**The spectre of nuclear conflict, once again**

After every major war or conflict, questions tend to be raised as to whether the ruling elites at the time had failed to see the writing on the wall and, hence, did not prepare for the possibility of a major conflict, or face up to the threat that lay ahead. Today, as some nations engage in sabre-rattling and hold out the threat not merely of war but also of using the ‘ultimate weapon’, it is important to raise this question yet again. The truth is, perhaps, hidden between layers of rhetoric that prominent leaders or their spokesmen indulge in from time to time. There is, yet, time for nations to sit-up and take notice as also discuss and discern hidden meanings behind the volley of rhetoric being seen.

**What the leaders of France and Russia say**

Many leaders, at least in the West, have taken due note of French President Emmanuel Macron’s so-called ‘apocalyptic vision’ and what the future, hence, looks like. There is also more than a hint in Mr. Macron’s remarks of the danger of nuclear ‘annihilation’, and unlike many previous outpourings of the French President, many Europeans this time are sitting-up and taking notice. Russia’s so called ‘mis-adventure’ seems to be the starting point of the French President’s ‘doomsday’ scenario, since he believes that the Ukraine war has changed Russia and that the Russian President Vladimir Putin’s ‘nuclear threats’ should not be ignored. As these remarks emanate from one of Europe’s most prominent leaders, the main thrust is on the impact that this would have on European security.

The French President is not inhibited on this occasion on his use of the term ‘French Nuclear Deterrent’ which has outgrown its previous ‘force de frappe’ metaphor. Today, France is in possession of what would be among the largest nuclear arsenals in the world, and hence, the French President’s utterances carry considerable weight. Against this backdrop and evidence of increasing Russian belligerence in the Ukraine Theatre, a possible use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine is no longer in the realm of fantasy. It does give rise to the spectre of a potential nuclear exchange. The French President is said to be planning to put forward his case on the nuclear aspect at a meeting of the European Political Community to be held in July this year.

It is not for the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, that the spectre of a nuclear conflict is coming to haunt the globe. The absence of leaders of consequence across the world, essentially those who have significant influence on world affairs, is aggravating the situation, making it more frightening. As it is, most parts of the world are going through extreme economic turbulence, leading to widespread problems. The nuclear fuse, which earlier tended to be long, appears of late to have shrunk. With a new array of weapons available to many nuclear weapon powers, this spells trouble. The absence of regular exchanges among nuclear weapon powers, notwithstanding the several protocols that are in place, is further cause for concern. Erstwhile nuclear guarantees, thus, appear to be fraying at the edges.

Aggravating this situation further are certain remarks attributed to Mr. Putin during the annual Victory Day Parade in Moscow on May 9 this year. In his address, the Russian President observed that ‘his nuclear forces were always on alert and that Moscow would not tolerate any Western threats’. He also added that ‘while Russia would do everything to prevent a global clash, at the same time we will not allow anyone to threaten us …. our strategic forces are always on alert’.

Well prior to this, in November 2023, Russia had revoked its ratification of a major international agreement, viz., the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) which is intended to prevent all forms of nuclear explosions, either for civilian or military purposes. The claim made by Russia, that revoking the ban was intended to balance the nuclear playing field with the United States, (which had never ratified it), is specious at best.

The international community’s response to this, not unexpectedly, has been extremely hostile, with several countries expressing concern that this step reversed the shift towards greater confidence in the nuclear arms regime. Meantime across the world, countries such as China are going ahead with enhancing their nuclear profile. China has very recently completed sea trials for its aircraft supercarrier fitted with electromagnetic catapults for launching aircraft. It is well on its way to complete building a fourth aircraft carrier.

**The discussion at Hoover**

Even as Europe and parts of the world seem to be haunted by the spectre of a possible nuclear armageddon, totally unconnected with this was an academic discussion on nuclear matters at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, U.S., which was attended by delegates from the U.S. and India (this writer was a delegate). The discussions centered around the U.S.-India civil nuclear Deal (2005-08) and how it had brought about a fundamental change in attitude, not only on nuclear matters but also on the entire gamut of relations between the U.S. and India. What the discussions seemed to imply was that there are many more things available in heaven than we are aware of. There were no references in the meeting to the nuclear stand-off in Europe, but the message emanating from the discussions seemed to imply that the methodology employed during the nuclear deal negotiations had relevance to many current disputes.

When India and the U.S. undertook to negotiate a nuclear deal, they stood at opposite poles of the nuclear order. India had not signed on to the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a foundational treaty governing global nuclear rules. It had also refused to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). India had carried out five nuclear tests in 1998, leading to the imposition of sanctions on India’s nuclear programme.

Consequent on the U.S.-India nuclear deal, most of the roadblocks that prevented India from joining the global nuclear regime were lifted. In the process, both sides made significant concessions. India agreed to separate its nuclear programme into civilian and military nuclear programmes, in return for linking permanent safeguards for permanent fuel supplies. India agreed to adhere to certain of the export control regulations. It accepted a voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing. The U.S., in turn, amended its domestic laws, and the U.S. Congress made possible the passage of legislative provision through enactment of the Hyde Act and the 123 Agreements. The U.S. also took the lead in approaching the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to ease nuclear restrictions on India. The U.S. and India thereafter coordinated their efforts to obtain an India Specific Safeguards Agreement from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This gave India a status similar to that of a nuclear weapon state under the Non Proliferation Treaty.

**The key to improving ties**

The message from the discussions at the Hoover Institution seemed to be that the deal had even more significance than being merely an arrangement about revising India’s nuclear status. Over the years since the deal was finalised in 2008, India-U.S. relations had attained new heights.

From technology denial, India had become a major technology partner of the U.S. Many of the mental cobwebs that previously existed had been removed and India and the U.S. had achieved a new plateau as far as economic and defence relations were concerned. India had also become an essential partner of the U.S. on many regional and global issues.

The discussions unambiguously seemed to reinforce the view that overcoming the psychological divide was critical to improving relations and relationships between countries. Breaching the impregnable wall of disbelief, leading to a subsequent transformation would inevitably have a beneficial impact. From India’s standpoint, given that the India-U.S. nuclear deal originated from India’s desire to obtain high grade uranium from outside to complement its energy requirements, the deal confirms that nuclear energy could be a major resource for peaceful purposes.