijani

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NUCLEAR WEAPONS are likely to be the elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about publicly when the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, visits India. Mr. Clinton, for one, will probably be too embarrassed to bring it up publicly because the U.S. Senate defeated the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) last October. If the Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, follows Mr. Clinton in maintaining public silence about nuclear weapons, he will miss a major opportunity to assert India's leadership in the field of nuclear disarmament. When India tested nuclear weapons after decades of trying to persuade nuclear weapon states to disarm, Mr. Clinton noted that India's restraint had been "under-appreciated". His visit provides a perfect opportunity for India to take the initiative on disarmament outside of the framework of the discriminatory Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The failure of the nuclear weapon states that are parties to the NPT to fulfill their disarmament commitments under that treaty is causing widespread discontent among the world's Governments and people. There is strong worldwide support for substantial new action that would move all eight nuclear weapon states towards disarmament. India is already on record in the United Nations as favouring de-alerting of nuclear weapons. It also has a policy of no-first-use of nuclear weapons. It is observing a moratorium on nuclear testing, though it has so far refused to rule out further weaponisation. India can give substance to its declaratory no- first-use policy by unilaterally de-alerting all its nuclear weapons by detaching all assembled warheads from delivery vehicles and storing them in separate locations and by declaring a moratorium on further weaponisation.

On the basis of this unilateral action, Mr. Vajpayee can invite the U.S., as well as all the other nuclear weapon states, including Israel and Pakistan, to New Delhi for a conference at which all would agree to immediately and verifiably de-alert all their nuclear weapons. Such an invitation would have moral and political credibility because India would have already taken unilateral action. A part of the strength of such action by India would derive from the fact that the U.S. still insists on retaining the prerogative of first use. It has refused to provide unequivocal and legally-binding guarantees to non-nuclear signatories of the NPT that it will never threaten them with or use nuclear weapons against them. On the contrary, it has made many nuclear threats against non-nuclear weapon states, including one against India during the 1971 war, when the nuclear-armed aircraft carrier "USS Enterprise" was ordered into the Bay of Bengal as part of the U.S. Government's "tilt" towards Pakistan.

The U.S.' technical goals for its nuclear arsenal include the capability for a surprise first strike (known as "counterforce" capability, that is the ability to destroy the nuclear forces of the adversary on the ground before they are launched). The U.S. and Russia keep thousands of nuclear warheads on hair-trigger alert, ready to fire within minutes, creating grave dangers of all-out nuclear war by miscalculation or accident. Such a global catastrophe was minutes away from occurring in 1995. Russia's President then, Mr. Boris Yeltsin, was told that a nuclear missile was speeding towards Moscow. Russian missile operators were ready for his order to launch before the U.S. missile hit. Fortunately, he waited. The "missile" turned out to be a U.S.- Norwegian weather-research rocket, whose trajectory soon veered away from Russia. There



have been many other false alerts. Such dangers have given rise to widespread demands for de-alerting in the U.S. and elsewhere. De-alerting has the support of the New Agenda Coalition of Governments, the Canberra Commission, and many military authorities in a number of countries.

There is precedent for unilateral de-alerting of a large number of weapons. In 1991, the attempted coup in the Soviet Union made nuclear command authority there uncertain. The U.S. President then, Mr. George Bush, unilaterally ordered thousands of tactical nuclear weapons removed from the U.S. arsenal and hundreds of strategic warheads to be de-alerted. A few days later the Russian President then, Mr. Mikhail Gorbachev, followed this bold, historic action by taking reciprocal steps.

The five-yearly review of the NPT is set to begin at the U.N. just four weeks after Mr. Clinton's return to the U.S. By unilaterally de-alerting and by extending an invitation to the other nuclear weapon states to do the same, India can occupy centre stage in that review without acceding to the NPT. Its action will put the five nuclear weapon states that are NPT signatories, notably the U.S. and Russia, in a difficult diplomatic position if they refuse to accept India's invitation to de-alert all nuclear weapons. Since May 11, 1998, the talk of nuclear apartheid by India's leaders has given way to negotiations with the U.S. to secure acceptance of India's nuclear-weapon status. Yet, India can never achieve great power status with nuclear weapons. The vast majority of the world's countries gave up the prerogative of making these weapons voluntarily in the hope that the five states that had these weapons in 1968, when the NPT was signed, would disarm. They are not going to accept new nuclear weapon states just because their hopes have so far been dashed by the five nuclear signatories of the NPT. Moreover, a crucial redeeming feature of the NPT, as unanimously interpreted by the World Court, is that it obligates these five states to actually achieve complete nuclear disarmament. In terms of pure realpolitik, India's chances of getting a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council are far better if it reclaims its leadership on nuclear disarmament at a time when the world desperately needs it.

India's strength lies in its history as the birthplace of great ideas that have diffused throughout the world without the use of force. For instance, India long ago gave the world the idea of the zero, which is the basis of computer technology. India's strong global position in information technology was established prior to and independently of its nuclear weapons tests. Some in the West claim primacy for western ideas and methods based partly on military might. The New York Times columnist, Mr. Thomas Freidman, has written "The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist – McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15?". He further quotes historian Robert Kagan: "Good ideas and technologies need a strong power that promotes those ideas by example and protects those ideas by winning on the battlefield".

Evidently, there are also Indians who share this short-sighted view. While empires have been founded on it, they have also disappeared, often accompanied by terrible wars. Unless we change this thinking, as Einstein advocated at the dawn of the nuclear age, the next chapter in this tale may end in nuclear catastrophe. Moreover, the finest American political idea, democracy ensured by the rule of law and equality under it, has not needed the use of force to inspire people the world over, from Alexis de Tocqueville to Ho Chi Minh. The moral foundation for the kind of thinking that is needed is inherent in the politics of non-violence that India gave the world two-and-a-half-thousand years ago, which it vigorously renewed during its independence struggle. For this, India has been admired and emulated the world over, not least by the movements led by Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr. As a result, India was already a great power in the minds of the majority of the world's people, a status that its



nuclear weapons tests have gravely diminished.

The events at Kargil and the increased fighting in Kashmir since show that the Pokhran tests and the predictable Pakistani response have resulted in severely increased nuclear dangers in South Asia and reduced security for both countries. If there is a silver lining to those tests, it is that the world is now paying far more attention, setting the stage for India to re-claim its historic leadership in disarmament. A propitious moment is at hand. Will Mr. Vajpayee seize it by taking decisive action?

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