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## **Nuclear Policy of India: An Analysis**

**Promod Singh**

*Ph. D Scholar, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi*

### **Abstract**

*India's nuclear policy evolved under the security framework considering both the domestic and international security environment. On the one hand, since independence the Indian leadership was quite vocal against the use or possession of nuclear weapons by any country, while at the same time, it considered it very imperative that India should develop indigenous nuclear system with credible deterrence as the core of the policy. This was in line with India's perceived threats from China and Pakistan. The failure of the international community to address India's security concerns had further accelerated the programme. It appears that the policy is going to continue in the same fashion in the near future.*

**Keywords: Nuclear policy, India, Security, International community.**

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**Introduction:** India has had an uncomfortable relationship with nuclear weapons. From the early days of independence, Indian leaders, especially Jawaharlal Nehru, took a very public and very vocal stand against nuclear weapons. But Nehru, a modernist, was also convinced that nuclear technology had a role to play in national development.<sup>1</sup> However, Nehru's perspective on nuclear weapons was not the only determinant of Indian Nuclear Policy. International security condition and domestic variables also played an important role.

As for bureaucratic influence, some defense scientists played a key role in keeping the weapons program alive even when there was no political support or indeed, active opposition, while other bureaucrats were responsible for creating political awareness of India's declining nuclear options. Nevertheless, these variables suggest a moderate Indian approach to nuclear weapons and thus reinforce the dominant tendency towards a political rather a military approach to looking at nuclear weapons. They neither suggest any dramatic changes nor rapid advances in India's nuclear weapons program.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On this dual aspect, see Itty Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy and The Postcolonial State* (New York: Zed Books, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Rajesh Rajagopalan "India's Nuclear Policy" in *Major Power's Nuclear Policies and International Order In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New Delhi: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2010.

**Background:** Indian leaders have generally considered nuclear weapons at best a necessary evil. Prime Ministers Lal Bahadur Shastri and Rajiv Gandhi sought international solutions to avoid committing to nuclear weapons; Prime Minister Morarji Desai shut down the weapons program for a time. Even Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee, who ordered the nuclear tests in 1998, was more ambivalent two decades earlier, siding with Desai in voting against restarting the nuclear weapons program in 1979. As a number of analysts have concluded, growing nuclear threats and a progressively unaccommodating global nuclear order forced New Delhi to move towards a declared nuclear arsenal in the 1990s. This discomfort with nuclear weapons has defined the manner in which India has viewed nuclear weapons.

**Developments:** The debates and decisions pertaining to India's nuclear weapons program can be divided into four distinct phases, each of which brought the country closer to the May 1998 tests. The first phase began with the creation of India's Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) in 1948; the Chinese nuclear test in 1964 marked the beginning of the second phase; the third comprises the build up and execution of India's first nuclear test, in 1974; the fourth brought India from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 to the tests in 1998.

**Phase One: The Origins of India's Nuclear Program:** The Indian nuclear program in a sense predates India's independence from the British Empire in 1947. The civilian program can be traced to the work of the Indian physicist Homi J. Bhabha. Two personalities dominated this formative period-Bhabha and Jawaharlal Nehru. A turning point in the Indian foreign policy establishment's attitude toward defense spending came in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian border war of October 1962. After invading India along the Himalayan border, the Chinese People's Liberation Army routed the ill-equipped and ill-prepared Indian army and came to occupy some 14,000 square miles of Indian territory. Worse still, the Chinese declared a unilateral cease-fire after achieving their territorial objectives, thereby humiliating Nehru and the Indian political leadership. The border war forced Nehru to reappraise his strategy and his most cherished ideals. "The Indian leader never recovered from the staggering psychological blow. Until mid-October 1962, Nehru, although aging, was still a towering international figure. A month later, Nehru was a beaten old man, his country seemingly dependent on the military support of the United States, his policy of non-alignment in shreds."<sup>3</sup>

**Phase Two (1962-64): China's Nuclear Test and the Non Proliferation Treaty:** The second phase of India's nuclear program started shortly after the first Chinese nuclear test at Lop Nor on October 16, 1964. Following that test, segments of India's political and scientific establishments evinced a greater interest in acquiring nuclear weapons. By this time Bhabha had begun to articulate the politico-military significance of nuclear weapons. The news of the test released a firestorm of controversy across India. China's acquisition of nuclear weapons in the aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war dealt a further blow to

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Dennis Kux, "India and the United States: Estranged Democracies 1947-1991", Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1992, p.208.

India's national security. Sisir Gupta, one of India's ablest diplomats, spelled out the concerns of most Indian strategists: "...without using its nuclear weapons and without unleashing the kind of war which would be regarded in the West as the crossing of the provocation- threshold, China may subject a non-nuclear India to periodic blackmail, weaken its people's spirit of resistance and self-confidence, and thus achieve without a war its major political and military objectives in Asia."<sup>4</sup> The Bharatiya Jana Sangh (the forerunner to the BJP) condemned India's policy of nuclear abstinence. Nehru, however, remained publicly opposed to the development of nuclear weapons. Nine days before his death, in a television interview in New York on May 18, 1964, he stated, "We are determined not to use weapons for war purposes. We do not make atom bombs. I do not think we will."<sup>5</sup>

In December 1964 at a press conference in London, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Nehru's successor as Prime Minister revealed India's efforts to obtain a nuclear guarantee from the nuclear weapons states. Amid these debates, Shastri dispatched Sardar Swaran Singh, his foreign minister, to ascertain the views of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom on India's request for a nuclear guarantee. Swaran Singh's initial assessment suggested that the requisite guarantees would materialize. Subsequently, however, during a debate on May 10, 1965, in the Lok Sabha, he admitted that the nuclear weapons states had ultimately failed to provide any such guarantees.

Meanwhile, the United States and the Soviet Union, in the backdrop of the Chinese nuclear tests, sought to forge a multilateral treaty to stop the further spread of nuclear weapons. Accordingly, in November 1965 the UN Political Committee adopted a resolution detailing the guidelines for a treaty on nuclear non-proliferation. The Indian delegation to the United Nations had played a key role in drafting the central provisions of the text.

**Phase Three: Pokhran I- The First Nuclear Test:** The third phase started with India's first nuclear test at Pokhran in May 1974. On the one hand, the international community could not address India's security concerns, while at national level, the ascendance to the power of the strong lady Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, created a shift in policy. India's failure to influence the creation of a global regime that would address its security concerns pushed the country further down the nuclear path. Sub-sequent events bolstered the Indian elite's commitment to acquire nuclear weapons. In 1971 India and Pakistan became embroiled in a third war, which resulted in the breakup of the Pakistani state and the emergence of Bangladesh in place of the former East Pakistan. In the aftermath of this war India emerged as the preeminent power on the subcontinent. On May 25, 1970, Sarabhai, the successor of Bhabha, in a public document spelled out the key features and goals of India's nuclear and space programs for the coming decade. Specifically, the document

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<sup>4</sup> Sisir Gupta, "The Indian Dilemma," in Alastair Buchan, ed., *A World of Nuclear Powers?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 55-67, at p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in G.G. Mirchandani, *India's Nuclear Dilemma* (New Delhi: Popular Book Services, 1968), p. 23.

called for important developments in the arena of space research, including a commitment to develop rocket systems capable of placing 1,200-kilogram payloads into geosynchronous orbit, the development of flight guidance systems for rockets, and the construction of large solid-propellant blocks.<sup>6</sup> The discovery of uranium deposits in northern India had also helped boost India's nuclear programs. The start of the 1970s witnessed both the capability and the political motivation of India to conduct a nuclear test.

**Phase Four: The Collapse of the Security Guarantee:** With the collapse of the Soviet Union and its disintegration into sixteen states, India lost a traditional, strong and very reliable friend whether on the question of Kashmir or India's neighbors-China and Pakistan. Again, two significant developments occurred in the mid-1990s against the hope and expectation of India. The indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1995 and the passing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996 by the General Assembly came as a surprise to the Indian leadership. At national level, the Bharatiya Janata Party assumed power with the support of some regional parties in 1998. This was significant, as the manifesto of the Party had spoken of the need to "induct" nuclear weapons coupled with the need to "review" India's security environment. Further, India's perceived threats from China and Pakistan further accelerated the nuclear programme.

#### **Indian Nuclear Doctrine – January 2003 Statement:<sup>7</sup>**

- (i) Building and maintaining a credible minimum deterrent;
- (ii) A posture of "No First Use": nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere;
- (iii) Nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage.
- (iv) Nuclear retaliatory attacks can only be authorised by the civilian political leadership through the Nuclear Command Authority.
- (v) Non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states;
- (vi) However, in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons, India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons.

India's nuclearisation has seen a limited utility as evident from both the 1999 Kargil crisis, and the 2001 Parakram crisis that took place after the attack on the Indian Parliament. While during the Kargil, India was very careful of not allowing its forces to cross the Line of Control; India's restraint in dealing with the attack on the Indian parliament

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<sup>6</sup> Vikram Sarabhai, "India's Nuclear and Space Programs: A Design for Decade 1970-80," Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis Journal (Delhi), Vol. 3, No. 1 (July 1970), pp. 90-91.

<sup>7</sup> "The Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews operationalization of India's Nuclear Doctrine." Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. January 4, 2003. <http://meaindia.nic.in/pressrelease/2003/01/04pr01.htm>

demonstrated the limitations that nuclear weapons imposed on India's capacity to respond to Pakistan's use of terrorism as a strategy. India used the military mobilization essentially as a way of putting pressure on Pakistan as well as on the United States.

**Conclusion:** India's nuclear policies have as much to do with the global power structure-defined since the end of the Cold war, by American politico-military unipolarity- as with China and Pakistan. India's nuclear policy has evolved gradually rather than dramatically in the backdrop of the failure of the international community to address its security concerns. Moreover, the Indo-US 123 Agreement, which came into force in 2008, has effectively legitimized India's nuclear capability outside of the NPT. The dramatic shift in American attitudes towards India's programme has represented an enormous strategic victory for India.

More recently, with the coming in power of the new government in 2014, a debate arose whether India should reconsider its nuclear policy. The election manifesto the Bharatiya Janata Party had promise to "revise and update" India's nuclear doctrine "to make it relevant to challenges of current time". However, shortly after assuming power, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi clarified that "On such issues, there is a tradition of consensus. I can tell you that currently, we are not taking any initiative for a review of our nuclear doctrine."<sup>8</sup> It remains to be seen that with credible deterrence as the core of India's nuclear policy and the recent 2008 Mumbai attacks, how is the Indian leadership going to shape its nuclear policy. Till then, deterrence theory seems to be failing.

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<sup>8</sup> "No review of nuclear doctrine, says Modi", *The Hindu*, August 29, 2014.

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