

Narasimha Rao and the Bomb

K Subrahmanyam

In the background of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's obituary tribute to P.V. Narasimha Rao acknowledging the latter as the true father of Shakti nuclear test of May 11, 1998, let me recall Rao's role in the development of the Indian nuclear deterrent as narrated by him. This is important in order to understand the correct historical perspective about very important decisions of the past; in this case, Rao's account of the evolution of the nuclear policy during his term of office.

When the Kargil Committee wrote to Rao that they would like to meet him, he asked me to meet him alone. He was President of IDSA from 1980 to 1987 when I was its Director. We had, therefore, known each other over a period of years. In the meeting, taking advantage of Rao's offer to discuss on the nuclear issue on a one-to-one basis, I asked him why he called off the nuclear test of December 1995. He said there was no consensus on the test. There were divisions not only among the economists and administrators but also among the scientists themselves. He felt that he would conduct the test if he came back to office.

I asked him whether he did not owe it to the country and future generations to give his account of the evolution of the nuclear policy during his term of office. I also reminded him while I was not at the centre of decision-making on the nuclear issue I had been on the periphery of it. He said he was aware of it and would be prepared to talk to me in my individual capacity but not to the Kargil Committee. When I pressed him further on his obligations to future generations, he said he had an obligation only to one person and he had discharged it to the full. When I asked him who that person was, he replied "Atalji who succeeded me. I have briefed him fully." It is obvious from his statement that he had told Atalji all he had to know.

The Kargil Committee (George Verghese) also asked him why the defence budget was cut during his time. Rao replied that was because the nuclear deterrent was under development and that had priority. Then he proceeded to tell us on his own, how the nuclear arsenal was operationalised only during his premiership. Subsequently, a record of discussion, including what he told us on the progress of the nuclear programme during his tenure, was sent to him, as was done in all other cases. I was

wondering whether on second thoughts, he would cut out the portion on the nuclear issue. He did not, but signed the record as it was and returned it. One could understand why the NDA had an interest in not publishing the annexures of the Kargil report since the Rao account would have appropriated most of the credit for nuclear weapon development to the Congress. The publication of the annexures at this stage would be to the advantage of the UPA.

Perhaps it was fortunate that the tests got postponed by two years. That gave enough time for Dr Chidambaram to finalise his design of the thermo-nuclear device that was tested in May 1998. Some people have attributed Vajpayee's determination to conduct the test to Brajesh Mishra's urging. That raises the question how Vajpayee attempted to conduct the test during his 13-day tenure of office when Mishra was not around. Vajpayee's present disclosure would tend to support the view that he was egged on at that time by Rao.

Rao would not have acted without cold calculation. In 1994 concerned with the apparent lack of progress on the weapons programme, I gave Brajesh Mishra a draft resolution for the BJP to move in Parliament that the Government of India would continue with its preparations for nuclear weapon capability and would never sign the NPT. A little later, Mishra informed me that when Vajpayee showed the resolution to Rao the latter assured him that the programme was on track and there was no need for such a resolution.

In 1985, Dr Ramanna, as Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission and myself as Director of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, both members of Rajiv Gandhi's interdisciplinary group drafted two proposals to be presented to Pakistan – one on no-first-use of nuclear weapons and two, a mutual pledge not to attack each other's nuclear installations. Rajiv Gandhi favoured both proposals. At that stage, Rao was the Defence Minister. He summoned Dr Ramanna, Dr Arunachalam and me and discussed the proposals. That was the first time I came to realise that Rao was among the few in the decision-making loop on nuclear weapons. He told us that while he was in favour of our proposals in principle, he was against initiating the no-first-use proposal at that stage. His reason: the Prime Minister had done so much of talking on Pakistani nuclear weapons that our offers would lead the Pakistanis to conclude that India was initiating them out of a sense of weakness and fear. Rajiv accepted this logic. So while the proposal on mutual non-attack on each other's nuclear installations was pursued by Rajiv Gandhi, the no-first-use proposal was dropped for the time being.

In 1994, January, J.N. Dixit was laying down office as Foreign Secretary. He called me up on telephone and told me that he had come back from Pakistan where he presented to the Pakistanis six non-papers. One of them was on an agreement on no-first-use of nuclear capabilities. He said he had carried out what I had been urging for years.

In 1985 I proposed to Rao, then Defence Minister, that our armed forces needed

to be educated further on nuclear strategy. My own knowledge of nuclear strategy and my visits to the National Defence College and Wellington Staff College led me to believe that the expertise of our armed forces on nuclear strategy and doctrines should be advanced further. So I suggested that Lt. General Sundarji, then Vice Chief of Army Staff should be requested to prepare an instruction programme on the subject. Again Rao told me 'not yet'. Sundarji and myself attributed this reluctance to Rao's then widely believed tendency to avoid decisions. But during my private conversation with Rao during the Kargil hearings, I realised, as a cautious man he was not perhaps willing to launch any step which would tell the world that India had weapons till they were fully ready. His complaint was that till he took over as PM, the Indian weapon effort was not at optimum speed; a complaint that I am in no position to confirm or deny. According to Rao, he bought time till the country was ready and then attempted to go for testing.

I am recording the last two conversations Rao had with me during the Kargil enquiry because of their relevance to history.

Though the credit for the order to assemble the weapon goes to Rajiv Gandhi and the credit for restarting the development programme of the weapon after Morarji Desai halted it belongs to Indira Gandhi, it was Narasimha Rao who operationalised it. In other words, there has been a consistent continuity in the Indian nuclear policy under Congress governments. Even while working hard for nuclear disarmament, Congress prime ministers were hardheaded people who did not put all their eggs only in the basket of nuclear disarmament. During the time when Rao was Prime Minister, when India was under considerable pressure from the US to roll back its nuclear programme, he appears to have kept Vajpayee informed of the progress in the nuclear programme.

The evidence of this is that there was no pressure from the BJP in Parliament on the nuclear issue though there was a widespread impression in the country that the programmes had been slowed down under US pressure. Unfortunately, Rao's statesmanship in treating the nuclear issue as a nonpartisan national issue did not appear to have been reciprocated by the NDA leadership on the day of the Shakti tests.

The present UPA government in which the Congress party plays the dominant role must prepare a white paper on the evolution of India's nuclear policy so that there will be necessary continuity in the documentation of the country's security and foreign policy. This has been advocated by the Kargil Committee.

K Subrahmanyam is India's leading strategic affairs analyst and former Director of IDSA.