International Journal of Research in Social Sciences
Vol. 8 Issue 1, January 2018,
ISSN: 2249-2496 Impact Factor: 7.081
Journal Homepage: http://www.ijmra.us, Email: editorijmie@gmail.com
Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A

INDIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAMME: A JOURNEY TOWARDS OVERT WEAPONISATION

Dr. Muzaffar Ahmad Ganaie *

Abstract

Indian nuclear programme was conceived of in the pre-independence era under the influence of discoveries made in the field of atomic energy in western world when a small group of Scientists persuaded Indian leaders to exploit nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. In this endeavour, India received assistance from a number of western countries particularly from U.S. under "Atoms for Peace" programme which was launched by Dwight D. Eisenhower to reach out to countries with minimal research capabilities in nuclear technology and know-how. However in 1962, India lost a border war with China which exposed the defence vulnerabilities of India and in 1964 China conducted its first nuclear test which greatly altered the strategic calculus of India and made India to divert its resources towards weapons development. In 1974, India conducted a Peaceful Nuclear Explosion and after a gap of 24 years it conducted five nuclear tests at Pokhran and declared itself a nuclear weapon state.

This paper traces the evolution of India's nuclear weapons programme and examines various developments in Indian nuclear discourse and argues that Indian nuclear tests were not a response to an immediate security threat but were conducted to bolster political fortunes.

Key words: nuclear energy, nuclear test, security threat.

* **Lecturer Government Degree College Uttersoo, Jammu and Kashmir.**

Introduction

The genesis of Indian nuclear Programme can be traced from pre-independence era. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister and Dr. Homi Jehangir Bhabha, an Indian nuclear physicist played an important in the development of Indian nuclear Programme and it was on the insistence of Homi Bhabha that Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, an institution dedicated to basic research in sciences was created in December 19, 1945. Thereafter with the support of Nehru, who had a personal interest in the development of nuclear energy subsequent developments took place. In 1948 Atomic Energy Act was passed which paved the way for the establishment of Indian Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC) in August 1948. In 1954, a new facility, Atomic Energy Establishment, Trombay (AEET) was created, now known as Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC). In the same year Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) was established which is now responsible for the implementation of India's three stage nuclear programme.[1] Under Nehru Indian nuclear programme moved swiftly and huge budgetary allocations were made for the development of nuclear energy. In1954 construction of first Indian reactor, Apsara began with British assistance which supplied enriched uranium for the reactor. It was a swimming pool type 1 MW research reactor. In the same year, India started negotiations with Canada for the construction of another reactor and after tough negotiations of more than one year two sides sealed an agreement under which Canada agreed to supply a 40 MW reactor to India and United States agreed to supply heavy water for the reactor and the reactor was dubbed as Canada-India Reactor, US (CIRUS). It may be noted that the plutonium used in India's first Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE) came from this reactor, though the agreement inked with Canada ruled out any type of PNE.[2]

Duality and ambiguity are the two important characteristics which have guided the Indian nuclear policy right from the beginning. Nehru publically opposed the development of nuclear weapons, but he always left the door open for the development of nuclear weapons as he said, '---------- I think we must develop it [atomic energy] for peaceful purposes. It is in that hope we should develop it. Of course if we are compelled as a nation to use it for other purposes no pious sentiment of any of us will stop the nation for using it that way.'[3] On the one hand Nehru echoed his voice against the development of nuclear weapons at different world fora but on the other hand he gave Homi Bhabha a free hand in the development of atomic energy and avoided any

public scrutiny on India's nuclear programme. In 1960 in a meeting with Kenneth Nicholas, a former US engineer which was also attended by Homi Bhaba, Nehru asked Bhaba, "can you develop an atomic bomb", Bhaba replied "yes", it would take him one year, then Nehru told him "well don't do it until I tell you to."[4] Nehru was willing to keep the option of developing the nuclear weapons open, as he knew its political value. However, it is to be acknowledged that during his life he stood in firm opposition against the acquisition of nuclear weapons and advocated the cause of universal nuclear disarmament. In a television interview on 18 May 1964 at New York he said that, 'we are determined not to use weapons for war purposes. We do not make atom bombs. I do not think we will.'[5]

The China factor

In 1958 Indo-China relations started deteriorating over border issue and in 1962 two sides got engaged in a brief but intense border war. The war resulted in a humiliating defeat to India which weakened the political ideology of Nehru. In the war India lost around 14,000 square miles of its territory. This defeat at the hands of China and rumours that China would soon develop nuclear weapons had a great impact on Indian political establishment and demand for the development of nuclear weapons was first time echoed in Indian parliament. Ramachandra Bade, a member of Bharatiya Jana Sang openly supported the development of nuclear weapons as he said, 'only those who wish to see Russians or Chinese ruling India will oppose the development of nuclear weapons. I beg the Prime Minister to make full use of our research in atomic energy.'[6] But his demand was turned down by Nehru. No doubt Nehru rejected the demand of Bade, but he did not completely down play the fear of Chinese bomb. On 22 November 1960, he told Indian Parliament that 'If nothing effective is done in regard to disarmament in the course of next three or four years, it may become too late to deal with it, it may become almost impossible to control the situation.'[7] On October 6, 1964 China exploded its first nuclear device at Lop Nor which accelerated the demand for the development of nuclear weapons in India and had a great impact on Indian strategic thinking that the nuclear armed China would now 'subject a non-nuclear India to periodic blackmail' and achieve its major strategic objectives in Asia.[8]

Minoo Masani, leader of Swatantra party expressed his fears in these words: 'The Chinese explosion can't be ignored, it cannot be down played, it is of major significance, we are the

country for which it has the most immediate importance.'[9] The impact of this test was so great that it even divided the Congress on the nuclear issue and several members of the parliament privately approached Prime Minister to convince him to change the nuclear policy.[10] In November 1964, an All India Congress Committee meeting was held in which majority of the members directly supported manufacturing of nuclear weapons.[11] The members supporting the cause of nuclear weapons were convinced by the figures given by Homi Bhabha, chairman of AEC regarding the economics of developing nuclear weapons. In 1964, Bhaba had claimed that producing nuclear weapons is quite cheap. He estimated that it would cost $21 million to manufacture a stockpile of 50 atom bombs and a stockpile of 50 hydrogen bombs would cost $ 31.5 million.[12] These estimates, however, proved inappropriate later on but provided the much needed impetus for bomb lobbyists to press their demand. But in spite of huge pressure, Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri refused to change country's nuclear policy as he considered it against the principles of morality to develop nuclear weapons and argued that it would weaken the Indian stand on universal nuclear disarmament and can prove economically disastrous for the country. Besides this, country faced certain technical difficulties like inadequate delivery system, and insufficient fissile material. He also had a fear that it would encourage arms race between India and Pakistan and thus destabilise the region.[12]

In September 1965, India and Pakistan fought their second war. This war put a new momentum in bomb debate. In this war Pakistan got diplomatic support both from China and United States. China increased troop movements along the border and threatened to open second front against India. It also served an ultimatum to India "to remove construction works in Tibet or face grave consequences".[13] But Prime Minister Shastri remained stuck to his stand. After the end of war nearly one hundred parliament members wrote to Shastri to change his stance on nuclear policy and ultimately under immense political pressure he authorised 'Subterranean Nuclear Explosive Project' in December 1965 [14] which authorised research in nuclear explosives.

Towards Peaceful Nuclear Explosion(PNE)

Early 1970s marked a dramatic change in Indian nuclear discourse. This was as period when major developments were taking place in Indo-Soviet relations on the one hand and Sino-American relations on the other hand and at the same time crises in Eastern Pakistan erupted. On

july15, 1971 Sino-American breakthrough was achieved and on July 17, 1971 Henry Kissinger, declared to India that 'we would be unable to help you against China' in the event of Chinese involvement in war between India and Pakistan.'[15] During the course of war US dispatched a nuclear taskforce to the Bay of Bengal. No doubt India won the war but these developments had a great influence on political elites and in1972 Indra Gandhi made a direct reference to Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE) in parliament. While commenting on the impact of these developments on Indian strategic thinking B.S. Gupta writes,

"The Chinese bomb ceased to be the main argument for the Indian bomb, perhaps because of China's inability to help Pakistan in 1971 war……..The arguments for the bomb now were that without it India couldn't be expected to the corridors of global power,…….the bomb might compel the United States to change its attitude of hostility…".[16]

On 18 May 1974, India carried out a Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE). The test was code named as "Smiling Buddha". To avoid international reaction it was declared that the test had a peaceful nature. The opinion is divided on the question that why Indira Gandhi ordered PNE? and was it actually carried out to address security concerns as it could have hardly served as a deterrent either against China or US. There is a broad consensus among the thinkers and strategic analysts that decision was taken for personal gains. Scot D. Sagon claims that it was directed to address domestic political concerns. In early 1970s country was hit by a series of droughts which gave serious setback to economy of the country and caused social unrest. Corruption and misgovernance had become routine of the day and in response to it J.P. movement was launched by Gandian Socialist Jayaprakash Narayan. In early 1974 a railway strike was called by George Fernandes and all this gave a setback to the popularity of Mrs. Gandhi and she considered it an opportunity to explode a nuclear device and regain her lost public support. Had it been a security matter then there would have been a lot of debate and discussion on it. The decision was taken by Mrs. Gandhi with the advice of a small circle of advisors and scientists. The defence minister was given the information only ten days before the explosion and foreign minister just 48 hours.[17] Former Indian defence secretary K. B. Lal also holds the same argument. In an interview in 1984 he said that:

"The test arose not out of defence programme……..If it was a defence project, there should have been some discussion……I know up to May 1973 that…… the Chairman of the Chiefs of the Staff, the Defence Secretary, the Defence Minister were not involved……..".[18]

In 1978, Mrs. Gandhi also admitted in an interview with Rodney Jones that her decision was not motivated by "military considerations."[19] In fact, "domestic political considerations" served as a motivating factor behind the decision and indeed domestic consequences of the test were rewarding. As per Indian Institute of Public Opinion, the test increased the public support for Gandhi by 1/3rd [20] and she regained her lost public support.

From Covert to Overt Weaponisation

After the detonation of nuclear device at Pokhran in 1974, India followed a moratorium on testing for 24 years. In this period at least two attempts were made to resume testing. First attempt was made in 1982 when Indira Gandhi approved a series of underground tests. But due to US pressure tests couldn't be conducted. Second attempt was made in 1995 during the tenure of P.V. Narasimha Rao, but decision was declined due to lack of consensus on the issue. Barring these two instances, Indian nuclear discourse did not witness any major breakthrough as the period between 1975 to 1997 was a period of political instability. The period from 1990-1997 witnessed five governments.

A major shift in Indian nuclear discourse came in 1998 when Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power and it conducted five nuclear tests. It had been a long term objective of the party to give Indian defence forces nuclear teeth and even the fear of economic sanctions did not deter it. It was the only political party that had openly advocated the cause of nuclear weapons. This found an expression in party's campaign manifesto called "National Agenda for Governance."[21] It utilised the ground prepared by previous governments as the programme had received the support of almost all the previous regimes. Had it not been the case, it would not have been possible for a three months old government to take such a major decision.

The decision to conduct the tests puzzled the strategic thinkers as well as political analysts as why did India conduct five nuclear tests after a gap of twenty four years? and several explanations have been put forth to answer this question. One such explanation is "deteriorating

security environment". After the tests Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee wrote to US president that security threat from China and Pakistan compelled India to take such a step.[22] But the fact remains that the country was not facing any security threat either from China or Pakistan. Country's relations with China were improving. Border was peaceful and there was forces reduction along the border from both the sides and China had softened its stand on Kashmir issue. Talks on border issue were going on slowly and steadily.[23] Security threat from Pakistan is also misplaced as India was enjoying an edge over Pakistan both in terms of nuclear and conventional weapons capability and nuclear balance was in India's favour in spite of Pakistan's Gauri Missile test in April, 1998.[24] So security threat argument sounds hollow. After the tests, former Indian PM I. K. Gujral also acknowledged in Lok Sabha that India was not facing any security threat which could have triggered the tests.[25]

Second argument holds the 'strategic threat' posed by nuclear and military build-ups in Pakistan and China, China-Pakistan nexus and US tilt towards Pakistan as a reason which prompted India to take counter measures. So far as nuclear build-ups in Pakistan were concerned, such measures were taken to level the power equation in the region which was in India's favour.[26] India started her nuclear programme even before the emergence of Pakistan but Pakistan set her nuclear programme on the course of weapons development only after its defeat in 1971 war and India's PNE. In fact it was Pakistan which put forward certain proposals on nuclear restraint and regional disarmament but such proposals were turned down by India. On the one hand India was showing concerns regarding the intentions of Pakistan but on the other hand was expanding her weapons programme. In 1990s India had increased the number of her crude nuclear devices to around 20 and had accumulated fissile material sufficient for sixty to ninety bombs,[27] besides modifying its delivery systems. So nuclear or military developments in Pakistan were taken to ensure its own security and not to threaten India. So for as nuclear developments in China were concerned such developments were going on in China even before the beginning of Indian nuclear Programme and were directed more towards US and USSR than to India and if China really posed a security threat to India then one can argue that how India 'could live with Chinese bomb for a quarter century'[28] and if intention was to develop a deterrent against China how it could have been achieved by conducting only five tests and declaring moratorium on further tests, by 1998 China had around 400-500 nuclear war heads in her basement. The China-Pakistan

strategic entente was aimed at fulfil certain strategic objectives which had hardly anything to do with India like limiting US influence in Pakistan, cultivating a moderate and an influential Muslim state so that China could link itself to larger Muslim world and to get access to sophisticated technology provided by US to Pakistan.[29]

So far as strategic engagement between US and Pakistan is concerned such an engagement started during the cold war era and even continues today but US policy had never been to aid Pakistan in getting a nuclear bomb, it even imposed sanctions on China for supplying nuclear technology and knowhow to Pakistan.

Third argument put forth is discriminatory nuclear order. There is abroad consensus among the strategic thinkers that before 1998 tests global nuclear order was unjust and neither served India's interests nor reflected her growing economic and military power. International community was exercising too much pressure on India to sign Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which India had out rightly rejected because of its discriminatory nature. In 1995, NPT was indefinitely extended and in 1996 CTBT was successfully negotiated despite India's opposition. What alarmed India was Entry into Force clause of the treaty which required all the forty four nuclear capable states (including India, Pakistan and Israel) to ratify the treaty before it comes in to force. Indian political elite realised that if treaty comes in to force India will lose the option of conducting nuclear tests and would not be able to develop a credible nuclear deterrent.[30] As New Delhi did not want to miss the opportunity and decided to conduct nuclear tests. This argument holds some weight but cannot be cited as a primary reason. In fact it facilitated the decision and made the cause strong for Indian leaders.

The most important reason was BJP's rise into power which exercised the nuclear option to boost its fortunes. During the election campaign BJP made the nuclear issue most important election issue. For party nuclear weapons had always been a symbol of greatness and without these weapons India would not be recognised as a great power. After the tests Brajesh Mishra, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister said that '……you can't in today's world be counted for something without going nuclear'.[31] But more important and compelling reason was to boost the fortunes of a sagging coalition government, as it is a well established fact of Indian politics that the fate of a coalition government depends on the allocation of scarce resources such as ministerial positions than on attaching importance to matters of national concern. As BJP was

heading a coalition of 17 parties and in order to score political gains it decided to conduct the tests.

Conclusion

To sum up it can be said that security threat perception made India to divert its resources towards the development of nuclear weapons but the final decision to conduct nuclear tests was taken to score political gains as there existed no immediate threat to Indian security either in 1974 or in 1998. Indian leaders conflated their personnel interests with national interests and personnel security with national security to justify their decisions. The test of 1974 was conducted to boost political fortunes as the Indira Gandhi led Congress government was confronted with the challenges of corruption and misgovernance. The 1998 tests were also politically motivated. Though there was pressure on India to join the global non-proliferation regime as Non-Nuclear Weapon State which India considered highly discriminatory, but it was not a compelling reason. It only provided an additional boost to the political establishment to conduct the tests.

References

[1] "India's Nuclear Weapons Programme: the Begning-1940-1960, available at http://www.nuclearweaponarchive.org/India/Indiaorigin html.

[2] Shrikant Parajpye, "India's Nuclear Status: A Policy Note", *Asian Affairs,* Vol. 13, No. 2, Summer 1986, p.56.

[3] S.K. Mishra(ed.), *India's Nuclear Policy Disarmament and International Security*. New Delhi: Radha Publications, 2006, p.11.

[4] "India's Nuclear Weapons Programme: The Beginning", op. cit.

[5] Summit Ganguly, "India's Pathway to Pokhran-II: The Prospects and Sources of New Delhi's Nuclear Weapons Programme", *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1999, pp. 153.

[6] Shyam Bhatia, *India's Nuclear Bomb.* New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1979, pp. 108-109

[7] Bumitra Chakma, "Towards Pokhran II: Explaining India's Nuclearisation Process", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 93, No. 1, February 2005, p. 194.

[8] Summit Ganguly, "India's Pathway to Pokhran-II", op. cit., p. 153.

[9] Ibid., pp.152-153.

[10] shyam Bhatia, op.cit., pp.110.

[11] "India's Nuclear Weapons Programme: On to Weapons Development: 1960- 1967" available at http://www.nuclearweaponarchive.org/India/indiaweaponsdevelopment.html.

[12] shyam Bhatia, op.cit., pp.126-129.

[13] George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000,p. 109.

[14] Col. Ravi Nanda, *Strategic Compulsions of Nuclear India*. New Delhi: Lancer Books, 1998, p. 30.

[15] George Perkovich, op.cit., p.163.

[16] Quoted in "India's First Bomb: 1967-1974", available at http://www.nuclearweaponarchive.org/India/Indiasfirstbomb.html

[17] Scot D. Sagon, "Why do States Build Nuclear Weapons: Three Models in Search of a Bomb", *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Winter 1996/97, pp. 67-68.

[18] Quoted in George Perkovich, op.cit., p.177.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Scot D. Sagon, op.cit., p. 60.

[21] Deepa M. Ollapaly, "Mixed Motives in India's Search for Nuclear Status", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 6, November/December, p. 933.

[22] Weixing Hu, "New Delhi's Nuclear Bomb; a Systemic Analysis", *World Affairs,* Vol. 15, No. 1, Summer 2000, p. 30.

[23] Dipanker Banerjee, "Budha's Smile and National Security*", Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 20, May 16-22 1998, p. 1160.

[24] Weixing Hu,op.cit.,pp.30-31.

[25] L. Ramdus, "Pokhran and its Fall Out", *Frontline*, Vol. 15, No. 14, July 4-17, 1998.

[26] Karstein Frey, *India's Nuclear Bomb and National Security*. New York: Rutledge, 2007, pp.80-81.

[27] Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik, New Nukes: India, Pakistan and Global Disarmament, United Kingdom: Signal Books, 2000, p. 63.

[28] Praful Bidwai, "Saying No to Nukes", *Frontline*, Vol. 25, No. 11, May 24-6 June, 2008.

[29] M.V. Ramana and R.C. Rammanohar Reddy (eds.), *Prisoners of Nuclear Dream.* New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000, pp. 44-50.

[30] Weixing Hu,op.cit.,pp.32-33

[31] Quoted in Swaminathan on "Pokhran-II: Five Years Later", 17 May, 2003, paper presented at an international session of Obserber Research Foundation, Chennai on17 May, 2003.