

Collaboration only way to defuse tension

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THIS month marks the 11th anniversary of the South Asian nuclear genie being let out of the bottle, with both India and Pakistan conducting overt nuclear tests.

There was much consternation around the world when this occurred in 1998, particularly at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, the only inter-governmental negotiating forum on disarmament. I was then Bangladesh's ambassador to the body and, being from the region, was expected to lead off the protests. Instead, Bangladesh urged calm.

After all, India and Pakistan were not the first two countries to have nuclear weapons. There was no reason at that time to believe that such weapons would be less safe in the hands of heirs to an ancient civilisation than in the hands of other nuclear weapon states. Also, neither party had signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty or the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, so they had not broken any international commitments.

This did not mean, however, that the situation did not warrant careful monitoring. After all, the region has seen a number of wars.

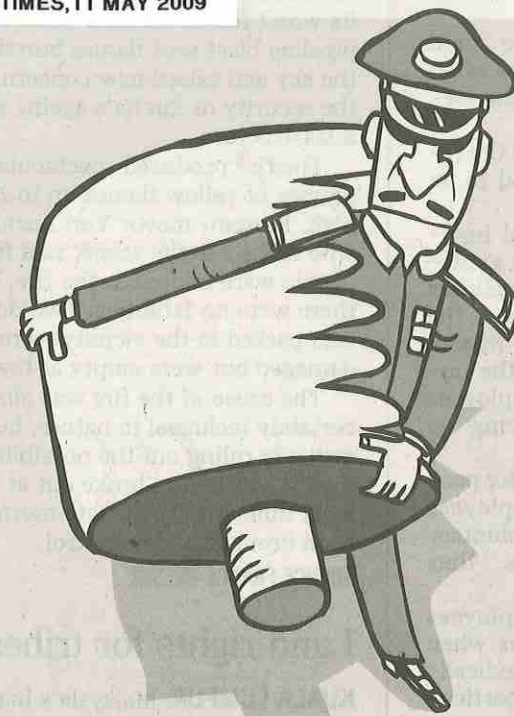
India's nuclear capabilities are greater than Pakistan's, though India has to factor in China's. The size of the Indian nuclear arsenal is said to be between 45 and 100 warheads, 75 per cent of which are reportedly maintained in assembled form. Pakistan has approximately 60 warheads, stored unassembled with the fissile core separated from non-nuclear explosives, and these components are stored separately from delivery vehicles.

India's delivery capability is far superior, with the ability to strike targets both close and distant, through a variety of missiles. Indeed, India will soon become a triad nuclear power with the capability to launch missiles from land, air and sea. For Pakistan, its nuclear-capable F-16 aircraft and medium-range surface-to-surface Ghauri missiles are seen as adequate for the country's purpose.

India has subscribed to a publicly announced nuclear doctrine, which states that it seeks a "minimum credible deterrent", and includes the principle of "no first use" and "no use" against a non-nuclear weapon state. Its Nuclear Command Authority, which comprises mostly civilians, is chaired by the Prime Minister. And the arsenal is believed to be well protected.

The United States-India nuclear deal, signed in November last year, has of course raised Pakistan's ire. Islamabad has demanded the same arrangements with the US, but has found little sympathy in Washington. Given India's overwhelming conventional military superiority, Pakistan eschews the "no first use" doctrine, believing that ambiguity would enhance its deterrence. Interestingly, President Asif Ali Zardari once mentioned "no first use", but his remarks were quickly retracted by officials who said the President was "not fully informed".

Pakistan is striving to achieve a "second strike capability", which India already possesses - that is, the capacity to absorb a "first strike" and still be able to retaliate massively. Theoretically, in the absence of a second strike capability, a nuclear power's entire arsenal could be vulnerable to a first strike - and indeed could invite such a strike. That is why former Pakistani president Pervez Mush-



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arraf was said to have ordered the dispersal of the country's nuclear arsenal to at least six different sites.

But therein lies the rub: While dispersal might enhance "security" in one sense, it also increases the chances of Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into terrorist hands. Despite the assurances of Pakistani policymakers that the weapons are safe, the international community remains nervous. There are other possible scenarios - including the possibility of the National Command Authority passing into terrorist or Taleban hands. But the chances of this happening are remote at present.

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Former Indian army general Shankar Roychowdhury said at a seminar in New Delhi in March that Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons prevented India from attacking it on two occasions - one after terrorists attacked the Indian Parliament and the other after they attacked Mumbai late last year.

While conventional conflicts of some intensity between the two countries cannot entirely be ruled out, it is clear that such warfare cannot provide a significant victory to one or the other side. That being the case, the only rational thing both countries can do is collaborate. There is the obvious necessity for them to undertake confidence-building measures on the nuclear front. This can and should spread to other issues such as terrorism. The leaderships of India and Pakistan must realise they have to cooperate and have but a Hobson's choice in this regard.

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