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Why did India go nuclear in 1998?

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On May 11, 2023, India will mark 25 years as a state with nuclear weapons. The momentous decision to conduct five nuclear tests in 1998 -- three on May 11 and two more on May 13 -- was taken in complete secrecy. The world woke up to the new reality only when the news was officially announced by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to India and the world at large.

Why did India choose to exercise the nuclear option in 1998 after having followed a policy of ambivalence for long? Since India had given a hint of its nuclear capability through the conduct of a peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE) in 1974, why did it continue to sit on the fence for 25 years before taking the nuclear plunge? What precipitated the need to test, instead of just keeping the nuclear option open?

The answer to these questions lies in two developments from that time. The first of these was an increasingly nuclearised regional environment, and the second was the progressively constraining non-proliferation instruments that were limiting India's choices. But, before analysing these further, it is necessary to understand that India could take the call to go nuclear only because the programme had been built by visionary nuclear scientists and engineers, and was sustained by political leaders who, irrespective of their personal predilections, were conscious of the *realpolitik* that drove international relations.

India's nuclear programme had an early start. The Atomic Energy Commission of India was instituted on August 3, 1948, within one year of independence. It was fortuitous that Dr Homi Bhabha, the father of India's nuclear programme, had international exposure to nuclear technology and convinced a scientifically inclined Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, that the country

should invest in this pioneering technology. Peaceful uses of nuclear energy were the primary motivations in the minds of both of these Indian pioneers. But the fact that the technology and the expertise had the potential to be used to build a strategic capability was not lost on them.

When China conducted its first nuclear test in 1964, it led to a debate within the small strategic community in India on its own response options. Given that China had imposed a crushing defeat on India in 1962, this was only natural, especially since India was also aware of China's nuclear efforts. In August 1961, Nehru had asked Bhabha "to take precautionary measures."[1] Bhabha had then set up a small group to study the high-pressure physics of nuclear explosions in January 1962. The result of the war with China compelled India to consider various modes of deterrence, including hastening efforts to demonstrate the capability to conduct a PNE.

It needs to be recalled that the conduct of PNEs was not uncommon in the 1960s-70s. For instance, the US established Project Plowshare in 1957, which it claimed was a cost-effective option for undertaking tasks such as deep geological mining, building big tunnels, flattening mountains, etc. The USSR, too, stated that it had used such explosions for developmental work. In its general conference, even the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) discussed PNEs within the rubric of peaceful uses of nuclear technology.[2] So, India was not contemplating anything out of the ordinary. However, it was well aware of the strategic implications of the activity.

Lal Bahadur Shastri, who became PM after Nehru's death in May 1964, was initially reluctant to approve a PNE. He explored other possibilities, such as seeking protection from the UK, asking the UN to offer a security umbrella to non-nuclear states, proposing a treaty on disarmament, and a freeze on the production of nuclear weapons. Of these, the idea that got some traction, mostly because it was a shared interest between the two superpowers who had just emerged from the scary experience of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, was that of a non-proliferation treaty (NPT). Negotiations on this started in 1965 and India was a participant.

Meanwhile, Pakistan mounted another war on India in 1965. As Indian forces pushed Pakistan back and came within striking distance of Lahore, China threatened to broaden the conflict. China – Pakistan collusivity influenced PM Shastri's thinking on India's need for nuclear weapons. In December 1965, he asked Bhabha to speed up plans for a PNE. However, tragically, PM Shastri died in January 1966. And, later the same year, Bhabha too died in a plane crash.

With the change in top political and nuclear leadership, the pace of the nuclear programme slackened a bit. While grappling with many domestic issues, PM Indira Gandhi took time to build her conviction on nuclear weapons. In fact, she too sent key officials to the US, UK, and USSR in search of nuclear guarantees. Meanwhile, by 1968, the NPT had clearly emerged as a non-proliferation tool with states divided into two neat categories. Nuclear weapon states (NWS) were those that had conducted a nuclear test before January 1, 1967. The remaining were to join the treaty as non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS). Thus, China fell within the fold of the NWS while India was left to become a member of the NPT as a NNWS. India rejected the treaty, opting to keep the nuclear option open lest its security environment deteriorate further, which it soon did.

India faced nuclear coercion in 1971, when the US, in support of Pakistan (which had just about then secretly aided its rapprochement with China), sent in the powerful naval task force led by *USS Enterprise* to the Bay of Bengal. This act, followed by Pakistan's decision to develop nuclear weapons in 1972, made the Indian leadership reconsider its own choices. A go-ahead for a PNE was granted and it was conducted on May 18, 1974. Despite the test, however, India did not move towards weaponisation, even though the action certainly accelerated Pakistan's efforts towards nuclear weapons. Pakistan's indigenous developments were supplemented with designs of centrifuges for uranium enrichment that were stolen by AQ Khan from the Netherlands, along with liberal Chinese help on weapon designs, technology, and fissile material. Not surprisingly, in 1987, Khan bragged in an interview to an Indian journalist that his country was close to nuclearisation.

Meanwhile, India was still leaning towards strategic restraint and keen to find an answer to its regional nuclear challenges through the idea of universal nuclear disarmament. In 1988, PM Rajiv Gandhi presented a comprehensive Action Plan for Ushering in a Nuclear Weapon Free and Non-violent World Order to the third Special Session on Disarmament at the United Nations. The recommendation was well thought out and expansive enough to include collateral steps across domains of conventional forces and outer space. It recommended measures to be taken in three stages spread over 22 years that would have made the world nuclear-free by 2010.[3]

The plan did not evoke a positive response since the superpowers were still steeped in Cold War politics. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, nuclear non-proliferation became an immediate concern. Consequently, the focus shifted to the perpetuation of the NPT, which was to come up for review and extension in 1995. Washington pressured the NNWS into granting an

indefinite and unconditional extension to the treaty. For India, this meant a loss of leverage on their part to push the NWS towards disarmament.

Meanwhile, another instrument that India supported to facilitate nuclear disarmament in this period was the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). But, the treaty emerged with the narrow objective of stopping new countries from developing nuclear weapons even though existing NWS could continue to modernise their arsenals through computer simulations and non-explosive testing. India had strong misgivings about this discriminatory stance, as well as the treaty's entry-into-force provision, which, contrary to customary practice, identified a list of 44 countries to sign the treaty mandatorily. India was one of them. As a result, India blocked the treaty at the Conference on Disarmament, where it was being negotiated. However, the draft text of the CTBT was taken to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) by Australia, where it was adopted by Resolution A/RES/50/245 and opened for signature. Countries had only until October 1999 to sign the CTBT.

The nuclear stranglehold was tightening around India. By this time, China had already conducted as many as 45 nuclear tests and had developed solid-fuelled, road-mobile, medium-range missiles and the first-generation SSBNs. China had also conducted a nuclear test for Pakistan, and the latter was fomenting insurgencies in J&K and Punjab, its confidence boosted by its nuclear weapons capability.

Caught in a security and non-proliferation bind, India was compelled to develop its own nuclear weapons to establish credible deterrence against nuclear coercion or blackmail by countries that held claims on Indian territories. As explained by Jaswant Singh, India's Minister of External Affairs in 1998, nuclear tests acquired for India "the much-needed strategic space and to break free from the new nuclear paradigm that had come into existence in the nineties".[4]

Prestige was a collateral benefit of India's tests. Since the world bestows a certain status on countries that possess nuclear weapons, India, too, became its beneficiary. But prestige was not the primary driver behind India's decision to acquire nuclear weapons. Security[5] was, and still remains the rationale.

Notes:

1. Raj Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace: The Secret Story of India's Quest to be a Nuclear Power*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 85

2. Georges Delcoigne, "A Review of IAEA Activities Relating to PNE", *IAEA Bulletin*, vol 17, no. 5, October 1975, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/publications/magazines/bulletin/bull17-5/17505082628.pdf

3. For text of Action Plan see Manpreet Sethi, ed, *Towards a Nuclear Weapon Free World* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2009), pp 151-156.

4. Chengappa, n.1, p. 434.

5. The security concerns were also well explained by PM Vajpayee in his letter to the US President after the nuclear tests. See Appendix VI in ML Sondhi, ed., *Nuclear Weapons and India's National Security* (New Delhi: Har Anand Publications, 2000), p. 165-166

[Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)]

Recommended Readings:

- Jasjit Singh, ed., *Nuclear India* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 1999).
- Raj Chengappa, Weapons of Peace: *The Secret Story of India's Quest to be a Nuclear Power*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2000).
- ML Sondhi, ed., *Nuclear Weapons and India's National Security* (New Delhi: Har Anand Publications, 2000). Appendices in the book are especially useful.
- Amitabh Mattoo, *India's Nuclear Deterrent: Pokhran II and Beyond* (New Delhi: Har Anand Publications, 1999).
- George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (University of California Press,1999).
- Jasjit Singh and Manpreet Sethi. ed., *Nuclear Defence and Diplomacy* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2004).