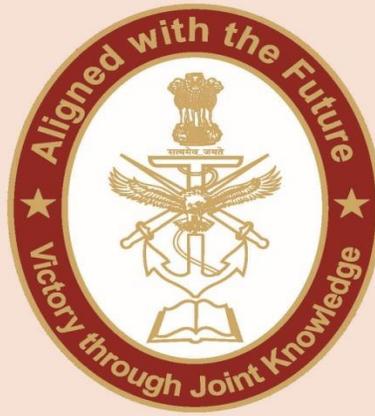


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

DIAMOND JUBILEE: DESTRUCTION OR DETERRENCE



Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd) is an alumini of Doon School and St Stephens College. He retired in Feb 2018 and has been writing articles on Defence related issues for the Tribune and various journals.

Seventy five years ago to the month, ‘Little Boy’ and ‘Fat Man’, changed the world as we see it. Not only did they usher in destruction on an unprecedented scale but they were truly disruptive and affected not only modern warfare but also economies, international relations and technology. After the detonation of the first nuclear device in July 1945, Robert Oppenheimer, the ‘father of the atomic bomb’ quoting Krishna from the ‘Bhagvad Gita’ had said “Now I am become death, the destroyer of the worlds”. The impact of those blasts is still reverberating around the world. This was now the new normal, and the world was thrown into the nuclear age irrespective of who possessed nuclear weapons.

The mushroom cloud that killed and injured thousands of people and destroyed large parts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki became a symbol of horror. It was unlike any other weapon used before with unimaginable horrors and effectively changing the course of human history. The ability to deliver these weapons of mass destruction over long distances, in the shortest period of

time is frightening and has transformed both strategy and warfare. No longer was there any territorial immunity due to distances. Long range vectors and precision guided missiles brought in the change. Missile Launchers no longer needed to be located in Cuba, Italy and Turkey to constitute a threat as was the case in 1962.

Over the years advances have taken place not only in technology but also in the means of delivery thereby considerably increasing the lethality, range, guidance, accuracy and reliability across delivery platforms. Though, the overall numbers of warheads has decreased considerably, due to a series of agreements mainly between the US and erstwhile USSR, they are still sufficient to destroy everything on Planet earth.

Fortunately, none of these weapons have been used since World War II, though the world has seen few occasions when adversaries were close to 'pressing the nuclear button'. But have these decades led to a sense of complacency in the world, believing that these weapons will only serve as a deterrent and not be used in anger?

Nuclear weapons have since been used for deterrence, which begs to question are these weapons meant to prevent wars or to fight wars? And are we prepared for the consequences of their use in the event prevention fails?

The strategic concept of deterrence is aimed at preventing conflict. It follows that a country may use nuclear weapons when its core national interests are threatened. As stated in the 'Dictionary of Modern Strategy and Tactics', "deterrence is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction". Nuclear deterrence removes the optimism about the positive outcome of a conflict and hence is considered to be an effective tool to diffuse a conflict situation. Its failure poses an existential threat to mankind.

Though deterrence has been defined in various ways, it essentially seeks to induce caution in others by a threat of destructive retaliation. The concept is

simple but its application is vast and is guided by numerous factors including deterrence by denial and punishment; and direct and extended deterrence, which is aimed at discouraging adversaries from attacking their allies.

The root of a deterrent strategy lies in capability. Capability manifests itself in the armed forces of a nation, modernized, suitably equipped, highly trained and backed by doctrines ready to execute their tasks should deterrence fail. This leads to credibility; the realization by the opponents that the threat would be executed if the red lines are crossed. Ambiguity of course surrounds the 'red lines' of each country; at times imagined to be more fragile than they actually are.

Bernard Brodie, the American strategist who is considered the architect of the nuclear deterrent theory, saw the usefulness of nuclear weapons not in their deployment but in the threat of their deployment. In his famous book 'The Absolute Weapon : Atomic Power and World Order' he stated; "Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment had been to win wars from now on it must be to avert them. There can be no other purpose. "

As per the SIPRI Report of 2020, nine nuclear countries which possess 13400, nuclear weapons of which 1800 were in a state of high readiness. What the report also highlights is the ongoing replacement of retired warheads and modernization by few countries. However, none of these figures can be considered accurate due to the low levels of transparency that surround these weapons.

We are all aware of the force ratios needed to overcome an opponent in a conventional conflict. These are also dictated by the terrain and the type of equipment. However, what is the credible threat ratio of nuclear weapons? At the time of the Cuban crisis it was estimated by scholars that US had built up a ratio of 9:1. They had a huge advantage not just in numbers but in quality and deployment as well.

At the height of the Cold War, the stockpile of nuclear weapons between US & the USSR accounted for 98 % of the global nuclear arsenal, with a destructive power equivalent to three million Hiroshima bombs; it was so large that it was meaningless.

Richard Simpkin stated in 'Race to the Swift ', weapon systems have a ' fifty year cycle' by when new technologies usher in the next transformative change. However, nuclear weapons have their own set of rules and one thing is definitive, we are not sure where we presently stand.

Ironically, nuclear weapons continue to be developed incorporating the latest technologies for delivering the maximum destructive power and not for deterrence as weapons cannot be designed for such a concept. The complete platforms needed to destroy an intended target in accordance with the parameters and conditions set forth. Such paradoxes, while being intellectually stimulating for a debate represent a choice between life and death and hence cannot be exercised.

Presently, we are witnessing a sudden surge in nuclear threats, which are manifesting themselves by strong statements issued by the leaders of various countries. This is in spite of the fact that for the last seventy five years conflicts have been fought in the sub nuclear domain. It only reinforces their attendant dangers as nuclear weapons continue to remain an integral part of international policies and military strategies.

Recently, Imran Khan the Pakistan Prime Minister, whose strategic assets include both nuclear weapons and terrorist organisations, threatened nuclear war over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act at the First Global Refugee Forum in Geneva . He had earlier made a similar threat while referring to the removal of Article 370 in Jammu & Kashmir, while speaking at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019. The Indian response was appropriate, by calling it brinkmanship and not statesmanship.

Does this show that Pakistan doubts India's nuclear capability? On the contrary it only reflects their uncertainty in to winning a conventional war. Hence to make up for their weakness, they have to resort to nuclear threats.

Keeping nuclear weapons and the difficult to manufacture materials needed to make them out of terrorist hands is critical to world security. An issue we all have to face is that these weapons in the hands of terrorists /non state actors and rogue states, which are not governed by any established rules, could destabilise the world as we know it.

As Vice Admiral Vijay Shankar had said," the relationship between a 'deterree' and 'deterer' is based on rationality. The former has the conviction that he risks disproportionate hostile action and the latter has to have transparency in confirming the reality of these risks so that strategic miscalculation is avoided. The exceptional feature of this is the roles are reversible, provided it is in common interest to maintain stability". One wonders how this reasoning can apply to terrorist and rogue state threats.

In response to North Korea's rhetoric and testing of ballistic missiles, President Trump had famously declared from his golf resort in Aug 2017," they will be met by fire and fury like the world has never seen." A statement like this against a country acquiring nuclear weapons and the subsequent release of the US Nuclear Posture Review in 2018 , that called for building new types of nuclear weapons and integrating them with conventional war plans, brought out the core and enduring function these weapons continue to occupy as far as strategies and war fighting doctrines are concerned. The importance of the threat of nuclear weapons in dictating terms has still not evaporated.

In October 2018, President Putin, while speaking in Sochi had stated, "Any aggressor, should know that retaliation is inevitable, and they will be annihilated. And we as martyrs will go to paradise, while they would simply perish because they wouldn't even have time to repent their sins."

As George Perkovich in his recent article in 'War on the Rocks' stated, "there are two dramatic ways in which the nuclear age could end: annihilation or disarmament, while one ending is undesirable the other unachievable."

The truth is that wars must remain in the conventional and not the nuclear domain .The principle articulated by Ronald Reagan in his State of the Union Address in 1984, and also echoed in his joint statement with Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, succinctly sums up everything "A nuclear war cannot be won must never be fought". It is therefore imperative that the nuclear genie must forever remain in its bottle.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.