

CHAPTER VII

Causes and Implications of the South Asian Nuclear Tests

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SUBSEQUENT TO INDIA'S FIVE NUCLEAR TESTS on May 11 and 13, 1998, Pakistan conducted six tests of its own on May 28 and 30, exacerbating tensions between the two South Asian countries. As India's stance on developing nuclear weapons showed no sign of softening, Pakistan indicated that it could not unilaterally withdraw from the nuclear race. The two countries will now likely focus on developing the necessary delivery and support systems.

This new nuclear arms race in South Asia may be the most important global issue at the century's end. It threatens not only peace and stability in South Asia but also international security.

MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THE INDIAN NUCLEAR TESTS

Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes has declared China to be India's "potential number one threat," and in a letter to President Bill Clinton on May 13, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bahari Vajpayee asserted that India's nuclear tests were justified due to a weakening of national security. Vajpayee stated, "We have an overt nuclear weapons state on our borders, a state which committed armed aggression

against India in 1962, and an atmosphere of distrust persists mainly due to the unresolved border problem" (Vajpayee 1998). The Indian Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led administration thus posited that its nuclear tests were due to perceived threats from China because of the border dispute and the 1962 war. However, this was not the real reason behind India's recent nuclear tests. We need to consider a number of factors to explain the motivation behind the nuclear tests.

First is India's domestic political needs. In fact, India has had the ability to produce nuclear weapons for several years, and Indian officials have said on several occasions that India has mastered "all nuclear weapon technologies" and that if necessary could "assemble atom bombs immediately." According to estimates, India has the capability to produce about fifty nuclear bombs and plutonium devices.

India's security has recently improved. Notably, new progress has been made in the dialogue between India and Pakistan. For example, in February 1997 Mohd Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League rejected war as an option for resolving disputes between the two countries, saying, "Pakistan and India must solve the Kashmir dispute bilaterally. We must sit at the table, face to face, to study and solve all outstanding disputes" (Xinhua News Agency 1997). India responded to this signal immediately, with then Prime Minister H. D. Deve Gowda expressing his wish to initiate a new dialogue with Pakistan in a letter to Sharif congratulating him on his election as prime minister.

With these overtures marking a turning point in the relationship, talks between top-level leaders of the two countries have been more frequent than ever before. In 1997, there were four rounds of talks between the two prime ministers, three formal sessions at the diplomatic secretarial level, and other talks between the ministers of foreign affairs. Moreover, the two countries could claim some real achievements, including formalizing a list of issues to be resolved, and both sides reached some concrete understandings, such as agreeing to set up specialized working groups. This is in striking contrast to the seven rounds of talks held intermittently between 1989 and 1994, all of which came to a fruitless conclusion. Although many discussions were held in the past between the prime ministers of the two

countries, most resulted in little more than an exchange of greetings and avoided contentious issues. But since early 1997, the leaders of both countries have adopted a comparatively realistic attitude. In addition, the two prime ministers now inform each other of urgent problems via a hotline, and they frequently exchange opinions. Some actual problems have thus been resolved. For example, the conflicts that arose over the demarcation of Kashmir in September and early October 1997 were quelled through hotline communications between the two prime ministers.

Sino-Indian relations have also improved in recent years. India is one of China's largest neighbors, and the two countries have traditionally been friends. During the initial post-independence period for both countries, Sino-Indian relations were quite amicable. Indeed, both China and India were early advocates of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. In the late 1950s, however, relations between the two nations began to deteriorate. A boundary question has been the core issue among the many points of contention between the two countries, causing the Sino-Indian border war in 1962.

Since the mid-1980s, a number of events have augured improvements in Sino-Indian relations, following an exchange of visits between the late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Chinese Premier Li Peng. In September 1993, then Indian Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao visited China, and China and India signed an agreement to maintain peace and tranquillity along demarcation lines in their border areas. Indian defense experts came to recognize that détente with China would be to India's benefit, by creating a stable environment, reducing the defense budget, and helping to develop the economy. Abid Hussain, deputy director of the Indian Institute for Contemporary Studies, wrote in *Pioneer* in November 1993 that India should devote itself to developing its economy, striving to become a major global economic power within twenty-five years, and thus bringing about a peaceful and stable environment (Yu 1998, 3).

In November 1996, Chinese President Jiang Zemin paid a state visit to India. At the conclusion of cordial discussions, the top leaders of the two countries signed four agreements, including a pact covering confidence-building measures for military forces along demarcation lines in border areas. During President Jiang's visit, Indian Prime

Minister Gowda disregarded diplomatic protocol and appeared at the airport in person to receive and to see off the Chinese leader. This showed India's readiness to elevate Sino-Indian relations to a new, higher level. After the visit, China and India made some progress in such areas as recognizing present border demarcations, reducing bilateral military forces in border areas, establishing confidence-building measures, and opening border areas to free trade. In early 1998, Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian visited India.

These examples suggest that the Indian security environment has shown some improvement. So why did the Indian government conduct nuclear tests at this time? It is instructive to observe the current Indian domestic political situation. After Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral fell from power in November 1997, Indian politics entered a turbulent period. The BJP took over the government as the dominant member of a coalition early in 1998, but the political basis of the coalition is weak, with the coalition government claiming a single-seat majority in the Indian Congress. Also significant in the Indian political climate is the fact that the policy of developing nuclear weapons has had broad popular support for a long time. In 1997, for example, several public opinion polls indicated that 60 percent of the Indian people supported nuclear weapons development. As a result, the BJP regarded nuclear tests as a strategic move, rather like a chess gambit, that would further the party's interests and improve the political situation. The party's main objectives were to stimulate nationalistic emotions among Indians by creating a controversy of global proportions, to divert the attention of the Indian people and the media from domestic issues, and to strengthen its position as the party in power.

The party also regarded the tests as a form of strategic deterrent, mainly aimed at China and Pakistan. In the post-cold war period, nuclear weapons are almost impossible to use as a tool in actual combat, but they still play a deterrent role. Some political and military figures in India regard China as a potential threat and entertain grave concerns about China's power. Specifically, they claim that China's nuclear power poses a serious threat to India's security and that sales of Chinese weapons to Pakistan would disturb the existing military balance between India and Pakistan. For this reason, India

is making great efforts to develop its nuclear and missile technologies, and it refuses to waive its nuclear option. By carrying out nuclear tests, India displayed its nuclear capabilities to China, Pakistan, and other South Asian countries, and it engaged in strategic deterrence.

India also regards nuclear tests as a means of seeking major power status. India's international status has weakened in recent years. The collapse of the cold war order in the early 1990s sent shock waves throughout South Asia. The U.S.-Pakistan axis ceased to exist, and the Soviet-Indian alliance fell apart. The end of the cold war also rendered the nonaligned movement meaningless, and India's leadership in that movement fell victim to the ongoing drastic change. On the other hand, China, Japan, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have seen their status elevated vis-à-vis that of India among Asian entities as a result of their bolstered economic and political prowess. Given India's aspirations to major power status, the actual situation conflicts with Indian government objectives.

In addition, India wants to join the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. APEC recently admitted three new member states, but not India. APEC has since vowed not to accept any new members, implying that nonmember India will continue to suffer from a serious handicap in foreign trade.

The Indian government desires to be a powerful and respected member of the international community and views permanent membership in the UN Security Council as a way to raise its status. However, its competitors in this race—Japan and Germany—are more likely to gain permanent membership.

Among the Indian Ocean Rim nations, India, Australia, and South Africa are the leaders, but this nascent partnership cannot compare with the influence of APEC, the European Union (EU), ASEAN, or the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) area. Any affiliation among Indian Ocean nations does not yet have any permanent significance, and it is premature to forecast whether this region will foster greater economic cooperation in the future.

India is a regional power on the South Asian subcontinent, but its international status faces great challenges. It is clear that the Indian

government wants to use its status as a nuclear power to raise its international standing and to enable it to become a permanent UN Security Council member.

PAKISTAN'S REACTION TO THE INDIAN TESTS

India has long regarded Pakistan as its greatest single threat, and vice versa. This mutual hostility means that both countries regard the development of nuclear weapons as an important means by which to intimidate the other country. Pakistan, which is inferior to India in national strength and conventional weapons, believes that developing nuclear capabilities is the most economical way of challenging India. In Pakistan, the development of nuclear weapons is the only issue on which the whole country is united. Like India, Pakistan has not signed the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to prohibit nuclear tests. Pakistan declares that only if India gives up its nuclear program can Pakistan consider suspending its own. In 1997, Prime Minister Sharif said, "I believe in a world without nuclear weapons. Once India signs the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, Pakistan will follow suit. India has carried out nuclear tests, and it refuses to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Under these circumstances, it is absolutely unfair to expect Pakistan to halt its nuclear program, which is completely defensive in nature" (Wu 1998, 4). Hence, it is difficult to break the nuclear deadlock between the two countries. After India carried out nuclear tests, Pakistan's national security faced enormous pressure from India. Later, even though relations between China and Pakistan as a whole have been quite amicable, the Chinese government expressed "deep regret" over Pakistan's announcement that it had exploded six nuclear devices.

FALLOUT FROM THE NUCLEAR TESTS

The nuclear tests constituted a severe blow to international efforts to prevent nuclear weapons proliferation. Remarkable achievements have been made in international arms control and disarmament since the end of the cold war. In particular, a consensus has been reached

on preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The nuclear explosions in South Asia, however, have defeated these sustained efforts by the international community. As UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan pointed out, India's nuclear tests have violated the common understanding reached by the international community.

It is no longer difficult for a country to obtain nuclear technology, due to increasing levels of technological development and exchanges. The key factors today, however, are a commitment not to develop nuclear weapons and a guarantee that the technology will be used for peaceful purposes. A few nations are undoubtedly still seeking to develop nuclear weapons, but their failure to do so to date can be mainly attributed to international pressure. The Indian and Pakistani tests may now touch off a chain reaction, giving other nations an excuse to develop nuclear weapons in the name of national security. If so, the existing international nonproliferation system, which suffers from various shortcomings and fails to achieve sufficient strength in deterrence, will exist in name only.

In addition, the South Asian nuclear tests may have a negative effect on other areas of international arms control and disarmament. Some existing nuclear powers, for example, might now be more reluctant to reduce their nuclear weapons stockpiles. The U.S. Congress could use the tests as justification for postponing ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the Russian Duma could suspend ratification of the treaty on second-phase strategic arms reduction. These two countries might also reevaluate the negative implications of their nuclear disarmament efforts and thereby reject further cuts.

The recent tests can be regarded as a challenge to the new concept of global security. As the danger of a world war receded with the collapse of the former Soviet Union, peace and development became global themes. Most countries have surrendered traditional security paradigms centering on military force and have formulated new long-term national security strategies stressing technological and economic development.

These states have recognized that mutual reliance rather than mutual destruction is key to their national security. In line with this new security conception, many countries, including India and Pakistan, have used official and unofficial channels to seek cooperation

from others on security issues in recent years. However, the recent nuclear tests have ended cooperation on security issues in South Asia and challenged the validity of the newly formed security paradigms themselves.

India's tests also reminded the international community that when a country fails to resolve its internal problems and to develop economically, and when it tries to enhance its overall national capabilities and raise its international status, it may choose nonconventional weapons as the means to do so. It is a matter of concern that some countries may seriously consider developing weapons of mass destruction to maintain security and pursue foreign policy goals. Such thinking is dangerous to the maintenance of global security.

AVOIDING FURTHER NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

The first step to take in response to the South Asian nuclear tests is to enhance international cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation, especially among the major powers. The international community has already taken some positive steps in response to the crisis. For example, the foreign ministers of the five permanent members (P-5) of the UN Security Council met in Geneva on June 4, 1998, to discuss the nuclear tests in South Asia. The purpose of the P-5 meeting was to coordinate joint efforts to halt the nuclear arms race in South Asia and to restore peace and stability in this region.

The G-8 major industrial powers had the opportunity at their annual summit meeting, held in the spring of 1998 in Birmingham, England, to take an initial collective stance that would respond firmly and unambiguously to India's actions. The group issued a final communiqué calling for stricter export controls on weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems. The G-8 leaders also pledged to boost the exchange of information on the arms trade.

The G-8 foreign ministers held another meeting in London on June 12, 1998. As part of an effort to increase the number of participants, several other countries, including Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, and the Philippines, were also invited to the meeting. The major powers thus aimed to broaden international support for the process that began with the meeting of the P-5 in Geneva. On nuclear

nonproliferation and disarmament, the G-8 has asked India and Pakistan to sign the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, the CTBT, and the NPT; to reduce mutual tensions and adopt confidence-building measures; to abandon their nuclear weapons and plans to build nuclear arsenals; and to enter a dialogue on divisive issues.

During President Bill Clinton's visit to China in June 1998, the China-U.S. statement issued by Presidents Jiang and Clinton referred to the South Asian nuclear tests, and both countries condemned the tests by India and Pakistan.

These efforts have produced good results, but they are not enough. The international community should be better coordinated, with the emphasis on persuading India and Pakistan to sign the CTBT. The global community should also work to reduce tensions between India and Pakistan. Given that the hostile relations between India and Pakistan led to both countries conducting nuclear tests, the international community should encourage India and Pakistan to continue their dialogue on security issues.

Whether India and Pakistan enter into a dialogue and their relations show substantive improvement primarily depends on whether there are any breakthroughs in the stalemate over Kashmir. Two wars have failed to settle the issue decisively, and in any case it would be impossible for the winner to annex the territory claimed by the loser. Today, with both countries possessing nuclear capabilities, any conflict between them might turn into a nuclear war. Fortunately, discussions between the two countries last year suggested that there was little possibility of either side choosing the war option. The leaders of both countries have seemingly reached an understanding that totally hostile relations will exact a high price from both parties. The wisest choice is to alleviate this tense situation by continuing to put relations between the two countries on a more positive standing, as was achieved last year, to reach a breakthrough and finally resolve the Kashmir dispute through peaceful negotiations. Such a choice satisfies the interests of both countries and conforms to the current worldwide trend toward peaceful conflict resolution.

India's and Pakistan's nuclear tests and race to develop a carrier rocket have threatened peace and stability in Asia Pacific. As big powers enjoying influence within the region, China, Japan, and the United States can and should act positively to prevent the situation

from deteriorating. China is contiguous to India and Pakistan, China-Pakistani relations are good, and Sino-Indian relations have improved gradually since the mid-1980s. During the cold war, the United States and Pakistan were allies, and relations with India are an important component of current U.S. South Asia policy. Japan is a principal source of economic aid to India and Pakistan. More important is that the three countries' stances on the nuclear tests are the same. During President Clinton's visit to Beijing in June 1998, China and the United States issued a joint statement condemning the nuclear tests. Japan not only denounced India's and Pakistan's behavior, but it also is a model of a country that chooses not to exercise its ability to develop nuclear weapons. Persuading India and Pakistan to discontinue their efforts to develop nuclear weapons and carrier rockets and to enter the international nuclear nonproliferation regime as early as possible will both contribute to peace and stability in the region and conform to the three countries' interests. On this issue, China, Japan, and the United States should coordinate their policies so as to expand their cooperative base.

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