

## **Indian Initiatives for Disarmament: A Historical Assessment**

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### **Abstract**

*From the early years of her independence India has been a country having a strong opinion on disarmament and specially on nuclear disarmament. The first Prime Minister Mr Nehru had very clear opinion that India will not make or use nuclear bomb but keep its all options open to insure its all national interestsp. All following governments remained firm on this policy but the NDA government led by Mr Vajpayee had with no options but to exercise the nuclear option of the country in May 1998. The present work reveals various aspects on the issue.*

**Key Words :** *Disarmament, International Community, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, United Nations Atomic Energy Commission, Memorandum, Resolution, Disillusionment, SSOD*

*III, CTBT, UNGA, NWFV, NAM, WMD Programme.*

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## **Introduction**

India's relationship with nuclear disarmament goes back a long way. Ever since independence, Indian governments have made use of every opportunity and forum to press upon the international community to treat the subject of nuclear disarmament with the kind of seriousness and urgency that it deserves. In fact, even before India joined the comity of nations as a sovereign country, Jawaharlal Nehru, who was later to become the country's first prime minister, had said in 1940: "Both because of our adherence to the principle of non-violence and from practical considerations arising from our understanding of world events, we believe that complete disarmament of all nation states should be aimed at, as in fact an urgent necessity, if the world is not to be reduced to barbarism<sup>1</sup>".

In 1945, when the *Little Boy* and *Fat Man* were first dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Mahatma Gandhi realized the impact of this new weapon, though he chose not to speak against it, fearing that the British rulers could use it to deny independence to India. He later said that the bomb would bring moral devastation on those who developed and used it. He vowed to fight for outlawing the nuclear weapons. While he could not personally conduct the crusade, every Indian government has upheld nuclear disarmament as a moral imperative since the very nature of destruction wrought by nuclear weapons negates the very spirit of humanity. Even when India was not in possession of the lethal weapon, it did not consider an NFWF as an international abstraction, but as a necessity in whose attainment every nation, big or small, with or without nuclear weapons, had an equal stake.

India's very first articulation on nuclear disarmament after its emergence as a modern nation state provided a unique conceptualization to the term. Indian leaders upheld it not only as a political necessity for ensuring security and peace, but also as a moral imperative. In order to translate the concept into reality, India tried to make use of every opportunity, within the UN and outside it, through appeals, proposals and actions plans, to get the international community to pursue it consensually.

### **Indian Approach to Disarmament: Post Independence Scenario**

As early as in 1948, at the time of the consideration of the report of the newly created United Nations Atomic Energy Commission, India proposed limiting the use of atomic energy to peaceful purposes, and the elimination of nuclear weapons from national arsenals. Two years later, and despite its preoccupation with several urgent tasks of nation building, India used its voice in the UN to draw world attention to the fact that the growing arms race was not only a threat to international peace and security but also a drain on human and economic resources that could be better utilized for other developmental activities. To rectify this imbalance, it suggested the

creation of a UN Peace Fund formed through a progressive reduction of arms, and directing the amount thus released towards development.

In 1953, speaking before the First Committee of the UNGA, then Foreign Minister Y.K. Krishna Menon had said, “There is only one thing to do with atomic weapons and that is to do away with them”. In 1954, and soon after the USA first tested hydrogen weapons in the Marshall Islands, Prime Minister Nehru called for an immediate halt to all forms of nuclear testing and this eventually formed the basis for the conclusion of a PTBT.

In 1955, Krishna Menno once again called for a discontinuance of testing, for a new determination to reach an agreement on reductions, and for an absolute prohibition of the use of atomic weapons. One year later, India presented a memorandum to the Disarmament Commission suggesting certain concrete steps. These included a cessation of experimental nuclear explosions, dismantling of nuclear weapons in order to reverse the arms race, declarations by countries not to manufacture any more nuclear weapons, and prohibition of export or transfer of nuclear weapons to other countries by the then declared NWS. Unfortunately, none of these measures received the attention that they deserved. In 1957, the Indian delegation to the 12th session of the UNGA put forth a draft resolution appealing to the “states concerned to agree without delay to suspend tests of nuclear and thermonuclear weapons.” The resolution, however, was defeated by a vote of 34 to 24 with 24 abstentions<sup>2</sup>.

At an anti-nuclear convention held in 1962 in New Delhi, the then Indian president said, “The non-aligned and neutral people are as much involved in this as those who are knowingly engaged in the criminal conspiracy of creating weapons and conditions that would spell their own annihilation no less than that of others<sup>3</sup>”. In 1964, India took the initiative to place the item “Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons” on the UN agenda and thereby sowed the first seed of the NPT. It had then called for the treaty to be based on three principles:

- (i) Absence of any loopholes that might permit the NWS and NNWS to proliferate weapons either directly or indirectly.
- (ii) Establishment of an acceptable balance of mutual responsibilities and obligations of both the NWS and NNWs.
- (iii) Marking a step towards general and complete disarmament.

It is a different matter that the NPT that finally took shape was devoid of these principles and has, hence, not been accepted by India to date.

However, despite its disillusionment with the NPT, India continued its efforts into the 1970s. At the UNGA’s First Special Session on Disarmament in June 1978,

Prime Minister Morarji Desai called for outlawing the use of nuclear technology for military purposes, including its research and development. Four years later, at the second session, the Indian foreign minister proposed a 5-point programme in this regard. It sought the negotiation of a binding convention on the non-use of nuclear weapons, an immediate suspension of all nuclear tests, a freeze on nuclear weapons, attainment of general and complete disarmament within an agreed time-frame and the UN taking the lead in educating the public on the dangers of nuclear war, the harmful effects of an arms race and the positive aspects of disarmament and its links with developments<sup>4</sup>.

At another level, in 1984, India launched the 6-nation 5-continent Peace Initiative along with Argentina, Greece, Mexico, Sweden and Tanzania. This measure came at a time when the dialogue between the nuclear powers had collapsed into accusations of ill faith and mutual recrimination. In 1986, during President Gorbachev's visit to India, Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi used the occasion to once again send out a forceful plea for disarmament. In a joint statement, the Delhi Declaration, both heads of government "on behalf of more than one billion men, women and children..." called for urgent action that would lead to a "world free of weapons of mass' destruction, a world without war<sup>5</sup>". In 1988, at the third Special Session On Disarmament (SSOD III), the Rajeev Gandhi Action Plan was unveiled that sought a binding commitment by all nations to a phased elimination of nuclear weapons by 2010; the establishment of a comprehensive global security system under the aegis of the UN; and, simultaneous negotiations on a series of integrally related measures such as cessation of all production of weapon grade fissionable material, a moratorium on testing of nuclear weapons to set the stage for the CTBT, etc.

As is evident, the Rajeev Gandhi Action Plan for Ushering in a Nuclear Weapon-Free and Non-Violent World Order was a well-considered and comprehensive one that identified specific activities that could be realistically carried out in different stages. While the plan found praise from amongst the NNWS, and even some of the NWS, in the absence of sincere political will, and the resolute determination of the NWS to cling on to their nuclear arsenals, there was no concrete movement towards nuclear disarmament during the Cold War years.

Post-Cold War, India found its clout on the issue of nuclear disarmament somewhat diminishing with the fall in relevance of the NAM. From the NAM and Soviet Union, India had derived both numerical and ideological strength for its resolutions at the UN. But even as this fell, in contrast, US dominance grew and best came to light when in 1995 it was able to bludgeon several NAM nations party to the NPT into legitimizing nuclear weapons through granting an indefinite and unconditional

extension to the NPT. Since then, Indian efforts at promoting nuclear disarmament through the UN have largely been reduced to tabling resolutions before the UNGA, support for which has been steadily dwindling. The CD too remains stalemated, at least for the last four years over two issues: the NWS refusing to give in on the demand of the NNWS to establish an ad hoc committee on nuclear disarmament; and the US-China clash of interests on the issue of PAROS.

### **India and Nuclear Disarmament: A Change in Mood**

Given the cold response meted out to a large number of Indian initiatives and a simultaneous increase in the salience of nuclear weapons within the nuclear strategies of the NWS, it is not surprising that, within India too, there should be many who question the wisdom of India's pursuit of this objective. Especially after going nuclear, it is felt that the country must now concentrate on building a credible nuclear deterrent rather than wasting its energies and time on articulating the merits of nuclear disarmament. The position of those who hold this view is based on three factors:

Spread of cynicism due to the lack of seriousness on the part of the NWS. Rather, a reinforcement of the nuclear component in their military doctrines and a continued reliance on nuclear deterrence have only added to the cynicism. These developments stand out in sharp contrast to the pledge undertaken by the NWS at the time of the NPT extension in 1995 that they would fulfill their obligations under Article VI of the NPT to initiate steps towards nuclear disarmament. At the same time, they also promised not to use nuclear weapons against NNWS parties to the treaty. This promise was repeated by all the five NWS in the joint UN Security Council Resolution 984 (1995), which was unanimously adopted on April 11, 1995.

However, as has become increasingly evident over the last decade, these undertakings were obviously little more than ploys for securing international support for the unconditional extension of the NPT and have since been forgotten. Nuclear deterrence remains the mainstay of the military strategies of the five NWS and is likely to remain so into the "indefinite future<sup>6</sup>". Meanwhile, the US has not hesitated in expanding the core mission of its nuclear arsenal from deterring only nuclear weapons to now using them as a deterrent for chemical and biological weapons also. Russia too has retracted its commitment to not be the first one to use nuclear weapons. Rather, its military doctrine, put forth in January 2000, sanctions the first use of these weapons against even a conventional attack, in case other means at its disposal have been exhausted. The recently disclosed US policy of preemption in case it suspects a country of pursuing a WMD programme retracts US commitment to negative security assurances as extended to the NNWS in 1995. Actions such as these have only served to make other states that do not possess nuclear weapons reconsider

their approach to nuclear disarmament and to view it rather cynically in the wake of the ongoing trends.

The second factor to have impacted adversely upon nuclear disarmament is the growing feeling about its unfeasibility. There is a feeling of inability to tackle issues such as the logistics and cost involved in the dismantling of tens of thousands of weapons, accounting of every gram of fissile material recovered, effective verification mechanisms, etc. Besides, even if the existing nuclear weapons were to be destroyed, the knowledge of bomb making would continue to exist. Therefore, there is widespread skepticism over the feasibility of nuclear disarmament. This sentiment found an echo in a US government document of 1995 in which it was stated, "Since it is impossible to uninventive nuclear weapons or to prevent clandestine manufacture of some numbers of them, nuclear weapons seem destined to be the centerpiece of US strategic deterrence for the foreseeable future".

Thirdly, there is a takeover of idealism by realpolitik in the Indian polity. Idealism has slowly been giving way to greater realism in external relations and foreign policy-making. In this world of realpolitik, the ideal of nuclear disarmament has taken a beating. Of course, it cannot be overlooked that the voices of the realists contesting the official position had existed even as far back as the early 1960s when after India's defeat at the hands of the Chinese, Beijing had demonstrated a nuclear capability. This had given a fillip to the pro-bomb lobby<sup>8</sup>, though its reach had remained limited.

In fact, till 1998, the pro and anti-bomb lobbies had shared room for maneuverability, as the official Indian position remained one of nuclear ambiguity. The sense of idealism and the principled approach was adequately balanced by the belief that national security considerations demanded the availability of all options. Post-1998, however, idealism has taken a beating as other, more real issues of deteriorating regional security environment have surfaced. Hence, the security dimension of nuclear policy assumes greater sway with a consequent de-emphasis on disarmament. Also, India has seen support for its initiatives dwindling from among the ranks of the non-aligned nations, further reinforcing the perceptions on the impracticality of nuclear disarmament.

From the above arguments, it can be deduced that nuclear disarmament would not be detrimental to India's core interests of national security. Rather, it would bring several other advantages-economic, environmental and moral. In present day India, when contemporary emphasis is on national strength and when only the moral justification for nuclear disarmament is not enough by itself, this chapter has sought to highlight that even on a realistic level, nuclear disarmament remains the

need of the hour. In the past, India has used this plank to rally support from among the ranks of the non-aligned nations. Disillusionment in these nations on the real motives and intentions of the NWS is rampant, now more than ever. India could still stand to garner their support if it were to make a renewed commitment and exhibit a visionary approach in a collective march towards universal nuclear disarmament.

Having established that the attainment of nuclear disarmament would be in India's national interest, it becomes imperative that the country should pursue the objective in a proactive manner. The attainment of a secure and stable nuclear weapon-free world would naturally call for a large number of measures. These would have to range from fostering greater mutual trust in inter-state relations, a greater transparency in defense matters, more encompassing arms control efforts that specify deeper cuts to a stricter implementation and compliance with all treaties related to non-proliferation and disarmament. However, before embarking upon the tangible steps, it would be crucial to target the mindsets and beliefs of those against nuclear weapons abolition. In fact, this would have to be the essential starting point because unless we begin to think differently about nuclear weapons, we cannot be expected to act differently with them. Is it not said, "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that defenses of peace must be constructed".

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