

India and Nuclear Weapons

In the sweltering heat of May 1998, India ended its long-standing nuclear ambiguity. By conducting two rounds of nuclear tests on May 11 and 13, India's first right-of-centre government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, resolved nearly five decades of nuclear debate in India in favour of an overt nuclear posture. For good or bad, and whether the world liked it or not, India had decided to cross the nuclear Rubicon. Fifty years after her independence, India now wants to become a »normal nation« – placing considerations of realpolitik and national security above its until recently dominant focus on liberal internationalism, morality and normative approaches to international politics. The shock waves from this decision are likely to haunt the domestic politics of India, the regional equations in the subcontinent, the balance of power in Asia, and the global nuclear order for a long time to come.

The Roots

India's dalliance with the nuclear question goes way back to the early 1940s well before India shook itself free from British colonialism, the American use of atomic bombs against Japan, and the full story of the efforts – unsuccessful in Germany and successful in the United States – to build nuclear weapons came to light. India's interest in the nuclear issues was spurred by the emergence of an impressive community of scientists in the early decades of the 20th century in India, who managed to produce world quality work despite the utter backwardness of the country. Scientists like C.V. Raman, Ramanujam, and S.N. Bose were making substantive contributions to international scientific development. Indians, with a long tradition of excellence in mathematics, took eagerly to modern physics that was about to fundamentally transform the world.

The Indian scientists were part of the exciting developments that were taking place in Europe in the field of atomic physics and clued into the debate on the economic and political implications of the prospect of harnessing nuclear energy. One of them, Dr. Homi Jehangir Bhabha was determined to ensure that when the Second World War ended and India became independent, it should be ready to enter the atomic age quickly. In 1944, fully three years before independence, Bhabha wrote and got a grant from the Tata Trust to set up a facility – the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research at Bombay – for advanced work on nuclear and allied areas of physics. India's first prime minister Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, who took strong interest in the development of India's scientific capabilities, gave unstinting support to Bhabha in building a wide-ranging national nuclear programme.

The focus of Bhabha and Nehru was on peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Like all the physicists and politicians who backed them in the 1950s, Bhabha and Nehru believed that nuclear research will lead to »energy too cheap to be metered«; and energy was to be the cornerstone of India's rapid development. Nehru's own high-profile international diplomacy, and Bhabha's wide-ranging contacts in the community of Western physicists – many of whom were now close to policy-making circles – ensured that India got substantive international co-operation in building an infrastructure for atomic research and development. Bhabha's standing was high enough to be elected as the president of the world's first international conference on atomic energy for peaceful purposes at Geneva in 1955.

Even as they laid the foundations of a broad-based nuclear programme, Bhabha and Nehru were not unaware of its military potential. But Nehru clearly ruled out the military application of nuclear energy, although he said he could not

vouch for the policies of the future generations of Indian leaders. With Nehru's emphasis on peace and disarmament in India's foreign policy, it could not have been otherwise. He took the lead in calling the world to come to a stand-still on nuclear weapon development, adopt a ban on nuclear testing and a freeze on production of nuclear material.

Even as they campaigned for nuclear disarmament, Nehru and Bhabha were clear in their mind that India should not give up the option to make nuclear weapons in the future. For this reason they refused to support any control mechanism – whether it was the Baruch Plan of the U.S. in 1945 or the international safeguards system – that sought to limit India's nuclear potential and future decision making on the bomb. Until the mid 1960s, the primary focus of the Indian nuclear policy was on building civilian nuclear technology, de-emphasising the military spin-off, and actively campaigning for nuclear restraint at the global level.

This policy mix came under tremendous pressure in October 1964, when China conducted its first nuclear test and declared itself the fifth nuclear weapon power. China's test, coming barely two years after Beijing humiliated New Delhi in a border conflict, forced India to debate for the first time in open its nuclear weapon option. There were strong demands within India for acquiring nuclear weapons; but there was also considerable hesitation arising from the deep revulsion against nuclear weapons and the notion of deterrence. Nehru's death five months before China's test had made it more difficult for India to make up her mind on nuclear weapons.

India tried three approaches to resolve its nuclear dilemma. One, it sought security guarantees from the United States, Soviet Union and Britain to cope with a hostile nuclear China on her borders. India was rebuffed by all three. Two, it attempted to develop a multilateral solution by calling for a non-proliferation treaty under which the nuclear powers would give up nuclear weapons and others would not acquire them. The NPT that came out of the multilateral negotiations turned out to be entirely different. Three, Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri decided in 1965 to go ahead with a sub-terranean nuclear explosion project (SNEP). But both Shastri and Bhabha died in January 1966. And given the large political and eco-

conomic crisis that India went through in that period, SNEP was postponed.

It was left to Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the successors of Bhabha to complete it in 1974 by conducting the first underground nuclear test. But the test – a delayed response to China's explosion a decade earlier – did not end the Indian nuclear problematic. It demonstrated India's nuclear capability; but New Delhi remained unwilling to call itself a nuclear weapon power. It confounded the whole world by naming the test a »peaceful nuclear explosion« and declaring that it had no intention of embarking on a nuclear weapon programme. The tension between India's moral rejection of nuclear weapons and the security imperative of acquiring them remained unresolved. Further, India's action in 1974 provoked the world into acting against it – through an expanding series of non-proliferation sanctions – without completing the task that challenged the global non-proliferation order.

From the late 1970s, there were renewed pressures on India to reconsider her ambiguous nuclear position. This time they came from the western border, where Pakistan had embarked on a clandestine nuclear weapon programme. China had begun a massive transfer of nuclear weapons technology to Pakistan. The United States, which renewed its strategic alliance with Pakistan in the early 1980s to drive Russians out of Afghanistan was unwilling to challenge it. Mrs. Gandhi considered conducting nuclear tests in the early 1980s, but the word about preparations got out and it had to be cancelled. As the scale of Pakistani nuclear weapon programme began to be understood in New Delhi in the mid 1980s, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi sought to pressure the United States into stopping the Pakistanis; but the gambit did not work. Mr. Gandhi who had embarked on an international campaign against nuclear weapons at the height of the Cold War resisted pressures from the strategic establishment to go nuclear. When the Pakistani leaders began to flaunt their nuclear weapon capability from early 1987 on-wards, India was left with few choices. Mr. Gandhi ordered nuclear weaponization in 1988, and the project was completed in 1990 under his successor, Mr. V.P. Singh. But the ambiguity in India's nuclear posture remained.

The Strategic Options After the Cold War

The end of the Cold War did not bring the expected peace dividend for India; instead it accentuated the Indian security problems. India was confronting a radically transformed world order, with few reliable friends. The importance of »self-help« in managing its national security was coming to the fore with greater clarity. New questions about India's nuclear options were now being debated. Is India's untested nuclear deterrent – now composed of a few air-deliverable weapons – credible against its two nuclear adversaries in the neighbourhood? The new pressures on India became irresistible, and India moved inexorably towards testing its nuclear weapons by the end of the 1990s. A number of factors were forcing the issue of testing to the forefront, and all that the BJP government did was to give the final political clearance for the tests, which were under active consideration for at least a few years before.

The end of the Cold War removed one of the most important constraints against overt nuclearization of India. That was the strength of the Soviet Union, India's de facto military/political ally since 1971, when the two sides signed a treaty. It provided enough of a security assurance for India to avoid going fully down the nuclear road. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left India without a reliable ally in the new world order dominated by one super power. The demise of the Soviet Union and the consequent disorientation of Indian foreign policy was compounded by a profound internal economic and political crisis. India had to cope with the imperative of reforming – root and branch – its development strategy built around the state capitalist model. It also had to manage the decline of the Congress Party and the consequent political instability at the centre.

The end of the Cold War raised expectations in India of a new relationship with the United States. But these hopes in the early 1990s were quickly dashed as the United States drifted towards a strategy that sought to pressurise India rather than befriend it. As the world's largest democracy sought to cope with massive threats to its territorial integrity posed by intensive insurgencies – rooted in domestic political mismanagement but fuelled by Pakistan – in the sensitive border states of Punjab, Kashmir and the North Eastern provinces, the

Clinton Administration was determined to highlight India's human rights problems. Washington also stepped up its diplomatic activism to »resolve« the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan. The new U.S. strategy towards India also highlighted the dangers of a nuclear war between New Delhi and Islamabad and emphasised the importance of rolling back India's nuclear and missile capabilities. The U.S. policy towards India in the early 1990s demanded simultaneous concessions from India on two most sensitive issues – its nuclear programme and Kashmir – and resulted in deepening India's security anxieties.

The decline of Russia's standing in the world after the Cold War also saw the rise of China and the growing recognition in the United States that Beijing is now the second most important power in the international system. The huge gulf that had emerged in the international stature of India and China – who were seen as peers offering different models of social and political development until the late 1970s was now a major source of concern for New Delhi. Although India embarked on a process of normalisation of relations with China since the end of the 1990s, India's self-esteem and pride were badly hurt by the way the world treated the two Asian giants – Communist China as a global power, and democratic India as a regional power locked into a conflict with a hostile smaller neighbour, Pakistan. China's policy of buttressing the strategic capabilities of Pakistan, with added co-operation on missiles in the 1990s, were seen in New Delhi as an attempt to balance India within the subcontinent. Regaining the psychological parity with Beijing, reasserting a role in the Asian balance of power, and getting out of the Subcontinental box became important national objectives that had a significant bearing on India's nuclear policy in the 1990s.

The Gulf War and the Western concerns about proliferation of weapons of mass destruction saw a dramatic expansion of the technology denial regime against India, which was seen as a major proliferation risk. The squeezing of advanced technology transfers to India in the 1990s forced India to re-evaluate the costs of nuclear ambiguity. So long as India remained an undeclared nuclear weapon state, there seemed no prospect of gaining access to technologies. That turned the Indian nuclear debate to consider the trade-off between the pain

of punishment that would inevitably follow an Indian test and the cumulative costs of technology denial over the last quarter of a century. If the former is politically manageable and can be limited to a short term, why suffer agonising permanent denial of technologies?

The need to once again demonstrate India's nuclear capability and transform itself into a declared nuclear weapon power was reinforced by the perception that the international nuclear order was closing in on New Delhi. The indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 was seen in India as permanently legitimising the possession of nuclear weapons by a few states; and that the total elimination of nuclear weapons was an increasingly unrealisable objective. The NPT extension fundamentally altered India's own attitude to the on-going negotiations on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

New Delhi had long supported the idea of CTBT as an important and integral step towards disarmament. As the drafting of the treaty proceeded, it became clear to India that the treaty was driven more by non-proliferation concerns. The political objective in particular appeared to be limiting the capabilities of the threshold states to design anything other than crude nuclear weapons. The CTBT shook the Indian nuclear debate out of its long stupor and forced into open the question of testing. There was a growing sense that the CTBT would forever close an Indian decision to test – whether India joined the treaty or not. It also raised doubts about the long-standing policy of keeping Indian nuclear option »open« or »ambiguous«. The insistence of China that the CTBT would not come into force without India's signature, and the incorporation of this provision into the Treaty despite India's objections reinforced the point.

The CTBT resulted in the emergence of two schools of thought within the strategic community. One which argued that India could live without testing and build a reasonably credible deterrent. And the other, in particular the technical community, suggested that without testing India's deterrent would not be credible. They insisted that in order to develop a war-head for missiles, as well as creating a significant data base for future nuclear weapons research, it was necessary to conduct at least a limited number of tests. Confronted with this choice all the recent Indian governments

toyed with the idea of testing. The government of Mr. P.V. Narasimha Rao came close to testing nuclear weapons in late 1995/early 1996. The two United Front governments during 1996–98 both looked at the option. All three backed off with the understanding that the political and economic costs of testing would be inordinately high. The BJP government was willing to risk this and may have calculated that the long-term gains (and perhaps immediate domestic political gains) could outweigh the immediate political and economic costs of testing.

The International Reaction

The international reaction to Indian tests did indicate the substantive price India might have to pay in the economic and foreign policy arenas in the coming years. It has added to the uncertainty about the prospects for successful economic reform in India. Coming at a time when the Indian economy has slowed down and there is a visible deceleration of the reforms, there is some concern about the short term impact of economic sanctions that have been imposed on India. But the ruling BJP coalition hopes that all the economic powers of the world would not gang up to economically isolate India. There is a sense that Europeans in particular would not follow the United States in imposing wide-ranging economic sanctions against India despite veiled threats from the European Union. Although Japan has followed the United States in cutting off aid to India, there is confidence that Tokyo would not go the full distance. Lending from multilateral institutions has been postponed, but there is a significant amount of undisbursed aid that could be utilised. But the sanctions from the United States – India's biggest trade partner and largest foreign direct investor – are substantive, and their impact cannot be minimised. But there is expectation that the U.S. corporations could be mobilised to limit the interpretation of these sanctions; and that the size of the Indian market would eventually limit the duration of these punitive measures from the United States.

The immediate political costs – in terms of relations with great powers and in the immediate neighbourhood are more direct and visible. In one shot India has put its relations with the United States,

China and Pakistan into a prolonged phase of uncertainty. The Clinton Administration, which was beginning to make preparations for President Clinton's visit to the Subcontinent later in the year and had believed that the new government would not do anything to rock the boat on the nuclear front, is seething with anger. This has been accentuated by its inability to politically judge the BJP and get a scent of its preparations for the test. After a difficult period in the early 1990s, Indo-U.S. relations have been on the upswing in recent years, and could have consolidated at a higher level during President Clinton's visit. That prospect now seems remote.

India's relations with China have taken a nose-dive. The process had started before the tests when the Indian defence minister Mr. George Fernandes, a long-time socialist, critic of Chinese communists and a supporter of freedom in Tibet and Myanmar, launched a barrage of statements highlighting the threat from China. Although his views on the long-term challenge from China, and its increasing strategic role in the subcontinent and its environs are widely shared in the Indian strategic community, the style of articulation had created new tensions in the Sino-Indian relationship. Further, the Prime Minister's justification of the Indian nuclear tests on the basis of the threat from China and its nuclear and missile assistance to Pakistan riled the Chinese.

Beijing reacted viciously to India's nuclear tests and accused it of seeking regional hegemony and blamed India for beginning a nuclear arms race in the subcontinent. Its response to Pakistani nuclear tests that followed India's was less condemnatory, interpreting them as an inevitable reaction to India's tests. China has demanded a roll-back of India's nuclear and missile programmes. New Delhi sees the reaction in Beijing as effort to preserve its status as the sole recognised nuclear power of Asia, prevent New Delhi's attempts to bring multipolarity to Asia, tie India down to the subcontinent, and use the international reaction to force India to renounce its nuclear weapons. The Indian nuclear tests could leave Sino-Indian relations in a prolonged state of tension for quite some time to come.

New Delhi has been pleased with France and Russia for their moderate response to India's tests and their role in watering down some of the for-

mulations of the G-8, P-5, and the United Nations Security Council. While India has had years of good relations with Russia, the tests could open the door for a substantive expansion of India's political and commercial ties with France. But there are clearly limits to how far Moscow and Paris could go in shaping international diplomacy on India's nuclear tests. While they have blocked the talk of expanding the sanctions regime against India, both France and Russia have an interest in preserving the existing non-proliferation order. In the declarations of the P-5 and the UNSC, there has been a strong defence of the current order and a determination to prevent a recognition of India and Pakistan as nuclear weapon states after their recent tests.

India's biggest long-term cost might have come from the tests conducted by Pakistan. Although an Indian decision to test might have assumed that Pakistan would follow suit, it is not clear New Delhi had a full sense of the political consequences. They have helped Pakistan demonstrate its nuclear parity, if only in symbolic terms, with India. This had reduced the prospects of India negotiating over a period of time its way into the nuclear weapons club and separating itself from Pakistan. The international reaction to the South Asian tests has focused once again on the problematic of an »arms race« between India and Pakistan, and the importance of resolving the so-called underlying cause, the Kashmir dispute. Both of these formulations are unacceptable to India.

There is some anxiety that Pakistan has succeeded after years of failure, to get the international community to focus on Kashmir. The UNSC for the first time after 33 years has referred to Kashmir in its resolution of June 6, 1998 on South Asian tests. Although the resolution refers to a solution to the Kashmir dispute within the bilateral framework that India wants, it may have created the basis for future international action on the issue. India, of course, is well aware that what finally shapes the issue is the nature of India's own relations with the great powers and the cor-relation of interests among them. While India finds the U.N. action worrisome, it believes the situation is not entirely unmanageable.

In the rest of South Asia, among the smaller neighbours, the reaction to Indian tests has been somewhat muted. And there has been some overt

support from Sri Lanka and less overtly from Nepal. While the Indian and Pakistani tests do cast a shadow over the processes of regional co-operation in the near term, it is unlikely to affect it over the long term. If Pakistan does remain hesitant to allow economic integration in the subcontinent through free trade and other arrangements, India will have to look at a »two-speed SAARC«, that will allow a more rapid movement through »sub-regional co-operation«.

Prospects

There are two elements to the current Indian strategy to overcome the costs of its challenge to the global nuclear order. The first is economic and commercial diplomacy – to effectively play the size of the Indian market in shaping the policies of the major economic powers. The success of this would depend on the effectiveness of India's own economic policies and the pace of its liberalisation and globalisation. Here, however, the BJP may be partly constrained by its emphasis on »Swadeshi« or self-reliance. While the government interprets this as not contradicting India's recent reforms, there are ideologues within BJP who might be critical of opening up the economy to dilute the affect of Western sanctions. The government has made promises to open up the economy; but its ability to achieve it remains to be seen.

New Delhi is aware that commercial diplomacy alone is unlikely to succeed without a measure of flexibility in its approach to global nuclear arms control treaties and an intensive effort to negotiate a modus vivendi with the global nuclear order. All these years India emphasized absolute objectives – total disarmament, equity and fairness, non-discrimination and primacy of national sovereignty – in dealing with global arms control. As a result, India has found it hard to support any global nuclear arms limitation treaty that affected it. This was partly shaped by the legacy of a national movement that emphasized normative principles and »non-cooperation« as a strategy to defeat stronger opponents. It was also partly induced by the need to protect the nuclear option for a future date when it might have to be exercised. India's prolonged reluctance to exercise the option left it in confrontation with most of the global nuclear arrangements.

India's nuclear tests do offer a break from this long tradition. Having exercised the nuclear option now, New Delhi has signalled that it is ready to be more flexible on joining the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). It has imposed on itself a unilateral moratorium on further tests and maintained it even after the Pakistani tests. It has thus undertaken the basic obligation of the CTBT – no more tests – and expressed a readiness to make it a »de jure« obligation after negotiations with the great powers. It also signalled a willingness to put a cap on the size of its nuclear arsenal by joining the international negotiations on a fissile material cut-off treaty (FMCT). India has offered to negotiate a no-first-use agreement bilaterally with Pakistan, and collectively in any international forum. It has also reiterated its commitment to prevent further proliferation of nuclear weapons through stringent controls over its exports of sensitive technologies and materials. This is a significant shift towards realism on India's part; but faces considerable resistance both from within and outside.

Within the country, many of the opposition parties are unwilling to countenance any signature on the CTBT that the nation had rejected with such intensity just two years before. They are unwilling to accept the government's argument that having tested, India should have no objection to joining the treaty – that while the text of the CTBT has not changed, the context has. The opposition, which is critical of the tests and the government's handling of the fall out, is charging that signing the CTBT would be a surrender to the American pressures.

Externally, the great powers have been reluctant to engage India on its offer to become part of the arms control mainstream as a declared nuclear power. They have rejected India's claim to be a nuclear weapon state as unacceptable under the NPT. They have called on India to join the NPT, sign the CTBT »unconditionally and immediately«, give up further production of fissile material, join the negotiations on the FMCT, stop nuclear weaponization and their deployment, undertake confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) with Pakistan, abandon the testing, development and deployment of nuclear capable missiles. There are elements in this approach which are entirely unacceptable to India, and others which may be negotiable.

There is no question of India accepting the NPT and rolling back its nuclear weapon programme. Even in the midst of a divisive domestic debate on nuclear policy, there are no takers in any Indian political quarter for the NPT. Similarly, India will not accept the demand on not testing missiles. The one missing link in India's nuclear architecture is a medium-range missile that will give it functional deterrence against China. India is on the verge of testing an advanced version of the Agni missile which could reach important targets in China. A demand on India to give up its missile programme amounts to accepting the right of China to keep and modernise its missile forces, keeping India permanently vulnerable to Chinese nuclear weapons, and the right of the U.S. and its allies in Asia to develop missile defences.

On CTBT and FMCT, India has signalled its flexibility. India is also interested in negotiating a wide range of military and nuclear CSBMs with both Pakistan and China. Pakistan, however, is hesitant because an emphasis on the CSBMs might reduce the international focus on Kashmir. The great powers' demand on non-weaponization is absurd, given the reality that India has weaponized its capability nearly a decade ago – at least in relation to air-deliverable weapons. But the deployment of nuclear weapons and missiles could be an area where there could be some flexibility. The notions of »de-alerting« and the need to separate missiles and warheads to reduce the nuclear danger have gained ground recently among Western arms controllers. India might be prepared to engage in such discussion with the other nuclear weapon powers on a reciprocal basis.

If the great powers refuse to recognise the new nuclear situation in the subcontinent, remain unwilling to negotiate meaningfully with India, and insist on reality accommodating the treaties and not the other way around, India has only two options: one negative and multilateral, and the other unilateral and positive. Under the former, New Delhi will have to step up its rhetoric on disarmament, challenge the nuclear monopoly of the P-5, question the recent evolution of their nuclear doctrines, point to the reliance of the U.S. and its allies on nuclear weapons for their security, reject all interim arms control treaties, and activate the non-aligned movement and the United Nations General Assembly with a barrage of proposals that

target the nuclear weapons and missiles of everyone. Universalism in disarmament has considerable appeal within the international community and was reflected in the Security Council debate on south Asian tests. It also has substantive political support within India.

The other approach is one that India needs to take in its own interest and to demonstrate to the world that it will be a responsible nuclear weapon power. By emphasising the limited role of nuclear weapons except in deterrence of blackmail and aggression, limiting the size and sophistication of its arsenal, devising a nuclear doctrine that will have strong built-in constraints against early use of nuclear weapons, instituting measures that will prevent their accidental or unauthorised use, India could convey to its neighbours and the world at large that there is no real danger to international peace and security from India's nuclear weapons. Whether the great powers accommodate India or continue to push it around, sticking to a minimum nuclear deterrent and unveiling a non-provocative nuclear doctrine would be important. And within the Indian strategic community there is strong support for such a course of action. The world has the choice to either encourage the realist and moderate trend in Indian nuclear thinking and integrate New Delhi into the global nuclear order, or promote extremist Indian positions by insisting on a total capitulation to the NPT system. ◀