

India joins the nuclear club

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan B. Maitra

Three underground nuclear tests carried out at Pokhran, the site of India's only other nuclear explosion in 1974, within a span of five minutes on May 11, made India a member of the exclusive nuclear weapons "club." Two days later, two more underground nuclear explosions at the same site brought to an end the series of tests necessary for developing a wide range of nuclear weapons and missile warheads.

The explosions have evoked strong sentiments against India within the world community. The United States, bound by the 1994 Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act, has already imposed economic sanctions against India, a non-signatory of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Similar actions have reportedly been taken by Tokyo and Bonn.

The strategic context

In view of the international excitement over India's nuclear test series, one is strongly advised to take a larger, strategic view at what happened on May 11 and 13 in the Rajasthan desert. India is a democratic country, which soon will have the largest population in the world, and which, like China, possesses a civilizational continuity of more than 3,000 years. Why, therefore, should India not have the sovereign right to develop all technologies—civilian, military, and so-called "dual-use"—which it deems necessary for its economic-social development and national security?

It is appropriate to look at the Indian government's decision to go ahead with the nuclear tests in the strategic context of the so-called Asian financial crisis. For years, India has been pressured by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and Western governments to "liberalize" its economy, its trade, and, in particular, its financial markets and monetary structures. Equally, India has been under constant and massive pressure to abandon its nuclear weapons program. Had India yielded to this pressure by the "international institutions," had India made its currency fully convertible, had it "radically deregulated" its economy and financial markets, then India today would be in a situation quite similar to that of Indonesia! This other large Asian country, with a population of 200 million, now stands at the brink of financial, economic, and political breakdown.

It should surprise no one, that India reserves the sovereign right to determine itself what is best for India. Therefore, the nuclear tests should not be seen as some sort of "impulsive act" of "nationalist adventurism." Quite the opposite, it seems that the decision for the nuclear test series was soberly considered and carefully calculated.

The French and Chinese precedent

The timing and the technical features of the nuclear tests indicate that India wants to insert itself into the nuclear "club" through a time-compressed series of nuclear tests, and *then* accept the CTBT regime. The simultaneous carrying out of three tests, followed by two further tests within 48 hours, which included a plutonium explosive, a thermonuclear explosive, and a low-yield explosive, indicates that New Delhi has chosen to collect the necessary data, which can come only from a "physical" experiment, within the shortest possible period of time. The data thus accumulated, provide the basis to proceed with computer simulations for manufacturing nuclear weapons and warheads. This approach in one go, instead of carrying out a series of tests over years, was similarly adapted by France and China in the 1995-96 period. The success of India's tests, particularly of the thermonuclear explosive on May 11 and two sub-kiloton tests which provide India the capability to miniaturize nuclear warheads, makes India a candidate to sign the CTBT, which has been signed by all five recognized nuclear-weapons states.

The test came as a surprise to most Indians, and it was widely welcomed across the land. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the leading party in the recently installed government in New Delhi, had stated in its election manifesto that once in power, it would keep alive India's nuclear option. India exploded a plutonium device at the same site in 1974, under the political leadership of the late Indira Gandhi.

India's objectives

The nuclear tests indicate that after years of deliberation, India has finally decided to put in place a nuclear arsenal to provide security to its population of almost 1 billion people. To the north of India, China has long been a nuclear-weapons nation and has built an impressive nuclear arsenal. To India's west, Pakistan has also developed a nuclear capability, although it has not tested any nuclear device yet, and only re-

cently carried out a number of missile tests with the purpose of developing a delivery system. India, at the same time, has developed a short-range surface-to-surface missile which is being updated now to carry low-yield nuclear warheads. India is also developing a medium-range missile capable of carrying a nuclear payload. These developments, and repeated statements made by various Indian security analysts and government officials, make clear that India has been in the process of developing a nuclear-weapons-based capability for its national security.

In addition to India's regional "threat perception" and national security considerations, most Indian analysts also argue that Delhi's decision to pursue the nuclear option reflects the conclusion that only by breaking the nuclear weapons monopoly of five nations, could India get itself counted as a major power. As of now, India is considered a regional power by most Western analysts, as opposed to China. These tests, and the subsequent development of nuclear weapons, will provide India the necessary muscle to eventually become a global power, not just in population and in economic-technical terms, in the 21st century.

International reactions

The international reaction to the tests is one of alarm and anger across the board. China, which has carried out more than 45 tests and has developed a large nuclear arsenal over the last three decades, officially expressed "serious concern about the nuclear tests carried out by India." Beijing charged that "India's conducting of nuclear tests runs against the international trend," which is to reduce nuclear weapons and ban all tests. It should be noted, however, that Beijing's reaction was basically *mildly negative*, and not altogether unexpected. India and China fought a war in 1962. The undemarcated border, which led to the dispute and border clashes, remains as it was, but China and India have mutually agreed to maintain peace and tranquility along it. The two large nations began economic cooperation in the early 1990s and are now involved in \$2 billion worth of bilateral trade annually. In recent weeks, following installation of the BJP-led government in New Delhi, the Indian Defense Minister has made accusations about China's allegedly continuing hostile posture toward India, even though these claims were toned down later.

In Washington, President Clinton imposed economic sanctions on India following the second string of tests. The 1994 Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act forces the President to enact sweeping sanctions against non-nuclear-weapons nations which move to develop nuclear weapons. The law calls for cutting off all U.S. government assistance except humanitarian aid; preventing U.S. banks from issuing loans and giving credit guarantees or other financial assistance; prohibiting sale of defense articles or defense services; banning U.S. exports of specific goods and technology, excluding food

and agricultural commodities; and opposing the extension of any loan or financial or technical assistance to India by an international financial institution.

The initial American response following the May 11 tests was less harsh than expected. The statement made by National Security Adviser Sandy Berger is worth noting. When asked whether President Clinton's proposed visit to the subcontinent this fall is still on the agenda, he said: "Our plans remain unchanged. I think it remains important that we continue our dialogue with Pakistan, with India. There is an enormous amount—India, for example, and the U.S. are the two largest democracies in the world—of common interests that we have. But I think we have a better chance of de-escalating or at least showing these kinds of actions if we remain engaged than if we do not." However, the harshness in the American tone increased considerably following the May 13 tests, although the India-U.S. strategic dialogue may continue and President Clinton's proposed visit to India in November has not been called off yet.

In Europe, various nations responded with dismay. Germany froze all aid. Great Britain, despite strong criticism of New Delhi, has refused to go along with the United States in clamping down sanctions on India. International Institute for Strategic Studies chief Gerald Segal strongly condemned India's tests and asked Western nations to label India a "rogue state."

Moscow, on the other hand, assured India that the tests will not change Russo-Indian relations. President Boris Yeltsin expressed "disappointment," however, and has reportedly discussed the matter with the U.S. President.

The responses from Russia and France were, if not supportive of the Indian act, nonetheless highly encouraging for New Delhi. Moscow has even gone to the extent of stating that it would oppose any sanctions against India. France's negative reaction was lukewarm.

There is a pattern like that seen previously in West Asia, where the European countries castigate the United States for failing to remain a vigilant "nuclear policeman," and then, while the United States acts the enforcer, turn around to seize the opportunity to open up wider economic and financial linkages with the "rogue" state at the time of the latter's triumph and adversity.

Damage control

Besides words of assurance, and plain bravado, by India's BJP-led government and its advisers, there is some evidence of a plan of action on the international political plane. As a starter, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee sent letters to the Group of Eight heads of state, seeking their understanding of India's action. The gist of the letter, as reported in newspapers, is that, considering the dangerous environment, the Indian people need to be reassured and their security interests must be protected. The letter also expressed India's readiness

to consider adherence to “some of the undertakings of the CTBT.”

In the coming days, India will have to control the damage in diplomatic relations with major countries and neighbors, caused by the tests. There are reasons to believe that Washington was aware of New Delhi’s intent. Recently, a high-level U.S. delegation, led by Bill Richardson, U.S. ambassador to the UN, held wide-ranging talks on India’s security matters in New Delhi. Subsequently, Indian Foreign secretary K. Raghunath, was in Washington extending the strategic dialogue with high officials in the Clinton administration. Whether or not the United States was in the know, will remain a mystery, but it is certain that both sides still have enough maneuvering space to search for ways to keep the long-term relationship on the track of improvement. Sandy Berger’s statement is indicative of that.

What now in Pakistan?

Perhaps the most delicate part of the damage control operation involves Pakistan. Pakistan has stated repeatedly that it will sign the CTBT if India does. But, under present circumstances, the pressure on the Nawaz Sharif government to carry out a test, and lessen the nuclear gap with India before signing the CTBT, is mounting. Washington is deeply worried about the domino effect of the Indian tests on the Pakistani side, and can be expected to try its best to stop such a test from being carried out. However, following the May 13 tests, President Clinton claimed that after his talks with the Pakistani Prime Minister, he is no longer sure that Washington can stop Islamabad from carrying out its own nuclear tests.

Pakistan has already made clear that it will try to close the nuclear gap with India. Now that India has shown its capabilities to the full, although lab simulations will enable India to fine-tune the warheads and weapons significantly, Pakistan is expected to do selective tests which would provide it with a nuclear deterrent.

At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that China is Pakistan’s major arms supplier, and a close ally. Because of these equations, the action of New Delhi is bound to set off a whole range of delicate diplomatic activities in the coming weeks. One idea, floated already in New Delhi by security analysts, is based on international responses following the tests. They are urging the government to call Russia and China for a summit of the three major nuclear powers in Asia, and work out a no-first-strike arrangement. In fact, in 1988, India had proposed this to China, but the Chinese Foreign Minister argued at that time that since India was not officially a nuclear-weapons nation, such an arrangement was not possible. Now that this hurdle has been crossed, the concept of a three-nation summit has potential to succeed.

It is imperative that India follow up the nuclear explosions with a number of high-level diplomatic actions. In addition to the three-power summit, it must now sign the

CTBT and continue its strategic dialogue with the United States.

Further, the BJP-led coalition government, which has been mired in internal quibblings, has done next to nothing to alleviate India’s growing despondency in the economic sphere. The acute industrial recession continues, and from preliminary readings, it seems the coming budget will be a harsh one, with increased taxes and less money for development projects, to reduce fiscal deficits. If this is the kind of budget the Vajpayee government is preparing to present to Parliament, it may further accelerate industrial recession and worsen the condition of the physical economic infrastructure, but will please such international financial institutions as the IMF. Any further weakening of the economy, through trade sanctions, for instance, in addition to what the Finance Minister is planning, may quickly turn public opinion against the government.

It is in this light that New Delhi must couple its new-found power with large economic development programs. Immediate large-scale infrastructure investments, integrated with the Eurasian Land-Bridge project, would provide some help to the now-dilapidated physical infrastructure. India can also work toward breaking the sanctions by making offers to foreign investors to bring in improved technology and investment.

**“Long before Paula Jones,
long before Monica Lewinsky,
there was a conscious decision, made in
London, that there would be a full-scale
campaign to destroy Bill Clinton,
and to destroy, once and for all,
the credibility of the office of the
Presidency of the United States.”**

—Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.



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