7 "We have a big bomb now": India's nuclear U-turn

Introduction

In May 1998, a newly installed Indian government led by the Hindu nationalist Atal Behari Vajpayee set off five nuclear explosions in the Rajasthan desert and declared to the world that India was now a nuclear weapons state. Why did India suddenly go for nuclear weapons after years of remaining on the other side of the threshold? This chapter finds the key reason in Vajpayee's oppositional nationalism toward Pakistan – a dramatic departure from his secularist predecessors' sportsmanlike nationalist focus on India's place in the world beyond South Asia. Surprisingly, the by now voluminous literature on the Indian tests has tended to downplay the causal importance of the distinctive NIC of Vajpayee and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in favor of a counterfactual view that sooner or later the tests would have come anyway.[1] To avoid "ahistoricism," we are asked to delve into the supposedly deeper causes of India's grasping for the bomb: the existence of a China with nuclear weapons in the region since 1964; the long-held desire of secular as well as Hindu nationalists for recognition as a world power; and the many years of bomb promotion undertaken by India's scientific-bureaucratic "strategic enclave."[2] But, in fact, what is ahistorical is to view the 1998 tests as the endpoint of a logically unfolding teleology.

[1] However, for an argument in favor of the "BJP hypothesis," see Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik, *New Nukes: India, Pakistan and Global Nuclear Disarmament* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2000). Stephen P. Cohen, while stressing the importance of long and medium-range factors, also clearly sees the BJP's ascension to power as the crucial catalyst. Stephen P. Cohen, "Why Did India 'Go Nuclear'?" in Raju G. C. Thomas and Amit Gupta, eds., *India's Nuclear Security* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), pp. 13–36.

[2] The "objective situation" hypothesis is promoted most forcefully by Jasjit Singh, ed., *Nuclear India* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 1998); T. V. Paul, "The Systemic Bases of India's Challenge to the Global Nuclear Order," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall 1998), pp. 1–11; and Ashok Kapur, "India and Multipolarity in the Asia-Pacific Regional Sub-System," paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 1999. The "international prestige" hypothesis is placed in the foreground by Raj Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace: The Secret Story of India's*

This is not to deny that India was at the cusp of a nuclear weapons arsenal before 1998. Previous developments in the Indian nuclear program had clouded to the utmost the distinction between "having" and "not having" nuclear weapons. But, in the end, the case paradoxically shows how meaningful that distinction actually is. The 1998 tests, far from representing mere ratifications of a well-known, pre-existing state of affairs, in fact roiled the politics of the region in dramatic and unexpected ways – and continue to do so even to this day. As the South Asian security expert Stephen P. Cohen put it during the Indo-Pakistan crisis of 2002,

> The nuclearization of South Asia had been anticipated for decades, yet when it came, it was a surprise. Then, it was widely assumed that being nuclear weapons states, India and Pakistan could no longer go to war. Indeed, some argued that the possession of nuclear weapons by both states would eventually lead to a reconciliation of their outstanding differences. These expectations were wrong, as the two countries did become embroiled in a minor war in 1999, and despite their declared nuclear status, are again on the brink of war as they enter the sixth month of an unprecedented crisis, featuring full military mobilization and mutual nuclear threats.[3]

Of the four cases tackled in this book, the Indian one is the most complex. Not surprisingly, while it generally supports the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 2, it does not perfectly fit that framework. In particular, Pakistan turns out to have loomed larger in the secularist Indian leaders' calculations than might have been expected given the coding results reported in Chapter 3. But the case poses even more difficult problems for the more conventional perspectives.

- First, realists generally consider the Indian bomb as a response to China's holding nuclear weapons. But the Chinese tested their bomb in 1964; yet, in spite of having long had the technical capacity, India took until 1972 to have a political decision in favor of a so-called "peaceful

Quest to Be a Nuclear Power (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2000); and chapters by Amitabh Mattoo and Pramit Pal Chaudhuri in Amitabh Mattoo, ed., *India's Nuclear Deterrent: Pokhran II and Beyond* (New Delhi: Har Anand Publications Pvt., 1999). "The "strategic enclave" hypothesis is highlighted by George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) and Itty Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy and the Postcolonial State* (London: Zed Books, 1998). An attempt to include all of these factors (and the BJP variable as well) is Stephen P. Cohen, "Why Did India 'Go Nuclear'?" The charge of "ahistoricism" was made by Sumit Ganguly, "Explaining the Indian Nuclear Tests of 1998," in Raju G. C. Thomas and Amit Gupta, eds., *India's Nuclear Security* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), pp. 37–66.

[3] Stephen P. Cohen, "Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear War in South Asia: An Unknowable Future," paper presented to the United Nations University Conference on South Asia, Tokyo, Japan, May 2002, http://www.brookings.edu/views/speeches/cohens/20020501.htm.

nuclear explosion" (PNE). Moreover, despite the success of the 1974 Indian PNE, the government refused to test further or to develop an actual nuclear arsenal until a quarter-century later. Clearly the Indian nuclear weapons program has not been driven by events on the other side of the Himalayas.

- Second, institutionalists generally expect decreasing interest in nuclear weapons worldwide over time, as the flip side of the rise of nonproliferation norms. But although India is hardly a "rogue state," its interest in nuclear weapons steadily increased over time, and international pressure and opprobrium even tended to solidify the Indians' resolve to go their own way.
- Third, although over the decades bureaucratic actors were able to make some progress in the shadows toward the bomb, they found that they could not achieve all they wanted without a top-down decision to go nuclear. But they could not pry that decision out of a long series of prime ministers, even quite weak ones. Indeed, all three of the major steps forward in the development of India's nuclear bomb – 1972–74, 1988, and 1998 – were taken by strong prime ministers whom the bureaucrats could hardly be said to have pushed around.

The chapter is organized as follows. The second part explains India's traditional nuclear stances as a function of the Nehruvian NIC of sportsmanlike nationalism. The third part presents an interpretation of Indira Gandhi's 1972 decision for a PNE and its immediate consequences. The fourth part explores the decisions on nuclear issues that Indian prime ministers took in the twenty-four years between the PNE and the coming to power of the BJP. Finally, BJP Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's definitive 1998 decision to go nuclear is explained.

The nuclear expression of Indian nationalism, 1947–71

From its earliest days as an independent state, India had a high international profile on nuclear issues. Despite its military weakness, India was a major player in international disarmament talks. And although it was mired in almost hopeless economic backwardness, India rapidly built a significant civilian nuclear program. Both its diplomatic and its technological ambitions – as well as its clear determination not to build the bomb – were the consequences of the NIC of sportsmanlike nationalism that was held by Jawaharlal Nehru and his successors.

Nehruvian India's nuclear diplomacy

Newly independent India took a very high profile in international disarmament negotiations, one completely out of proportion to its small

military capacity. A prime example of India's diplomatic activism on the nuclear issue is Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's 1954 proposal at the UN for a universal nuclear test ban. As noted in Chapter 4, only strong pressure from the US prevented French Prime Minister Pierre Mendès France from taking up Nehru's call in his own speech to the UN in November of that year. In the longer term, Nehru's proposal was a forerunner of the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty that banned atmospheric nuclear tests, and that India was quick to sign and ratify. In later decades, India would revive Nehru's call for a universal test ban on numerous occasions. For instance, Nehru's daughter, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, participated in the 1983 Six-Nation Initiative for a universal test ban, and in 1988 his grandson, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi presented the UN with an Action Plan for the elimination of nuclear weapons by 2010, the first step of which was to be a universal test ban.[4] The vigorous and continued efforts that Nehruvian India made on this matter demonstrates not merely its strong stance against the continuing existence of nuclear weapons, but also its nationalist belief that India could make a difference on central issues of global war and peace.

India also took a high profile in the late 1960s negotiations over the NPT. Many analysts have trouble understanding why Nehruvian India could have rejected the NPT unless it at least was thinking about acquiring nuclear weapons.[5] But in fact the principle of non-discrimination mattered to Nehruvian India, and this is what kept it from supporting the NPT while promoting a universal test ban. As the British Chief Science Advisor Sir Solly Zuckerman (who had close ties with Indian statesmen and scientists) wrote in a secret 1971 report, "This refusal [of the NPT] appears to be motivated much more by a sense of injured pride and a belief that the 'haves' wish to maintain their advantage at the expense of the 'have-nots,' rather than by a determination to acquire nuclear weapons."[6] The negative Indian reaction to the uneven nature of obligations envisioned by the NPT was widespread. Even the noted nuclear dove, Indian Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) chairman Vikram Sarabhai, strongly opposed the treaty; the Indian scientist Raja Ramanna explained his position to me in this manner: "Dr. Sarabhai did not believe in nuclear

[4] These calls were always placed in the perspective of general nuclear disarmament, though Indian insistence on a formal linkage between the test ban and further steps to decrease the arms race waxed and waned. Dinshaw Mistry, "The Unrealized Promise of International Institutions: The Test Ban Treaty and India's Nuclear Breakout," *Security Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Summer 2003), pp. 119–160.

[5] Ganguly, "Explaining the Indian Nuclear Tests," p. 46.

[6] Draft "confidential" note from Sir Solly Zuckerman on "Visit to Indian Establishments, 7–17 March 1971," prepared by R. Press, Solly Zuckerman papers SZ/CSA/25/1, "Visit to India March 1971," University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

weapons, but more than that, he did not believe in signing inequitable treaties."[7] Sarabhai was not alone; a scientific poll of Indian elites at the time of the NPT negotiations found that they stood both against an Indian nuclear bomb and against the "nuclear apartheid" regime of the NPT.[8] Indeed, Indian feelings against the NPT were so strong that for any Indian leader, even Nehru's daughter, to accede would have been to "commit political suicide," as the AEC official (later chairman) Homi Sethna told an American diplomat in 1968.[9] But Indira Gandhi, a sportsmanlike nationalist herself, did not need to take a poll to determine her position on the issue.

Nehruvian India's push for nuclear development

While opposing international nuclear discrimination on the diplomatic front, Nehruvian India also devoted great efforts to building a credible civilian nuclear technology sector. It was in India's very first year of independence that Nehru created the Atomic Energy Commission, placing it directly under the authority of the prime minister in order to ensure that it did his bidding. After founding the AEC, Nehru and his chief nuclear scientist, Homi Bhabha, succeeded in importing a 40 megawatt Canadian research reactor in the mid-1950s. As a technologically backward state, India had no choice but to import the reactor, but at the same time it strongly resisted international controls and rights of inspection over it. For Nehru, if mastery of nuclear energy was part and parcel of India's newfound freedom, the maintenance of an "international" – read, Western – *droit de regard* over India's nuclear energy program represented continuing Indian enslavement.[10] The Canadians proved quite understanding of this Indian resistance, not least due to their impression of Nehru as a fundamentally honorable man, so they did not press the issue.[11] Only a few years later, India added a fuel reprocessing plant

[7] Written communication with Raja Ramanna, former AEC chairman, November 19, 1998.

[8] Ashis Nandy, "The Bomb, the NPT and Indian Elites," *Economic and Political Weekly*, special number, August 1972. Thanks to Stephen Cohen for this article.

[9] "Conversation with Senior GOI Nuclear Official," Department of State telegram marked "Secret," May 7, 1968, Box 2648, RG 59, Central Files "Science" 1967–69, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[10] There was an entire theory of history behind these points. See Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. pp. 276–80.

[11] It was "participatory internationalism" more than commercial considerations that led the Canadians to give the Indians this gift. See Iris Heidrun Lonergan, "The Negotiations Between Canada and India for the Supply of the N. R. X. Nuclear Research Reactor 1955–56: A Case Study in Participatory Internationalism," M.A. thesis, Department of History, Carleton University, Ontario, Canada, 1989.

to its nuclear infrastructure, a plant that eventually came on line in 1964. Thus a poverty-stricken, scientifically backward nation was devoting major resources to independent research and development on the most advanced technology on earth. This was the direct result of Nehru's nationalism.

With the combination of unsafeguarded reactor fuel and a fuel reprocessing plant, India had access by the mid-1960s to plutonium that it was at liberty to employ for any purpose it chose.[12] It was this combination that would eventually allow India to build a nuclear explosive device in the early 1970s. But it would be wrong to jump from this technical equation to the assertion that Nehru wanted the bomb – an assertion made today by a growing number of analysts who are determined to see a logical continuity in Indian nuclear history.[13]

One seductive argument along these lines is that of Itty Abraham, who claims that Nehru and his colleagues, as "unmitigated votaries of large-scale industrialization," were entranced with everything scientific, modern, statist, and big – and that this ideology, whatever their protestations to the contrary, made the bomb inherently attractive to them.[14] But Abraham's portrayal of Nehru as a "postcolonial" leader aping the West is in fact a substantial underestimation of the man. In fact, Nehru exhibited a remarkable level of independence from the West not only in deed but also in thought. It is well to recall that in these early years Nehru and the Congress Party he led were still fresh from the success of the highly original non-violent struggle to end British colonial rule. For the Nehruvians, nuclear weapons represented the fundamental corruption of Western modernity, which India should not merely reject itself but also teach all humanity to spurn. And Nehru did not just talk a good game; in 1957 he flatly rejected a proposal by Homi Bhabha that India start research in the area of nuclear explosives.[15] Moreover, Nehru's rejection of the bomb was *not* an anomaly in his overall stance toward technology, as Abraham would have it. It rather reflected his rejection of gigantism in all things military. Nehru was consistently at odds with the Western (mainly British) military advisors who were "helping" newly independent India to design and build a modern fighting force. These advisors were

[12] Exactly how much plutonium it had amassed at what moment is a matter of dispute; but the argument of this book does not hang on such technical determinations. The point here is the broader one that India had a clear path to the bomb if it so chose.

[13] The man most responsible for the evolution in perspective on Nehru is the Indian nuclear hawk K. Subrahmanyam. He now has begun to argue that Mahatma Gandhi also would have favored the Indian bomb. See Cohen, "Why Did India 'Go Nuclear'?," p. 18.

[14] The direct quote is from Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb*, p. 72.

[15] Interview with T. N. Kaul, Indian diplomat (former foreign secretary), New Delhi, December 3, 1998, with follow-up letters March 7 and May 5, 1999.

trying to promote Indian investment in advanced military systems such as large bombers, rockets, and aircraft carriers. Nehru considered these grandiose schemes as likely to draw India into the international balance of power system, to ruin India's economy, to strengthen the Indian military at the expense of India's democracy, and to end in renewed Indian political dependence on the West.[16] The Nehruvian pattern of relative Indian modesty in defense procurement, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, would continue until the 1980s.[17]

Thus, Nehru's sportsmanlike nationalist vision in the area of technology was clear and his policy application of that vision remarkably consistent. In nuclear affairs, Nehru set a clear path for India: for autonomous nuclear technology, but against nuclear weapons. This position was neither ambiguous nor self-contradictory. And the proof that it rested on solid ideological and political foundations is that after Nehru died in office in 1964, his successors faithfully followed this line – even when confronted by the major challenge posed by the birth of the Chinese bomb.

India in the aftermath of China's nuclear test

In 1962, India fought and lost a disastrous border war with China. Then, in October 1964, China exploded its first nuclear bomb. It was hard not to conclude, as the US State Department did, that this one-two punch would generate an Indian bomb program.[18] Yet even though Nehru had passed away and his politically weaker successors had to confront the first serious domestic pressures for the bomb, in fact India's policy on nuclear weapons hardly budged.[19]

[16] "India and Defence," typed manuscript by Lord Blackett (probably 1969), Lord Blackett papers, G29 at the Royal Society, London. According to the Indian Defense Research and Development Organization chief in 1975, Blackett's 1948 report on Indian defense had served as the foundation of "modern scientific research applied to problems of India's defense and security." Sir Bernard Lovell, "P. M. S. Blackett, Baron Blackett of Chelsea," *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society*, Vol. 21 (1975), p. 97.

[17] Raju G. C. Thomas, "The Growth of Indian Military Power: From Sufficient Defence to Nuclear Deterrence," in Ross Babbage and Sandy Gordon, eds., *India's Strategic Future* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 35–66.

[18] "Current status of our Bilateral Relationship with India," State Department note marked "Secret," November 5, 1965, RG 59, Lot 69 D52 Entry 5255, Box 7, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[19] The main supporters of matching China's bomb with an Indian reply, other than Bhabha, were the small Hindu nationalist party the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, a few young Congress MPs, and some middle-level bureaucrats including the young K. Subrahmanyam. The main opponents were Congress Party heavyweights Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, Morarji Desai (Shastri's chief rival for the post of prime minister), Defence Minister Y. B. Chavan, External Affairs Minister Swaran Singh, Nehru's Defence Minister V. C.

Two 1960s-era Indian nuclear policy shifts have been attributed to the Chinese bomb test. First, in the wake of the test Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri sent diplomats to seek a nuclear guarantee from the great powers. Second, he secretly authorized the AEC to do a Study Nuclear Explosion for Peaceful Purposes. On first glance, these two acts seem significant, and Sumit Ganguly even claims that they constituted what he calls the "second phase of India's nuclear program" – a major step forward toward the bomb.[20] But, in fact, they can easily be shown to be minor variations on Nehru's basic theme.

The "quest" for a guarantee: Shastri well knew that he could secure a solid nuclear guarantee against China by choosing to ally with the United States. But the prime minister proved more interested in protecting India's non-alignment stance than in securing real protection against an eventual Chinese nuclear attack.[21] The "guarantee" Shastri and his advisors L. K. Jha and C. S. Jha sought in late 1964 and early 1965 was a joint declaration through the United Nations by the US, the UK, and the USSR not merely to protect India but *all* non-nuclear states from nuclear attack.[22] Moreover, hypersensitive to any hint of obligation on its part, India proceeded to rebuff all of the US constructive suggestions for the wording of such a resolution.[23] These were not actions of a state that felt a serious nuclear threat. Two years later, after Indira Gandhi became prime minister, L. K. Jha would again be sent to world capitals on precisely the same mission, and with precisely the same result.[24] And indeed, when India under Mrs. Gandhi finally did sign a Treaty of Friendship with the USSR in 1970, she specifically *refused* the USSR's suggestion of a nuclear guarantee for fear of compromising the hallowed

Krishna Menon, and R. K. Nehru, Nehru's brother and former secretary general of the External Affairs Ministry. Given this lineup, it is not difficult to guess who carried the day. A good summary of this episode – though he tends to overestimate Bhabha's power – is Peter Lavoy, "Learning to Live with the Bomb? India and Nuclear Weapons, 1947–1974," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1997, pp. 345–353.

[20] Ganguly, "Explaining the Indian Nuclear Tests," p. 41.

[21] "India and Nuclear Assurances," US State Department Note marked "Secret," April 16, 1965, RG59 Central Files, Lot 69 D52 Entry 5255, Box 12, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[22] Interview with Dharma Vira, Cabinet secretary under Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, New Delhi, November 13, 1998 and "Record of a Private Talk between the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Shastri, at 4:15 at No. 10 Downing Street on Friday, December 4, 1964," Folder "India Dec. 1964–August 1966," PREM 13/973, Public Record Office, Kew, UK.

[23] "Your Suggestion for US Assurances to India," State Department Note from Turner C. Cameron, Jr., India Working Group to Ambassador Llewelyn Thompson, February 12, 1965, RG 59, Lot 69 D52, Entry 5255, Box 8, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[24] Letter from Indira Gandhi, prime minister of India, to Harold Wilson, UK prime minister, April 1, 1967, PREM 13/1573, Public Record Office, Kew, United Kingdom.

policy of non-alignment.[25] In sum, this so-called "quest for a nuclear guarantee" was hardly a frantic search for security that, proving fruitless, produced a decision to build nuclear weapons. Rather, it was a mere variation on Nehruvian sportsmanlike nationalist themes. Indeed, the fact that the Nehruvian NIC was not oppositional *vis-à-vis* China explains why Indian elites exhibited a fair degree of cognitive complexity overall on the issue – they saw a danger, but they did not react as if the sky were falling.

The peaceful nuclear explosion study: Of course, a nuclear guarantee would be superfluous if India had its own nuclear weapons to counter the Chinese threat. But Shastri did not want nuclear weapons. In 1965, in response to Bhabha's pressures he did secretly permit a small AEC Study [of] Nuclear Explosion for Peaceful Purposes (SNEPP): an examination of theoretical issues and general feasibility.[26] Notably, however, he instructed the AEC *not* to make contact with the Ministry of Defense laboratories, whose assistance would be necessary for the design and development of important technical aspects of any actual nuclear device. This instruction contrasts markedly with Indira Gandhi's much more significant 1972 decision for a "peaceful nuclear explosion," when the Defense labs' assistance was immediately sought.[27] In sum, the SNEPP was a minor step, implying little real high-level interest in mounting a nuclear bomb program within any reasonable time frame. Indeed, contrary to the idea that AEC chief Bhabha was a potent "nuclear mythmaker," there is even an indication that Shastri, after recovering his political balance, later punished Bhabha for his pro-bomb activities in the aftermath of the Chinese blast.[28] And, in any case, after Shastri and Bhabha's deaths in 1966, even these tentative initiatives were halted by new leader Mrs. Gandhi and her AEC chief Vikram Sarabhai.[29] In fact, Sarabhai, a vociferously anti-bomb physicist of the pacifist Jain faith, was so offended by Bhabha's explosives study that he tried to confiscate any papers written for it.[30]

[25] Interview with Romesh Bhandari, who at the time discussed was serving in the Indian Embassy in Moscow, New Delhi, November 25, 1998.

[26] Interviews with Homi Sethna, former AEC chairman, Bombay, December 8, 1998, and with Vira. See also Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 85.

[27] Written communication with Ramanna.

[28] "Prime Minister Shastri . . . does not seem to look to him for political advice regarding international nuclear and other scientific policy as did Prime Minister Nehru. In fact there is evidence to suggest that Bhabha, perhaps because he has had a reputation as an advocate of an Indian nuclear weapons program, has been excluded from certain high-level GOI discussions of nuclear policy matters." "Your Meeting with Dr. Homi Bhabha at 12:30 PM February 22," State Department Briefing Memorandum, marked "Secret," from Phillips Talbot to the under secretary, February 20, 1965, viewed at National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

[29] Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 114.

[30] Interview with Sethna.

Such was India's "reply" to the Chinese blast of 1964: a half-hearted search for a generic UN guarantee covering all non-nuclear states, and a few theoretical studies of nuclear explosions. What explains this feeble reply to such a major new strategic reality? The Gandhian moral impulse was certainly a factor; Shastri beat back calls for the atomic bomb at the 1964 All-India Congress conference by pointing to a huge picture of Mahatma Gandhi and saying, "I am shocked that there should be even talk of violence in his presence."[31] But probably more important was the general sense that the Chinese bomb notwithstanding, an Indian nuclear bomb effort would *decrease* Indian security. As Shastri put it to Parliament, "Impoverishing ourselves and not even defending our country is a stupid thing to do. If we spend more money on this [atom bomb] we shall not be able to spend as much on conventional weapons and the conventional army." He added, "Our neighbors will be more frightened if we begin to make the atom bomb. . . . It does not help us at all in reassuring our neighbors with whom India wants friendship."[32] Indira Gandhi was clearly coming from the same perspective when she told Parliament in 1968:

> The choice before us involves not only the question of making a few atom bombs, but of engaging in an arms race with sophisticated nuclear warheads and an effective missile delivery system. Such a course, I do not think would strengthen national security. On the other hand, it may well endanger our internal security by imposing a very heavy economic burden which would be in addition to the present expenditure on defense. Nothing will better serve the interests of those who are hostile to us than for us to lose our sense of perspective and to undertake measures which would undermine the basic progress of the country. We believe that to be militarily strong, it is necessary to be economically and industrially strong. Our program of atomic energy development for peaceful purposes is related to the real needs of our economy and would be effectively geared to this end.[33]

These are undiluted Nehruvian – sportsmanlike nationalist – statements. For Shastri and Mrs. Gandhi, as for Nehru, the way to promote Indian security was through autonomous economic (including civilian nuclear) development, a foreign policy of friendship with all, not entering into military alliances which they saw as relationships of dependence with more powerful states, and avoiding bankrupting the country through unnecessarily grandiose military schemes. In short, as Indira Gandhi put it pithily

[31] William Bader, *The United States and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Pegasus, 1968), p. 63.
[32] Shastri, cited in Lavoy, "Learning to Live with the Bomb?" p. 348.
[33] Indira Gandhi in the Lok Sabha, April 24, 1968, cited in "Nuclear Weapons, a compilation prepared by the Department of Atomic Energy, July 1970," report for the Parliamentary Consultative Committee, accessed in Solly Zuckerman papers, SZ/CSA/25/2, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

to one interviewer, building a nuclear arsenal would merely "bring danger where there was none before."[34] This analysis was shared not only by politicians but also by the vast majority of mainstream Indian strategic elites.[35]

In short, the sportsmanlike nationalist leaders of India did not respond in kind to the Chinese nuclear threat because they did not judge the actual or potential threat from China to be great enough to merit such a response. Their response exhibited a degree of cognitive complexity that stands in stark contrast to the fear-driven response that would have emerged if they had held an oppositional NIC. Indeed, the temperate Indian reaction can be usefully contrasted with that of the Australian Liberals, who – with their oppositional NIC – reacted to the Chinese test with mortification, though only the later Prime Minister John Gorton also proved nationalist enough to want to build an Australian bomb in reply.

India's "peaceful nuclear explosion"

In March 1971, India's nuclear weapons policy was essentially no different than it had been twenty years earlier: for nuclear power, but against nuclear weapons. A year later that traditional distinction was much less clear, as India was launched toward a "demonstration" of its nuclear explosives capacity. In this section of the chapter I argue that the decision by Indira Gandhi for a "peaceful nuclear explosion" (PNE), while a risky and intemperate power play, was not a decision to go all the way. Indeed, I argue that Mrs. Gandhi's desire *not* to have a nuclear arms race in the subcontinent actually led to her PNE decision. The decision is thus best understood as an effect, albeit a warped one, of her sportsmanlike nationalist pride. The fact that it backfired tremendously and produced a near-nuclear standoff in the South Asian subcontinent merely underscores how much the decision was driven by pride and self-righteous emotion rather than by methodical calculation.

Nuclear India as of 1971

To understand how substantial a policy shift the PNE represented, consider the status of India's nuclear weapons debate at the beginning of

[34] Indira Gandhi, interview with Rodney Jones, quoted in Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 178.

[35] For instance, George Perkovich cites similar strategic reasoning in a 1966 Adelphi Paper by Major General (ret.) Som Dutt, the first director of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), the major Indian strategic think tank. Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 129.

1971. In the public arena, the bomb lobby was spent. In a solid study of Indian nuclear politics, Ziba Moshaver finds that "from 1968 to 1974 there was no pressure from the Lok Sabha [lower house of Parliament], the bureaucracy, the media, or the public on the government to change its nuclear policy. The 1974 test thus took everyone by surprise."[36] Behind closed doors, the story was only slightly different. The British Chief Science Advisor Sir Solly Zuckerman had filed a confidential report in March 1965 that there was a significant degree of interest in nuclear weapons in India, and among elements of the military in particular.[37] But when he returned in March 1971, this interest had dimmed. The crucial message of his 1971 report to the British government was the following:

> In discussions with both military and non-military people, I gained the clear impression that the Indian Government has no wish to develop nuclear weapons and is not at present planning to do so. They recognize they cannot afford to divert the necessary resources from their very pressing economic and social problems. China is their main worry and they greatly hope that somehow China can be contained in some global political arrangement, failing which they expect to come under renewed pressure to develop nuclear weapons. They appeared to regard about another two years as crucial in this respect. . . .
>
> Neither did I find any evidence that India is seriously concerned about, or even studying, possible peaceful uses of nuclear devices, and thereby pursuing a clandestine route to the production of military nuclear weapons.[38]

Zuckerman's report accurately reflected Indian policymakers' attitudes, but behind their backs various AEC scientists had in fact been working quietly on the nuclear explosives problem. This was done in spite of Sarabhai's personal efforts to stop it.[39] One example of this work was the AEC's experimental production of polonium, an important material

[36] Ziba Moshaver, *Nuclear Weapons Proliferation in the Indian Subcontinent* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 43.

[37] "The Impact of China and Vietnam on India's Nuclear Problem," Note by Sir Solly Zuckerman to Sir Burke Trend, dated July 7, 1966. Solly Zuckerman Papers, Folder marked "Transcripts File," Library of the University of East Anglia at Norwich. Note that in the internal hierarchy of power the Indian military was near the bottom so its opinions, while notable, were not terribly influential.

[38] Draft "confidential" note from Sir Solly Zuckerman on "Visit to Indian Establishments, 7–17 March 1971," prepared by R. Press, Solly Zuckerman papers SZ/CSA/25/1, "Visit to India March 1971," University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. In an earlier draft of this document, Zuckerman makes clear that for the Indians, such a settlement should include admission of China to the UN. Thus Zuckerman's interlocutors were thinking more in terms of appeasement than of deterrence when they spoke of dealing with the China problem. In fact, by 1972 China was clearly being brought into the international fold, so they got their wish on that score. Manuscript note (undated, untitled) by Sir Solly Zuckerman. Solly Zuckerman Papers, Folder "Visit to India March 1971," SZ/CSA/25/1, Library of the University of East Anglia, Norwich.

[39] Interview with Sethna.

for initiating a nuclear blast. They tackled this question beginning around 1968 and, after some false starts, had success around 1971.[40] In general, however, what work the scientists could do on the bomb was greatly limited by the official policy against it, a policy that Sarabhai strictly enforced.[41] Thus, India as of 1971 cannot be said to have had a nuclear explosives program. About a year later, however, it did; and in May 1974, India's "peaceful nuclear explosion" shocked the world.

Explaining the "peaceful nuclear explosion"

To fathom why Indira Gandhi made her decision for the PNE, it is first necessary to understand that this decision was *not* a decision to acquire nuclear weapons. There are at least five separate indicators that Indira Gandhi did not want nuclear weapons for India:

- First, in public statements both prior to and after the PNE she repeatedly voiced her objections to nuclear weapons in general and for India in particular. For instance, in her 1978 interview with Rodney Jones she clearly stated, "No, we don't want nuclear weapons. They only bring danger where there was none before."[42]
- Second, if this really had been a decision for nuclear weapons, one might have expected Mrs. Gandhi to inform the military, at least after the test, of her intentions, so that it could begin thinking about the integration of the weapon into its planning. But the military, as well as the civilian Ministry of Defense, was kept in the dark both before and after the test took place.[43]
- Third, the group of top aides that she assembled in total secrecy to discuss whether or not to proceed to a test never spoke of the device as a bomb and never considered more than a single test, as would be necessary if reliable devices were envisioned.[44]

[40] Interview with Sethna. Other aspects of the eventual explosives program were brought in for other reasons. The Purnima critical facility, which eventually provided important information for India's first explosion, was first mooted by scientist P. K. Iyengar after his visit to a similar facility in the Soviet Union. According to Iyengar, Sarabhai approved it in 1968 as part of the move into plutonium-based fast-reactor technology for electric power. Interview with P. K. Iyengar, former AEC chairman, Bombay, December 8, 1998.

[41] Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 160.

[42] Indira Gandhi, interview with Rodney Jones, cited in Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 178.

[43] Interview with K. B. Lall, former defense secretary, New Delhi, November 16, 1999, with follow-up letters February 2 and April 14, 1999. See also Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, pp. 174, 177.

[44] Interview with Sethna and interview with P. N. Dhar, prime minister's secretary under Indira Gandhi, Delhi, November 20, 1998 (with follow-up letter February 27, 1999). Both Sethna and Dhar were members of the small group that met with Mrs. Gandhi to discuss whether or not to have a test.

- Fourth, on the very day of the 1974 test, in the first flush of accomplishment, the scientist Raja Ramanna suggested that India plan more tests, only to find his suggestion brutally rejected by an irate Mrs. Gandhi.[45] Mrs. Gandhi's advisors T. N. Kaul and Inder Malhotra made similar suggestions and received similar dressings-down.[46] Mrs. Gandhi's opposition to further tests in fact brought the nuclear explosives work to a screeching halt.
- And fifth, Mrs. Gandhi explicitly rejected her science advisor's proposal to bend ongoing missile projects toward the development of nuclear-capable missiles: "Don't mix the two," she said.[47]

In short, the decision to explode the PNE was not a decision to build nuclear weapons. But then what was it? In the following paragraphs, I argue that the PNE is best conceptualized as a *warning shot* to the great powers and to the US in particular, meant to cause them to rethink their policy of assisting Pakistan.[48]

The 1971 war and its aftermath

In mid-1971, the crisis in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) took on international proportions as a flood of Bengali refugees, terrorized by the Pakistani army, began crossing the Indian border. The crisis escalated, and by December India and Pakistan were at war. Within days, India was well on its way to a smashing victory that would divide Pakistan in two. In the US, the Nixon administration began to fear that India was intent not only on "liberating" East Pakistan but also on swallowing up Pakistan whole.[49] Nixon therefore ordered a "tilt" in favor of Pakistan in the form of sending a US Navy flotilla into the Bay of Bengal. The flotilla notably included the USS *Enterprise*, the country's largest and most modern aircraft carrier.[50] Mrs. Gandhi was angered by Nixon's "tilt" toward

[45] In Ramanna's words, Mrs. Gandhi told him, "Now that it has come let me tell you as far as I am concerned the whole program is over." Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, p. 202.
[46] Interview with Inder Malhotra, journalist and friend of Indira Gandhi, New Delhi, November 28, 1998, and interview with T. N. Kaul.
[47] M. G. K. Menon, quoted in Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, p. 214. Strangely, Chengappa writes that Menon added, "Mrs. Gandhi wasn't against doing it. But said let's not do it at the moment till we develop some capability."
[48] For a parallel interpretation, see Rajesh M. Basrur, "Nuclear Weapons and Indian Strategic Culture," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (March 2001), esp. p. 186.
[49] After the war, the Nixon team convinced itself that they had prevented that. "India–Pakistan," Department of State Memorandum of Conversation marked "Secret," December 28, 1971, folder "South Asia 12/17/71–12/31/71," Box 573, National Security Council Files, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Materials Staff at College Park, Maryland.
[50] "India–Pakistan Situation," Memorandum marked "Secret" for the president from Henry A. Kissinger, December 14, 1971, folder "South Asia 12/14/71–12/16/71," Box 573, National Security Council Files, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Materials Staff at College Park, Maryland.

Pakistan, a tilt that she perceived to have existed right from the start of the crisis.[51] In an open letter to Nixon, Mrs. Gandhi came close even to blaming the US for the war.[52]

Though she felt she had both right and might on her side, in peace talks at Simla in early 1972 Mrs. Gandhi tried to appease Pakistan with soft treatment, and at first it seemed to oblige. But Indian intelligence agents soon learned that Pakistani leader Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto had "called a meeting of eminent scientists in Multan in January 1972 and announced his desire and decision to make Pakistan a nuclear weapons state."[53] Thus it became clear that Pakistan was not only unbowed by its defeat, but was in fact intending to raise the stakes in the subcontinental military competition. The fact that Mrs. Gandhi knew about the speech and was deeply concerned by it was confirmed to me by her principal secretary, P. N. Dhar, and her atomic energy chief, Homi Sethna.[54] Her decision on what to do about it came quickly; by January 1972, she was already telling her close friend Inder Malhotra that India needed to explode a nuclear device, in order to show the world that it could do it.[55] Those few others who learned of the Multan speech, like Dhar and Sethna, came to the same conclusion.[56] Those who were not privy to the information, however, did not make noises for nuclear weapons at this time.[57] For instance, the defense secretary at the time, K. B. Lall, told me that in 1972 he had seen no reason for India to acquire even a nuclear explosives capability, but that if he had seen solid intelligence that "Bhutto, smarting from a disastrous defeat, was launched on acquiring a nuclear

[51] But she was not fearful. The Indians basically could not imagine any scenario in which the US went to war against them, though in light of the US "tilt" they did resolve to close down military operations as quickly as possible. Interview with Lall; and see Pupul Jayakar, *Indira Gandhi, An Intimate Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books), ch. 33.

[52] Letter from prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi, to president of the United States, Richard Nixon, December 15, 1971; folder "South Asia 12/12/71–12/31/71"; Box 573, National Security Council Files, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Materials Staff at College Park, Maryland.

[53] J. N. Dixit, *Across Borders: Fifty Years of Indian Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Picus Books, 1998), p. 437.

[54] Interviews with Dhar and Sethna.

[55] Interview with Malhotra. See also Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991).

[56] They did disagree on the details: while Sethna and eventually Gandhi felt a single test was necessary to demonstrate India's capacity, Dhar argued in their secret meetings that given the country's shaky economic position, it was not propitious to "go public" with India's capacity at that particular juncture. This nuanced position was misinterpreted, Dhar says, by Raja Ramanna in his autobiography. Ramanna was only at the last meeting, and this may have been part of the reason for the misinterpretation of Dhar's position. Interview with Dhar.

[57] Why did Mrs. Gandhi not allow this information to spread further? It is not clear. Perhaps she did not want to create a panic that would end up forcing her into a nuclear weapons program.

capability, then you would be unwise not to launch yourself on that course also."[58]

Why was the Multan speech so determinative? It was *not* because Mrs. Gandhi feared Pakistan's indigenous nuclear capacities. The cocky overall Indian attitude toward Pakistan was expressed in the post-test period by Mrs. Gandhi's chief secretary P. N. Haksar. Bhutto had declared that Pakistan would get the bomb even if such an effort required its people to "eat grass." Haksar offered this reply: "If by eating grass one can produce atom bombs, then by now cows and horses would have produced them. But, of course, the people of Pakistan under the great and charismatic leadership to which they are now exposed might produce a bomb on a diet of grass."[59] When she learned of the Multan speech, Mrs. Gandhi was slightly less dismissive than Haksar; she did ask the recently elevated AEC chief Homi Sethna to assess Pakistan's nuclear prospects. But Sethna told her not to worry: even in the worst case scenario, Pakistan could not build it for at least ten years.[60] Parenthetically, it is very significant that Sethna's AEC, when asked for its expert opinion, did not exploit this opportunity to push for an explosion – the clearest instance in the history of nuclear India in which the monopoly on technical expertise gave the scientists real power to affect political calculations. Sethna's restraint falsifies the hypothesis that bureaucratic pressures drove Mrs. Gandhi to the PNE decision.

The Multan speech had a dramatic effect not because of what it told India's leaders about Pakistan, but what it told them about Pakistan's *masters* (in their view). To Mrs. Gandhi's Nehruvian way of thinking Pakistan was quite simply not a serious competitor for India – but Pakistan was dangerous as the willing puppet of the great powers, India's real peers.[61] Thus, from the Nehruvian point of view Bhutto's Multan speech was important as a sign of what Pakistanis thought they were being allowed to do. And, in fact, Mrs. Gandhi's perception contained more than a

[58] Interview with Lall. An exception to this rule was Ambassador T. N. Kaul, who was not aware of the Multan speech but who was in favor of nuclear weaponization in order to deter China (interview with Kaul).

[59] P. N. Haksar, interview published by *Blitz* August 10, 1974, reprinted in P. N. Haksar, *India's Foreign Policy and its Problems* (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1989).

[60] Interviews with Dhar and Sethna. Sethna's advice reflected a hard assessment of Pakistan's technical capacities, but it also reflected the general Indian opinion of Pakistan as a "gang that can't shoot straight" and thus would be unable to master the challenges posed by nuclear weapons development. This tendency to underestimate Pakistani capabilities stands in contrast to the definition of "oppositional nationalism," which requires an attitude of fear, not derision. See also Ashley Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001), pp. 50–51.

[61] This is a common theme in Indian security studies. See Stephen P. Cohen, "Perception, Influence, and Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia," ACDIS Occasional Paper, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, August 1979, p. 3.

grain of truth. As a note from Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon in 1973 made clear, the US administration was willing to help Pakistan bilaterally "in every way we can," and also to encourage China to help Pakistan in ways that Congress was preventing the US administration from doing.[62]

Pakistan's acquisition of the bomb would be a disaster, but to the Nehruvian mind this could only happen if the great powers let it (or made it) happen. What the situation called for in Mrs. Gandhi's eyes, therefore, was a strong signal to the great powers to rein in Pakistan before things got out of hand. If they were reminded that India was naturally part of the great power club, too, they would not treat it in this way. What they needed was a healthy indication both of India's potential might and of its self-restraint. The PNE – a one-shot test, not followed up by any subsequent work toward an actual arsenal – would provide this indication.

George Perkovich writes that the PNE-as-warning-shot idea might be plausible, except for the fact that, as he puts it, the PNE had the "opposite effect" on the great powers to that intended. He therefore favors a domestic politics explanation.[63] Perkovich is right that Mrs. Gandhi's gambit backfired: India was lambasted internationally as not only power-hungry but also hypocritical for its claims of "peaceful" intent. And, far from dissuading the great power supporters of Pakistan, the PNE actually made them more inclined to understand Pakistan's desire for nuclear weapons; indeed, it directly caused China to launch a major program of nuclear assistance to Pakistan.[64] But Perkovich is wrong to think that just because the PNE backfired in terms of India's international goals, these goals could not have been behind Mrs. Gandhi's motivation to do it. Governments make mistakes all the time as a result of misperception or simply the complexity of the world. The real puzzle is why Mrs. Gandhi did not *realize* that the PNE would backfire in this way.

The fundamental reason for Mrs. Gandhi's blind spot lies in her immense sportsmanlike nationalist pride, which had been inflamed even more by the 1971 war.[65] She did not anticipate the counterproductive effects of her PNE signal because of her inability to fathom how any

[62] Note on "Meetings with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan" from Henry A. Kissinger to the president, September 17, 1973, p. 2, Box 935 "Pakistan: Visit of President Bhutto Sept. 18, 1973" [2 of 3], National Security Council files, Nixon Presidential Papers, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[63] Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 177.

[64] John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

[65] The great secrecy with which the PNE decision was taken, which led Mrs. Gandhi to bypass the significant analytical resources of the state, is clearly another important piece of the puzzle. For elaboration, see P. R. Chari, *Indo-Pak Nuclear Standoff: The Role of the United States* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), p. 52.

"unprejudiced observers" could believe that India – her country, the country of Gandhi and Nehru, a beacon of peace and non-violence throughout the world – wanted nuclear weapons.[66] Such a self-righteous attitude is one of the causes that Robert Jervis has pointed to for why state actors often wrongly assume that others will recognize their peaceful intentions.[67] Indeed, many scholars have noted that it is precisely such a clash of self-righteous attitudes that has dogged Indo-US relations since the very beginning.[68]

In sum, Indira Gandhi's decision for a PNE is paradoxically explained by her sportsmanlike desire to avoid a nuclear arms race, combined with her inflamed nationalist pride that caused her to misjudge badly the potential international reaction to such a blast. Mrs. Gandhi was counting on outsiders to see the distinction she made between the development of nuclear capacity and the weaponization of that capacity. But the outsiders, perhaps understandably, did not accept that distinction. Thus her decision, far from stopping a nascent arms race on the subcontinent, actually brought one to life.

India's nuclear stance between 1974 and 1998

In the decade after India's 1974 nuclear test, Indian policy on nuclear weapons did not budge. Indian leaders withstood significant efforts by the US Carter administration to get them to accept a regional nonproliferation agreement with Pakistan and other South Asian nations.[69] Carter's arguments did have some currency in the government of Morarji Desai, but in the end Indian resistance to "nuclear apartheid" carried the day.[70] On the other side of the coin, Indian leaders withstood significant

[66] The phrase "unprejudiced observers" is borrowed from Mrs. Gandhi's December 15, 1971 letter to Nixon.

[67] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 354.

[68] Partha S. Ghosh, "United States and India: The Reality and the Hope," ACDIS Occasional Paper, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, March 1994, p. 2. See also Dennis Kux, *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies, 1941–1991* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1992).

[69] "Minutes of President Carter's Meetings with Prime Minister Desai," marked "Secret," June 13–14, 1978. Document viewed at National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

[70] The consistent Indian refusal to budge from its sportsmanlike nationalist nuclear posture even as Pakistan's nuclear program continued to grow stands in contrast to the Argentine willingness to make certain compromises to its sportsmanlike nationalist posture in the face of a growing nuclear rivalry with Brazil. The reason for this difference would be interesting to explore further. The most reasonable hypothesis would seem to be that, on the one hand, Argentine leaders respected Brazil enough to see their relationship as an actual rivalry, and indeed as one that could take on a nuclear dimension if cooler heads did not prevail. By contrast, as the withering quote from P. N. Haksar cited

pressures by some Indian atomic scientists who continued to pursue their explosive dreams. After studying how to downsize the original PNE device to a size that might actually be deliverable, the scientists pushed Mrs. Gandhi, again in power from 1980, to allow them to put their ideas into practice.[71] She hesitated, but in the end refused, telling her defense science advisor, "I am basically against weapons of mass destruction."[72]

After Mrs. Gandhi's own bodyguards assassinated her in 1984, her son Rajiv assumed the duties of prime minister. At the time, intelligence reports about Pakistan's nuclear progress were pouring in. Like his mother, Rajiv Gandhi believed that he could solve the problem by convincing the US to rein in its Pakistani client. In October 1985 he met with President Reagan, and as a result of their meeting he understood Reagan to have committed to putting a stop to the Pakistani program. Therefore, upon his return he disbanded the nuclear weapons policy group he had earlier formed and instead began a vigorous campaign for his "Action Plan for a Nuclear-Free, Non-Violent World."[73] The Action Plan was a direct descendant of Nehru's disarmament vision. Notably, the first stage in the plan was for a comprehensive test ban, to which India as well as the existing nuclear powers would subscribe. Like Nehru's disarmament proposals, however, the Action Plan did not have the immediate impact that Rajiv Gandhi had hoped it would.

The decision for "weaponization"

Rajiv Gandhi clearly was not eager to build nuclear weapons. But in spite of his meeting with Reagan, Pakistan's nuclear progress continued. Then, in the midst of a major military crisis in the subcontinent in 1987, the top

earlier demonstrates, Indian leaders at root did not respect Pakistan and saw its nuclear efforts mainly as bluff and bluster. This underestimation explains why India's leaders in the 1970s were not willing to adopt the serious confidence-building measures with Pakistan that Argentine leaders adopted with Brazil. But by the end of the 1980s, of course, the progress of the Pakistani program was undeniable, and this caused Rajiv Gandhi to attempt a number of confidence-building measures with Pakistan. Those measures, however, did not prevent Rajiv Gandhi's decision for "weaponization" that is discussed below.

[71] Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 242.

[72] Arunachalam cited in Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, pp. 257–260, 287. See also Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 242.

[73] K. Subrahmanyam, "Indian Nuclear Policy– 1964–98," in Jasjit Singh, ed., *Nuclear India*, pp. 40–41. The nuclear policy group had a mix of pro- and anti-bomb members. Subrahmanyam is wrong to imply that Admiral Tahiliani's report – which he admits to not having seen – argued in favor of an Indian nuclear weapons program. The report did say that a nuclear weapons program was feasible, but Admiral Tahiliani at that time saw no urgent national security need for it. Interview with Admiral R. N. Tahiliani, New Delhi, December 16, 1998.

Pakistani scientist A. Q. Khan and even President Zia himself informed journalists that their country to all intents and purposes had the bomb.[74] These statements were interpreted in India as some mix of the truth and braggadocio, but they still shook Indian elites out of their previous smugness about the Pakistani program. Therefore, in 1988 or 1989 Rajiv Gandhi gave his secret approval for work on nuclear "weaponization," and in this work Dr. P. K. Iyengar of the AEC and Dr. V. S. Arunachalam of the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) were to be key players.[75] The affair was so secret that even the prime minister's closest nuclear policy advisor, the diplomat Muchkund Dubey, only guessed at the project because a scientist asked him for an estimate of how much time India would have to complete bomb assembly in a crisis, and also how many bombs it might need.[76]

This was serious work that went far beyond what had already been done for the PNE and subsequently. It involved "design, testing and production of advanced detonators, ruggedized high volt trigger systems, interface engineering, systems engineering and systems integration" as well as various "contributions in aerodynamics, arming, fusing, safety interlocks, flight trials etc."[77] In short, under Rajiv Gandhi, for the first time India had a bona fide nuclear weapons effort, albeit one whose ultimate objective was still unclear. As Rajiv Gandhi was a sportsmanlike nationalist *vis-à-vis* generic foreign "others" – one who, according to Chapter 3, refused to recognize Pakistan as a key comparison other – his choice for "weaponization" diverges from the theoretical expectations developed in this book.[78] But still, this was no straightforward decision to go nuclear. One might say instead that he was trying to make India "half-pregnant" with nuclear weapons. His decision had given the scientists not a green light but a flashing yellow one, requiring them to ask for permission for every forward step they took.[79] Given the provocations

[74] Sumita Kumar, "Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Programme," in Jasjit Singh, ed., *Nuclear India*, p. 174.

[75] Interview with Iyengar.

[76] Interview with Muchkund Dubey, former foreign secretary, New Delhi, December 15, 1998.

[77] "Joint Statement by Department of Atomic Energy and Defence Research and Development Organisation," New Delhi, May 17, 1998, available at http://www.fas.org/news/india/1998/05/980500-drdo.htm. Accessed April 20, 2005.

[78] This chapter makes clear that Pakistan's nuclear progress forced the pace of Indian nuclear weapons decisionmaking from 1972 to 1998. Should this cause us to reevaluate the coding decision of Chapter 3, according to which Pakistan was not the key comparison other for the Indian secularists? In my view, it should not. The codings in Chapter 3 were – and must be – derived independently from the empirical data on India's nuclear development.

[79] Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, p. 335.

coming from Pakistan, what is really striking is not that Rajiv Gandhi moved toward nuclear weapons, but rather that he did not decide to go all the way. Even now, India was still reluctantly slouching toward the nuclear threshold.

After Rajiv Gandhi's tenure, his successors allowed the secret process of weaponization to continue (the top military brass, Cabinet, and most senior civil servants were out of the loop until the BJP tests of 1998).[80] But they – sportsmanlike nationalists all – also continued to agonize over whether or not to "go nuclear," which they defined as holding a series of nuclear weapons tests. And in spite of significant pressure in the 1990s to take that final step, the prime ministers before 1998 all said no. Was this reticence to test really significant, or did it just reflect a desire to have a secret nuclear weapons arsenal? In fact, in the 1990s both Indian and foreign analysts generally accepted that the subcontinent had settled into a situation of "recessed deterrence" – meaning, in essence, I won't go for a fully operational nuclear arsenal if you won't.[81] There are three separate indicators that in spite of the progress made on "weaponization," India before 1998 was still, by its own choice, a non-nuclear weapons state.

- First, since the reliability of the weapon designs had not been established, the AEC's "bombs in the basement" were potentially duds. This is why the scientists were so insistent on the need for the tests and had not built many prototype warheads.[82] Indeed, India only truly crossed

[80] *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: Sage Publishers, 2000), p. 241. It should be noted in passing that the decision for "weaponization" does reconfirm the book's focus on the prime minister as the undisputed key decision-maker in the nuclear issue area.

[81] Many have commented on the existence of this situation of "recessed deterrence," also known as "non-weaponized deterrence." Rajiv Gandhi's close advisor Arun Singh even claims that recessed deterrence tended to depress conventional military spending on both sides at a time of increasingly hostile relations. Arun Singh, "The Military Balance: 1985–1994," ACDIS Occasional Paper, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, March 1997, p. 19.

[82] The AEC has now admitted that only one of the five devices tested at Pokhran in 1998 was indeed a "weapon" – and even that designation is highly questionable. Indeed, given the need for additional tests on the bomb design, before May 1998 the AEC "would have considered it foolish to make 30 warheads, not knowing if it would work or not" (interview with senior Indian nuclear engineer, name withheld on request, 2000). A recently publicized US estimate is that India even in early 2000 still had only about five warheads of dubious quality (Robert Windrem and Tammy Kupperman, "Pakistan Nukes Outstrip India's, Officials Say," MSNBC News report, June 6, 2000, available on web at http://www.msnbc.com/news/417106.asp?cp1=1, accessed April 20, 2005). By contrast, after February 2000 the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board was relieved of responsibility over weapons-related nuclear facilities. This is indicative of "round-the-clock" production of warheads since that time (interview with senior Indian nuclear engineer, name withheld on request).

the technical threshold to nuclear weapons in April 1999, with the Agni II missile test. In the months between the May 1998 nuclear tests and the April 1999 Agni test, the scientists had worked feverishly because they knew that the severe vibrations to which the warhead would be subjected in flight would *prematurely trigger the device*.[83]

- Second, a weapon is not merely a thing that goes "boom." To be at all effective, complicated modern weapons systems require the practical familiarity of those who will be asked to employ them.[84] Yet as the Kargil Review Committee put it, prior to 1998 the Indian military had been kept almost completely "in the dark about India's nuclear capability."[85] It therefore could not train with the weapons, could not integrate them into its planning, and indeed doubted their very existence. Therefore, the military could not have reasonably been expected to show any competence in employing nuclear weapons in a crisis situation.[86] As former Army Chief of Staff General V. N. Sharma told me, "There was no question of asking for or of providing the military with 'dummy warheads' for training as the military well knew that none existed. . . . It is only now in May 1998 that suitable weapon authentication tests have been carried out, and the path to weaponization has been opened up."[87]
- Third, it is true that in spite of these technical issues, in the matter of nuclear deterrence perception is often reality. Thus, even if neither side actually had nuclear weapons but if each *perceived* the other to have them, the effects on their behavior could be identical. But, in fact, the two sides' behavior toward each other changed markedly after their respective 1998 nuclear test series. Most dramatically, the new situation emboldened Pakistan to undertake the Kargil incursion, by

[83] Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, pp. 435–436. In light of these continuing technical hurdles after May 1998, it is not clear why Chengappa devotes so much attention to the 1994 "flight test" of a mock nuclear device dropped from the bomb bay of an Indian Air Force plane. Indeed, as late as 2000 the Army's former director general of military operations, V. R. Raghavan, was lamenting that India's so-called nuclear "arsenal" had "uncertain technical parameters at best" and was perhaps *still* not fully "weaponized." V. R. Raghavan, "Whither Nuclear Policy?" *The Hindu*, July 1, 2000, available at http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2000/07/01/stories/05012523.htm.

[84] See, for instance, Christopher S. Parker, "New Weapons for Old Problems: Conventional Proliferation and Military Effectiveness in Developing States," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1999), pp. 119–147.

[85] *From Surprise to Reckoning*, p. 241. This was the report of a government-appointed committee led by K. Subrahmanyam.

[86] This was the point of Army Chief of Staff General K. Sundarji's polemic book, *Blind Men of Hindoostan* (New Delhi: UBS Publishers, 1993).

[87] Interview with Gen. V. N. Sharma, former chief of army staff, New Delhi, December 16, 1998, with follow-up letter February 18, 1999.

far its most ambitious military move since 1971.[88] India's Kargil Review Committee concluded that Pakistan was attempting a "salami slicing" tactic that came straight out of Cold War nuclear strategy manuals.[89]

In short, the abstention from testing before 1998 had real consequences for the status of India's (and apparently also Pakistan's) nuclear weapons program. As Ashley Tellis summarizes, "The May 1998 tests, in fact, represented merely the beginnings of change."[90]

The 1995 test non-decision

I have contended that Indian prime ministers until 1998 kept India from becoming a fully fledged nuclear weapons state. That successive prime ministers considered, and then shelved, the nuclear test option is hardly evidence that India's nuclear "coming out" was bound to occur sooner or later. It is rather evidence that Atal Behari Vajpayee's ideas about nuclear weapons were profoundly different from those of his predecessors. But contrary to these points, there are some suggestions that India in fact tried to test in 1995, under the Congress Party government of P. V. Narasimha Rao, until the Americans stopped it from doing so.[91] If this were true it would indeed represent a decision to go nuclear, albeit a failed one, and it would require a change in the historical interpretation offered here. A closer examination of this episode, however, shows that in fact Rao never did decide to go nuclear.

The early years of the Rao government had originally promised a more cooperative relationship with the US on the nuclear issue. Indeed, India and the US cosponsored the UN resolution for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1993. Importantly, the Rao government did not

[88] What was Pakistan's actual nuclear status before May 1998? K. Subrahmanyam has opined that until May 1998, "China did not allow Pakistan an entirely autonomous capability. Pakistani nuclear weapons, therefore, were strictly not military weapons capable of being used against India" (K. Subrahmanyam quoted in Major General Dipankar Banerjee, "India's Nuclear Policy – An IIC Debate," June 8, 1998, http://www.ipcs.org/newIpcsSeminars2.jsp?action=showView&kValue=413). There is some additional evidence for this hypothesis in the Kargil Review Committee report, *From Surprise to Reckoning*, p. 196, although Subrahmanyam now argues that Pakistan already had nuclear weapons before India.

[89] *From Surprise to Reckoning*, p. 242. What the committee does not mention is that on the Indian side, too, nuclear weapons were put into play in Kargil. For the first time, DRDO scientists fanned out to Indian ballistic missile sites and readied at least four missiles of both the Prithvi and Agni variety for a possible nuclear strike on Pakistan. Parenthetically, the fact that India readied an Agni for a strike on Pakistan puts to lie the idea that Agni is a "China-specific" missile.

[90] Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture*, p. 117. See also Tellis' comments on pp. 18–19.

[91] Ganguly hammers on this point to advance his argument that to focus on the BJP's motivations to test is "ahistorical." Ganguly, "Explaining the Indian Nuclear Tests," p. 38.

condition its support for the CTBT at this time on broader movement toward worldwide disarmament.[92] This stance was in keeping with the historic Nehruvian position that a universal test ban, unlike the NPT, was not discriminatory.[93] But obviously it was in contradiction with any policy of acquiring nuclear weapons. The fact that the Rao government circa 1994 was planning to sign and ratify the CTBT is a clear indication that, even at this late date, secularist India was looking beyond Pakistan and the subcontinental nuclear rivalry to the wider world where it found its true key comparison others. But the pro-bomb BJP and its allies in the bomb lobby launched an intense campaign opposing the CTBT. Aided by the overbearing American diplomatic tactics at the CTBT and NPT Review conferences, these groups succeeded in tarring the treaty as simply another guise of "nuclear apartheid." The domestic ferment, coming during the run-up to national elections, forced the Rao government to back away from its support for the CTBT beginning in October 1995.[94] This was a major setback for India's traditional Nehruvian stance in nuclear diplomacy. Later, in June 1996, after the Rao government was succeeded by a weak United Front secularist coalition, India would abandon the CTBT negotiations entirely.

It was in the difficult political context of late 1995 that Rao considered approving a nuclear test.[95] The prime minister went so far as to ask the scientists to make initial preparations at the test site – though without allowing the explosive devices to be transferred there.[96] But after due reflection Rao chose not to proceed, and this choice predated the US discovery of the test preparations.[97] That Rao ended up deciding not to test is hardly surprising. The whole thrust of Rao's energies as prime minister had been moving in the opposite direction from a nuclear breakout. In sponsoring the CTBT the Rao government had essentially been saying that India's interests would be best served by locking in its non-nuclear weapons state status. It did not cease thinking in that way just because the BJP had forced it to abandon the CTBT. From the Rao government's point of view, there was little to be gained from a test in terms of security – after

[92] Mistry, "The Unrealized Promise," p. 135.
[93] Rao also had a particular interest in maintaining good Indo-American relations, as a key to the success of his project of economic opening.
[94] Mistry, "The Unrealized Promise," pp. 136–137.
[95] Andrew Koch, "Nuclear Testing in South Asia and the CTBT," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Spring–Summer 1996), pp. 98–104.
[96] Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, p. 395.
[97] For a strong case against the notion that the US "stopped" the tests, see Aaron Karp, "Indian Ambitions and the Limits of American Influence," *Arms Control Today*, May 1998, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/1998˙05/kpmy98.asp

all, Pakistan would surely test immediately after India.[98] Meanwhile, it calculated that international sanctions could seriously disrupt India's fledgling economic opening.[99] Moreover, having seen the fleeting popularity that Indira Gandhi's 1974 PNE had given her, Rao never bought into the notion that a test would keep him in power.[100] Indeed, if the theory advanced in this book – that decisions to go nuclear arise from deep-seated emotional needs rather than from cool calculations – is correct, the very fact that Rao had to contemplate the matter long and hard after already spending four years in office itself suggests that he was not going to decide in favor of it. In sum, the 1995 Rao "non-test," far from proving that an Indian nuclear breakout was inevitable in the late 1990s, demonstrates the continuing resilience of the policy of remaining just shy of the nuclear threshold – a policy that India had already maintained for nearly a decade.

The theory advanced in this book certainly has trouble explaining India's forward creep toward nuclear weapons status in the 1990s, but it well explains why Indian decisions during that decade never went beyond nuclear ambiguity to full-fledged nuclear acquisition. Moreover, as will be demonstrated, it explains very well why a new, Hindu nationalist government in 1998 definitively ended India's ambiguous nuclear posture. Indian nuclear behavior during the decade 1988–98 may pose an empirical challenge to the theoretical framework set out in this book, but the events of 1998 offer startling empirical confirmation.

The BJP bomb

The "recessed deterrence" situation, though fraught with danger, had over the course of the 1990s proved remarkably stable. Moreover, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, it was expected by virtually all mainstream security analysts to endure. As a rule they did not modify their assessments even after the Hindu nationalist BJP came to power in 1998. Indeed, they had interpreted its electoral promise to "re-evaluate the country's nuclear policy and exercise the option to induct nuclear

[98] Interview with A. N. Varma, former principal secretary to Prime Minister Rao, New Delhi, December 2, 1998.

[99] Interview with Manmohan Singh, who at the time discussed here was minister of finance, New Delhi, December 19, 1998, and follow-up letter February 19, 1999. The evidence in Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, pp. 392–395 reinforces this account.

[100] One should not lose sight of the fact that for any politician to decide to go nuclear for electoral considerations would, as Rao's Principal Secretary A. N. Varma put it, be stooping so low as to be "subterranean." Interview with Varma.

weapons"[101] as a *softening* of its nuclear stance – as an indication of a new sense of responsibility on the part of a putative governing party. They were wrong.

The new government, led by the BJP in coalition with several minor party partners, was sworn in on March 19, 1998. The very next day, new Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee – widely seen as a BJP "moderate" – called in AEC chief R. Chidambaram and DRDO chief A. P. J. Abdul Kalam. As one Vajpayee aide told *India Today*, "It was not a pure courtesy call."[102] Vajpayee wanted to know the technical status of the nuclear weapons program, and he also wanted to know whether tests in the form of actual explosions were technically necessary for the "induction" of nuclear weapons into India's arsenal. The scientists replied that the devices were nearly ready, but that tests would indeed be necessary. Vajpayee closed the meeting without giving them a definitive green light, but the scientists left with the knowledge "that they didn't have much persuading to do."[103] His main concern was apparently that the government would lose its first no-confidence vote in Parliament, as it had in its thirteen-day stint in power in 1996 (about which more below). The government did survive the vote on March 28. Then, on 6 April, Pakistan tested a medium-range missile, the Ghauri, which was capable of hitting India's major cities. As Vajpayee's principal secretary Brajesh Mishra recalled, "Then came the missile and all the claims from the other side of a war. And at that point, the Prime Minister said, OK, let us go ahead [with the tests]."[104] The journalist Raj Chengappa reports that in a meeting on India's security options on the very morning of the Ghauri test, Vajpayee told his aides that there was "no need for much thought. We just have to do it."[105] And so, two days later, on April 8 Vajpayee again called in Chidambaram and DRDO chief A. P. J. Abdul Kalam and asked them to proceed to the test. They said it would take them thirty days to get ready, and so he fixed the test date for May 11.[106]

[101] Bharatiya Janata Party, Election Manifesto 1998, "Vote BJP, Vote for a Stable Government, Vote for an Able Prime Minister," p. 31.
[102] Manoj Joshi, "Nuclear Shock Wave," *India Today*, May 25, 1998.
[103] Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, p. 34.
[104] "Threats of war from Pak led to Pokhran: Mishra," *The Economic Times*, November 11, 2000.
[105] Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, p. 49.
[106] In fact, the tests were ill-prepared not only politically but also *technically*. The scientists, for all their pleading over the years for a test, seem to have been caught by surprise by Vajpayee's determination to move forward so soon. Clearly the scientists themselves were not aware of the great influence ascribed to them by such analysts as Perkovich. The results of this haste are plain to see, especially in the fact that the May 11 tests clearly did not provide the scientists with enough information, and they had to beg Vajpayee for the second set of tests that were performed on May 13. Moreover, it is

While the test preparations went on, the government allowed domestic and foreign security experts to believe that it was being "responsible." Pakistan's Ghauri missile test had not caused a general tumult in Indian elite or mass opinion. The strategic situation was still generally perceived as remaining fundamentally stable.[107] And indeed, confirming the views of the strategic experts, on 10 April – that is, two days *after* the secret decision to test had already been made – the government announced the formation of a task force to produce recommendations for the creation of a National Security Council. The Council in turn would be tasked with carrying out a "strategic defense review" that, among other things, would evaluate the nuclear policy stance. In short, the BJP certainly *appeared* to be shuffling its electoral promise off to some undefined date far in the future. As Jasjit Singh, one of the members of the new task force and director of the prominent Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, told *India Today* merely one week before the tests, "Their [BJP's] image was that the first thing they would do would be to test the atom bomb but they are moving with maturity and restraint."[108] But this was in fact not what was happening. Vajpayee did not need a government commission or even his own defense minister to tell him whether or not he needed the bomb. Indeed, he had already tried to make the decision to test once before, during his thirteen-day stint as prime minister in 1996, but his government had fallen on its first no-confidence vote and he thus could not set the wheels in motion.[109] Clearly, on this issue Vajpayee was a man who knew what he wanted – and he wanted it now.

On the appointed date, May 11, India conducted three tests at the Pokhran test site in the Rajasthan desert. One of the tests was of a thermonuclear device. The call from Pokhran came through at 3:45 p.m. The journalist Manoj Joshi describes the scene:

> The Prime Minister's Principal Secretary Brajesh Mishra lifted the receiver hesitantly to hear an excited voice cry "Done!" Putting the caller on hold, Mishra re-entered the room. Seeing his expression, Prime Minister Vajpayee, Home Minister L. K. Advani, Defense Minister George Fernandes, Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha and Planning Commission Deputy Chairman Jaswant Singh could barely control their feelings. Advani was seen wiping away his tears. Picking

clear that more tests will eventually be needed, because the scientists had not worked in a specialist group with the military or anyone else to determine precisely what tests would be needed for what nuclear force structure. And besides that, the thermonuclear test appears to have failed. See General (ret.) V. R. Raghavan, "Dangerous nuclear uncertainties," *The Hindu*, March 13, 2000. These points were reinforced in several interviews with senior Indian military officials.

[107] See George Fernandes' comments, cited in Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 410.

[108] Ibid. [109] Ibid., pp. 374–375.

up the receiver, Vajpayee, in an emotion-choked voice, thanked the two scientists who made it happen.[110]

Two days later, India conducted two more tests, each sub-kiloton in size. With these two test series, the decade-long subcontinental nuclear equilibrium had been destroyed.

Why Vajpayee chose to go nuclear

To reiterate, this was a decision that Vajpayee made essentially on his own, keeping even most of his Cabinet (let alone Parliament and the outside world) in the dark until it was a *fait accompli*. But why did he do it? What explains the extraordinary motivation and certitude that Vajpayee displayed in his firm decision to go nuclear immediately upon coming to power – which stands in such stark contrast to the long history of hedging on this issue by his predecessors? The answer is clear: Vajpayee, unlike his predecessors, was an oppositional nationalist *vis-à-vis* Pakistan; Pakistan's Ghauri missile test played into his preexisting tendency to experience a mixture of fear and pride; and the letting loose of those emotions proved an explosive psychological cocktail.[111] Indeed, it would be hard to find a more straightforward reflection of the theoretical expectations of Chapter 2.

The connection between Vajpayee and the BJP, their nuclear weapons ambitions and their oppositional nationalism against Pakistan is clear. The first call made by the BJP's predecessor party, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, for nuclear weapons had actually come in a resolution of December 4, 1964, which demanded a response to China's nuclear tests.[112] But when the BJP proper was formed under Vajpayee's leadership in 1980, it no longer held that India should develop a nuclear arsenal against China or for any other reason. As late as the 1984 general election campaign, the BJP electoral manifesto did not call for building a nuclear deterrent.[113] It was only in July 1985 that the party came out

[110] Joshi, "Nuclear Shock Wave."

[111] Note that while the Ghauri test was causally relevant to Vajpayee's choice, this was more as an excuse than as a trigger. As Vajpayee's attempt to proceed to nuclear tests during his 1996 stint in power makes clear, he hardly needed the Ghauri to convince him of the rightness of this course.

[112] BJS, "Nuclear Deterrent Necessary," Resolution No. 13, December 4, 1964, in *BJS Party Documents 1951–1972*, Vol. III: *Resolutions on Defence and External Affairs* (New Delhi: BJS, 1973).

[113] In parliamentary statements, however, BJP stalwarts had begun to indicate that the nuclear program of Pakistan worried them gravely. For instance, in 1981, Jaswant Singh, the BJP's main spokesman on external affairs in the upper house (*Rajya Sabha*), argued that India should get nuclear weapons if Pakistan did so. Jaswant Singh in the Rajya

in favor of an Indian nuclear deterrent, naming one cause for this change of heart: Pakistan's nuclear progress. The resolution of the BJP National Executive read in part:

> Reports from Pakistan indicate that the threat of a Pakistani Nuclear Bomb is real and an immediate response to this is necessary. The BJP, therefore, calls upon Government to take immediate steps to develop our own nuclear bomb.[114]

In short, the BJP had come to believe by 1985 that the Pakistani bomb either existed already or would exist very soon, and thus it demanded an urgent Indian bomb effort in response. (The resolution came at a time of escalation of Hindu–Muslim communal tensions inside India, tensions that the BJP was helping to promote.) The party ramped up its rhetoric yet further beginning in 1991, with the claim that Pakistan's nuclear status was no longer ambiguous at all but that the country was in fact "now a nuclear-weapon state."[115] These assertions continued with even more emphasis in subsequent years. True, party resolutions began also tossing in other factors, such as the China threat, as justification for an Indian bomb effort, but there could be no mistaking the wellspring of the policy. Similarly, while in the weeks following the tests, the government – in not a little disarray after taking such an ill-prepared decision – went on a public fishing expedition for arguments, after Pakistan's tests the government's line became much more focused.[116]

If the oppositional nationalists Vajpayee and the BJP were quite clear in their motivation to acquire the bomb, the sportsmanlike nationalists – most secularist parties and a good portion of the strategic elites – were quite clear in their motivation to steer clear of that choice. It has not been sufficiently noted that in the aftermath of the tests, Congress and the other secularist parties offered stern critiques of the decision. The BJP actually got into deep political trouble, and if the Pakistani reply had not come when it did the government might well have fallen.[117] This shows, parenthetically, that the BJP did not choose to test as a means of

Sabha, quoted in Madhusadan Mishra, *BJP and India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1997), p. 43.

[114] BJP, "Nuclear Bomb," resolution approved by the National Executive meeting at Bhopal, July 19–21, 1985, in A. Moin Zaidi, *Annual Register of Indian Political Parties 1985* (New Delhi: India Institute of Applied Political Research, 1987), pp. 431–432.

[115] BJP, "Foreign policy" resolution approved by the National Executive meeting at Thiruvananthapuram, 1991, in BJP, *Foreign Policy and Resolutions* (New Delhi: BJP, 1995).

[116] Its arguments included not only Pakistan's nuclear program and the Ghauri test, but also Pakistani activities in Kashmir, Chinese encirclement, Western hypocrisy, the rough nature of international politics, India's legitimate aspirations for great power status, etc.

[117] Dinshaw Mistry, "India and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty," ACDIS Research Report, Program in Arms Control, Disarmament and International Security, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, September 1998.

consolidating its hold on power. In fact, it was taking a huge political risk: not only by destroying the traditional foreign policy consensus, but also by its secrecy and failure to consult Cabinet and its coalition partners. Moreover, in spite of the general popularity of the tests, the BJP got little benefit from them in regional elections later that year, which turned on the rising price of onions and potatoes.

For a complete understanding of Vajpayee's nuclear decision, however, we need to go beyond the correlation that we have established between his desire to go nuclear and oppositional nationalism. We need to explore the complex pathway by which Vajpayee's NIC impacted his nuclear decisionmaking. Here I will focus especially on the effects of fear, the difference between his emotional predisposition and that of his sportsmanlike nationalist predecessors. Vajpayee's fear led to *higher threat assessments* and to *lower cognitive complexity* on this issue than for his secularist counterparts. It also led him to *hasty decisionmaking* and a *taste for the symbolism of security and power*. All of these elements pushed him in the direction of "inducting" nuclear weapons.

Threat assessments. Fear brings about higher threat assessments. Vajpayee the oppositional nationalist clearly rejected the conventional idea that the subcontinent was in a stable situation of "recessed deterrence." As noted above, already by 1985 he and his party were claiming that the Pakistani nuclear train was unstoppable. And after the Pakistani tests of 1998, Vajpayee told Parliament, "The Pakistani tests did not come as a surprise and this vindicates our decision to test."[118] It is well to pause for a moment on this remarkable statement. Vajpayee was saying that *the Indian tests were necessary because of the Pakistani tests that the Indian tests had caused!* We would be on the other side of the looking-glass here, but for the key assumption underlying Vajpayee's statement: that Pakistan already had the bomb, while India did not. As Vajpayee also noted in his statement to the upper house (Rajya Sabha):

> I would like to assure the House that Pakistan's tests do not pose any new threat to our national security because we have been monitoring Pakistan's clandestine pursuit of its nuclear programme . . . After his first tenure in office, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had declared in August 1994 that Pakistan possessed a nuclear bomb.[119]

[118] "Prime Minister's reply to the discussion in Lok Sabha on Nuclear Tests on May 29, 1998," http://www.indianembassy.org/pic/pm(ls).htm.

[119] Again, these statements were not universally accepted, and Vajpayee knew it. With the Pakistani tests, he rubbed it in: "Many honorable members have questioned the 'timing' as well as our assessment of the threat perception behind the decision to undertake the limited programme of underground nuclear tests, conducted on 11 and 13 May. One answer came yesterday in the afternoon, quite loud and clear. The action taken by the

In other words, in Vajpayee's eyes India, though testing first, was actually just evening the score with Pakistan.

Cognitive complexity. Fear brings about lower cognitive complexity and perceptual double standards. Vajpayee's lack of cognitive complexity on this issue was summarized by his disarmingly simple statement after India tested: "We have a big bomb now." As George Perkovich notes, an embarrassed government retracted Vajpayee's statement after it was printed in *India Today*.[120] Moreover, Vajpayee's view of Pakistan as "having" the bomb before 1998 *because* it had gone some way toward it, and of India as "not having" the bomb *even though* it had gone some way toward it, is a classic example of a perceptual double standard.

Haste. The fearful individual feels a great need to act as soon as possible, as much to decrease the fear as to decrease the danger. The "maturity and restraint" that secularists and mainstream strategic elites such as Jasjit Singh saw in India's "recessed deterrence" stance, the BJP saw as "drift and escapism."[121] Vajpayee was clearly not satisfied with anything less than acquiring an actual, full-blown Indian nuclear arsenal as soon as possible. As noted above, it was a mere two days after arriving in power that he summoned his scientific chiefs to discuss the test option. Then, provoked as few others were by the Ghauri test, Vajpayee told his aides that there was "no need for much thought. We just have to do it."[122] Yet this haste does not mean that Vajpayee took the issue lightly. Indeed, that Vajpayee understood his decision to be a revolutionary one is clear from the symbolic importance he ascribed to it. I now turn to that dimension of his decisionmaking process.

Symbolism. Fear leads to a frantic search for symbols of security and power, and pride leads to a desire to possess those symbols oneself. Vajpayee was very explicit about the broader symbolic dimension of his act. As he told a reporter, "The greatest meaning of these tests is that they have given India *shakti* [a Vedic concept of the liberation of energy], they have given India strength and they have given India self-confidence."[123] The 1998 tests themselves were even code-named "Operation Shakti." The liberation that Vajpayee hoped for was in large part a liberation from Pakistan. It is an old theme in Hindu nationalist rhetoric that Pakistan will cause trouble for India as long as India chooses to remain weak, but

Government of Pakistan should set at rest most queries regarding both 'timing' as well as 'threat perceptions.'" "Prime Minister's reply to the discussion in the Rajya Sabha on nuclear tests on May 29, 1998," http://www.indianembassy.org/pic/pm(rs).htm.

120 Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 420.

121 The quote of "drift and escapism" is from the complete BJP 1985 resolution on Pakistan and the bomb. See Zaidi, *Annual Register of Indian Political Parties 1985*.

122 Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, p. 49.

123 Atal Behari Vajpayee, interview with *India Today*, May 25, 1998.

that it will respect an India that has decided to become strong.[124] In the aftermath of the tests, Vajpayee and other BJP leaders such as Home Minister L. K. Advani (Vajpayee's number two) reiterated this theme of the tests as a symbol of their determination to put an end once and for all to the Indo-Pakistan conflict. They argued that facing a nuclear India, Pakistan could no longer mount wars, incursions, or support terrorism in Kashmir.[125] They even believed that a nuclear India could even make peace with Pakistan, finally, on its terms.[126] And if Pakistan instead tried to mount a real nuclear arms race, let it: the crushing economic burden would cause it – like the Soviet Union – to vanish altogether.[127] Meanwhile, India with the bomb would soar, taking its rightful place among the great powers. For it was "India's due," as Vajpayee told Parliament – "the right of one-sixth of humankind."[128] In these words one hears clear echoes from the French case.

But the tests did not only symbolize liberation for Vajpayee; they also – unavoidably – symbolized other, less palatable desires. Ashis Nandy cites a poem by a young Vajpayee, which apart from explicit reference to (in Nandy's words) "the victimization of the Hindus in history" at the hands of the Muslims, also offers a chilling premonition of the tests he was to order:

> This is the identity of the Hindu body, the Hindu soul and the Hindu life,
> I am that rage of Shankar, which can destroy the earth and reduce it to ashes,
> I am the devastating sound of his drum to which death dances,
> I am the unquenched thirst of the goddess of war, I am the divine laughter of Durga,
> I am the doomsday call of the god of death, the burning fire from the funeral pyre,

[124] For instance, in its "Principles and Policies" adopted in 1965, the BJS wrote, "By continuously fomenting anti-India feeling the rulers of Pakistan seek only to strengthen their own political position. As such, India's policy of appeasement is their biggest prop. If India were to adopt an attitude of firmness toward Pakistan, Pakistan's worked-up hostility towards India would not last long." *Bharatiya Jana Sangh Party Documents 1951–1972*, Vol. 1: *Principles and Policies, Manifestos, Constitution* (New Delhi: BJS, 1973).

[125] John F. Burns, "Visiting Nuclear Site, Indian Leader Puts Pakistan on Notice," *The New York Times*, Thursday, May 21, 1998, p. A7. Thanks to Jacques L. Hymans for this article.

[126] Thus the Lahore peace effort made by Vajpayee, seemingly so "uncharacteristic," actually stemmed just as much from the tests as the Kargil war did.

[127] This is a disturbing trend in Indian discussions of Pakistan since the early 1990s. See Stephen Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), ch. 7. Thanks also to Dinshaw Mistry and V. R. Raghavan for the initial insight here.

[128] "Evolution of India's Nuclear Policy," paper laid on the table of the House on May 27, 1998 by Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee, on web at http://www.indianembassy.org/pic/nuclearpolicy.htm.

> If with this fire raging inside me, I burn the earth,
> And the water, earth, sky, soil go up in flames on their own, do not be surprised.[129]

In short, the man who shattered the "recessed" nuclear equilibrium with his tests in the Rajasthan desert had not done so merely for strategic purposes; he had also done so because he – and the India of his imagination – needed the psychological reassurance of hearing that awful desert music.

Oppositional nationalism, fear, pride, haste, nuclear symbolism, all resulting in great motivation to equip the nation with nuclear weapons: the basic hypothesis of this book could hardly find greater confirmation than in the case of Atal Behari Vajpayee.

[129] Cited in Ashis Nandy *et al.*, "Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self" in Ashis Nandy, *Exiled at Home* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 55.