

Will weaponization make us secure?

This is in response to the letter by Balasubramanian *et al.* (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 76, 1290–1291). We disagree with all the four points raised by them but deal here with only the fourth point raised in their letter.

They justify the cost of nuclear weaponization, billed at Rs 40,000–50,000 crores in the next ten years, on the plea that it would consume only 1.5% of the budget and improve the security. Regarding security, one cannot be sure. The recent events in Kargil must act as a hard lesson for the deterrence–security theorists, but the point is – 1.5% of the budget should not be treated as ‘negligible’ as they make it to be. It would have been so if and only if we had a budgetary surplus; but our revenue deficit (current expenditure minus current revenue) today is more than what it was in 1991. We all know what extraordinary steps were taken in 1991, under the structural readjustments programme. One of the aims of this was to bring down the fiscal deficit from 8.4% in 1990–91 to about 6% in 1992–93 – the difference being a mere 2.4%! But such an exercise needed a major overhauling of the economy which is still far from over. And to recommend now a further increase by 1.5% (as done by Balasubramanian *et al.*) may prove to be suicidal for the country. Let us remember that the above amount if invested in conventional power sector, can bring an extra 7000 MW of installed capacity, considering the present rate of cost escalation, not a small amount at all in the present scenario. The Government of India had accepted a goal of 6% of budget expenditure for education, but has never reached that modest target with levels of illiteracy still remaining high.

This 1.5% increase being proposed for defence will still leave us short of the accepted level of expenditure on education. We have also need to consider health, drinking water and the like that have not been brought into this argument. UNICEF has made a number of interesting calculations that should be looked at by those recommending such increases in military expenditure. One also has to consider what roles these elements of the economy play in the context of security.

The main point is that in economics, a difference of merely 1.5% often gives rise to a cascading process that is difficult to control. Enhanced defence expenditure, at the cost of development projects, as may happen during wars do snowball as major economic crises. This was evident after the Bangladesh war also as the annual economic growth rate fell from 5.41% in the previous year to 1.8% in 1971–72. And India at the time was a country with very little external debt! At present, close to 30% of our foreign exchange earnings are spent in foreign debt servicing. If we consider internal debt, the task is much more daunting.

The suggested 1.5% increase in nuclear weapons, according to us would be inflationary. With poor revenue collection, the nuclear weaponization project has to be financed through money borrowed from the RBI and other sources. Private sector would be ‘crowded out’ – there would be less money for it to borrow, and interest rates would rise. This would restrict the availability of money for the private industries, and also make it more costly. They would then raise the prices of their commodities to recover their expenditure. This would set off a cycle of inflation. This inflationary

impact would have serious consequences on the poor, whose number is now on the rise, even though the country did not have a crop failure in the last decade due to unusually good monsoon. Economic programmes which are catastrophic for the poor have hardly any relevance for the future of our country. The security question cannot be separated from this basic issue. The real security, as the seminal works of Amartya Sen have established, cannot be judged merely in terms of security in wartime but is also linked with the security of the people at the time of peace. Balasubramanian *et al.* raise no such concern and hence find the weaponization costs to be marginal. The hidden, social costs are the ones, which we should ponder over.

The country that is most secure is the one whose citizens have a stake in it for their well being. In India, the poor peasant has suffered for many centuries – whether it was the Moghuls or the British, he found life very hard. After independence, expectations were high. Some improvements have indeed occurred, but the majority still live in pathetic conditions. If their living conditions improve, it will be the best security we can have. And if they do not, no amount of military expenditure will give us a guarantee of ‘security’.

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