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India's Nuclear Tests: Sino-Indian Mutual Concerns

SINO-INDIAN SECURITY RELATIONS, 1949–1998

For the decade following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Sino-Indian relationship was relatively stable. In 1954, the two governments declared the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in the Agreement on Trade between India and the Tibet region of China. Jawaharlal Nehru, prime minister of India from 1947 to 1964, acknowledged that Tibet was an integral part of China, and the two governments adopted a friendly policy toward each other. In 1959, the Dalai Lama, the religious leader of Tibet, escaped from a Chinese military attack and fled to India. Since then, the Dalai Lama's use of India as a home base for campaigns against Chinese control in Tibet has remained a source of tension between the two countries.¹⁷

Territorial disputes are another irritant in Sino-Indian security relations. China rejects the so-called McMahon Line, drawn by the British in 1914 to separate China and India, as an unjust colonialist manipulation. In 1962, territorial frictions escalated into a two-month border war in which the neighbors fought along the eastern and western sectors of their Himalayan border. After pushing back Indian forces, China called for a cease-fire and offered to withdraw its forces twenty kilometers from the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This defeat of Indian troops by the Chinese army left continued tensions and distrust along the border, as each side still claims that territories rightfully belonging to it are occupied by the other.

In 1964, China exploded its first nuclear device. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Sino-Soviet alliance, established in 1950, had already been transformed into an antagonistic relationship, and Beijing was engaged in confrontation with both the Soviet Union and the United States. Although Mao Zedong called nuclear weapons a “paper tiger,” China worried about possible nuclear strikes by either or both nuclear superpowers and began to develop its own nuclear arsenal in defense.¹⁸

Nevertheless, India saw these developments in a different light. That the Chinese development of a nuclear capability two years after the brief border war triggered India’s own nuclear aspirations should not have been a surprise. Even before the Chinese test (and with some knowledge of the forthcoming Chinese breakthrough), some Indian officials had begun to voice India’s need for acquiring nuclear weapons of its own. In public debates, arguments ranged from unconditional opposition to all nuclear weapons to the unequivocal pursuit of them. By the late 1960s, Indian nuclear opponents had lost ground to the emerging consensus in favor of the nuclear option. Among the reasons cited by India for its rejection of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968 was its concern with China’s new status as a nuclear power.

India’s first detonation of a nuclear device in Pokhran in 1974 enjoyed a high measure of public support. Still, it is worth noting that arguments for a non-nuclear-weapon policy continued not only from civilian officials, but also from military officials who warned that the costs of such a policy would exceed its actual benefits for Indian security. M. J. Desai, former secretary general of the Ministry of External Affairs, said that a nuclear race with China would retard India’s economic and social programs, weaken the country internally, and eliminate its political influence in Asia and Africa.¹⁹

During the 1970s and 1980s, Sino-Indian relations continued to deteriorate. China aligned itself with Pakistan, while India lent support to Vietnam, China’s rival. In 1979 and 1981, the Chinese and Indian foreign ministers exchanged visits and agreed to seek a negotiated solution to their boundary dispute. The two sides conducted eight rounds of talks between 1981 and 1987 but failed to find common ground. In 1986–1987, new territorial friction erupted during Indian military exercises and resulted in a fresh spate of accusations and warnings by both nations.

In 1988, Rajiv Gandhi, Indian prime minister, visited China, after which Sino-Indian relations began to improve. Both sides agreed to establish a China-India Joint Working Group to develop conditions for “a fair and reasonable settlement” and “to maintain peace and tranquility in the border region.” Li Peng, the Chinese premier, visited India in 1991 and the two governments signed a series of agreements on diplomatic exchanges, border trade, and science and technology. Bilateral relations improved markedly after Narasimha Rao, the Indian prime minister, visited Beijing in 1993 and the two governments signed an Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the LAC.²⁰

Security measures negotiated by the Joint Working Group include twice-yearly joint military meetings, the installation of military communication links at key points along both the eastern and western borders, mutual transparency on the location of military units along the LAC, prior notification of military maneuvers and troop movements along the border, and exchanges between high-level defense officials. The 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility contains the following key provisions:

- The two countries will resolve the border issue through peaceful and friendly consultations.
- The two sides will “strictly respect and observe” the LAC, pending an ultimate solution.
- The two sides agree to reduce their military forces along the LAC in conformity with the agreed requirements of the principle of mutual and equal security ceilings.
- The two sides will work out effective confidence-building measures (CBM) along the LAC.²¹

The high point of this period of relative Sino-Indian rapprochement was the historic visit by Chinese President Jiang Zemin to New Delhi in late 1996. The two sides signed the Agreement on CBM in the Military Field along the LAC, according to which their governments pledged:

- to limit the number of field-army troops, border-defense forces, paramilitary forces, and major categories of armaments along the LAC;
- to avoid holding large-scale military exercises near the LAC and to notify the other side of exercises involving one brigade group (that is, 5,000 troops);

- not to discharge firearms, cause biodegradation, use hazardous chemicals, set off explosives, or hunt with firearms within two kilometers of the LAC;
- to maintain and expand telecommunications links between border meeting points at designated places along the LAC.²²

In light of the gradually improved Sino-Indian security relationship, observers might be puzzled to see the Indian nuclear tests justified by references to the “Chinese threat.” India understands that China has been a nuclear-weapon state for more than three decades and that its potential nuclear threat to India has perhaps reduced with the gradual establishment of CBMs. The key question remains: Why did India decide to conduct nuclear tests in Pokhran again after twenty-four years of its non-nuclear weapon policy—and why now?

INDIA'S PERCEPTION OF THE NUCLEAR THREAT

Before conducting its first nuclear test in 1974, India's nuclear policy was directed toward the perceived threat from China. After Pakistan started its own nuclear program and Indo-Pakistani relations worsened during the 1970s and 1980s, however, ambiguity and uncertainty developed in Indian strategic thinking. By the mid-1980s, Indian strategists were convinced that Pakistan had developed an effective nuclear-weapon program; they subsequently viewed Pakistan as India's main nuclear threat. In the early 1990s, some observers argued that since India had lived under the Chinese nuclear shadow for more than twenty-five years, it surely could live with it for another twenty-five years under the improved bilateral relationship.²³

It is worth noting again that the policy community in India remained divided on the question of China. Key officials of the Ministry of External Affairs were keen to improve ties with Beijing, while defense planners feared Chinese expansionist ambitions and kept a watchful eye on the areas across the LAC. Some military analysts also worried that a wealthy and newly powerful China would be dominated by nationalist ideas and argued that India should cooperate with other Asian nations to contain China.²⁴ Throughout this period, the issue of Tibet and the territorial disputes remained sources of tension between China and India.

In *Nuclear Weapons in Third World Context*, a 1981 Indian study of nuclear deterrence and the Indian strategic environment, several military and civilian analysts concluded that only nuclear weapons would deter a nuclear-armed aggressor. With respect to China, they believed, an India without nuclear weapons would suffer the same humiliating defeat as in 1962.²⁵ General Krishnaswami Sundarji, former chief of staff of the Indian army, wrote in 1995 that his country needed “both a nuclear and a conventional minimum capability to deter China and Pakistan,” adding that, “if the Chinese use only tactical nuclear weapons, India would do likewise.”²⁶

Since the early 1980s, the annual reports of the Indian Ministry of Defense have persisted in identifying China as India’s most formidable threat.²⁷ “China is potential threat number one,” George Fernandes, defense minister, said in May 1998: “The potential threat from China is greater than that from Pakistan and any person who is concerned about India’s security must agree with that.” Answering questions about a supposed Chinese military buildup around India, Fernandes stated that, “China has its nuclear weapons stockpiled in Tibet along India’s borders. I’m sure they are directed elsewhere also.”²⁸ Fernandes’s assertiveness likely has its roots in his personal history of anticommunism and antisocialism; he has passionately involved himself in prodemocracy movements in Tibet and Myanmar. For Fernandes, it is simply not in India’s interests to understate its problems with China.²⁹

One day after India’s first round of nuclear tests in May 1998, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, prime minister of India, wrote to U.S. President Bill Clinton:

I have been deeply concerned at the deteriorating security environment, especially the nuclear environment, faced by India for some years past. We have an overt nuclear weapon state on our borders, a state which committed armed aggression against India in 1962. Although our relations with that country have improved in the last decade or so, an atmosphere of distrust persists mainly due to the unresolved border problem. To add to the distrust that country has materially helped another neighbor of ours to become a covert nuclear weapons state. At the hands of this bitter neighbor we have suffered three aggressions in the last 50 years.³⁰

Rajendrasinh Rana, chief of the State Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), said that, “the tests were a befitting reply to our hostile neighbors.”³¹ But disagreements do exist among Indian policy makers. Inder Kumar Gujral, a former prime minister, advised Prime Minister Vajpayee not to project the nuclear tests as a BJP victory and warned against cultivating a chauvinist image of India. Gujral criticized Vajpayee’s adventurism and lamented that his successor had encouraged the defense minister to take over India’s foreign policy.³²

Even the Indian army is wary of Fernandes’s provocative comments on China. One general said that, “We simply cannot afford to antagonize the Chinese at this point. . . . We are fully stretched in combating insurgency in the country and if we have to deal with renewed tensions on the LAC, the army could well break down.”³³

Nevertheless, Fernandes may represent the “silent majority” on Sino-Indian security relations.³⁴ Although India has backed down from any confrontation with China for the moment, the most fundamental shift in the Vajpayee government strategy has been its reorientation away from Pakistan and toward China. It seems that New Delhi has concluded, again, that China is the real and long-term threat.³⁵

India’s internal debate on its policy toward China was carefully monitored by the Chinese, for whom words count—especially when uttered by Indian leaders. For those in India who wished to threaten China, the message was received clearly. Despite its restrained reaction, China was alarmed.

THE IMPACT OF INDIA’S NUCLEAR TESTS ON CHINA’S NATIONAL SECURITY

Two PLA senior colonels said in interviews that they were not surprised by India’s nuclear tests because that country has simply shifted from being an undeclared to being a declared nuclear power. This tells exactly how well the Chinese are aware of the Indian nuclear program. Despite China’s more mature nuclear development, India’s looming nuclear potential has had a substantial impact on China’s national security.

The controversy surrounding Tibet has caused repeated conflicts of national interest between China and India. *Xinhua*, the official Chinese news agency, commented that the Indian government tried

in vain to obstruct China's liberation of Tibet but continues to provide the Dalai Lama a site to launch campaigns in support of Tibetan separatism. China perceived the Dalai Lama's endorsement of the Indian tests as "sinister relations between the Indian government and the Dalai clique." From the Chinese perspective, India has maintained an aggressive drive toward its northern boundary and has occupied some 90,000 square kilometers of Chinese territory since its independence from Britain. In October 1962, New Delhi continued to pursue what the Chinese called a policy of expansionism, which triggered an invasion of China. Citing the recently improved Sino-Indian relations, the *Xinhua* article stated that the "'China threat' advocated by the Vajpayee government is not a fact. But the interference from a group of Indian political figures with China's internal affairs is a matter of record."³⁶

A second impact on China is India's historical determination to build up its nuclear power. One recent article in the PLA's *Liberation Army Daily* detailed Chinese perceptions of Indian nuclear developments, including a policy in existence since 1974 that reserves the option of building nuclear weapons for deterrence. China believes that India conducted nuclear research for weapons purposes and stored nuclear-weapon parts, which can be assembled as nuclear weapons when necessary. It "adopted the policy of vigorous development and comprehensive improvement." As a result, India today possesses nine nuclear-power plants, six heavy-water plants, seven nuclear-research reactors, four plutonium-reprocessing facilities, and three uranium-enrichment plants.³⁷

The Chinese assessment of India's nuclear development is confirmed by Indian sources, who note that, "A nuclear bomb program is technically feasible, politically highly desirable, strategically inescapable and economically not only sustainable but actually advantageous. . . . India's nuclear program has always been strongly influenced by the China factor."³⁸ *Xinhua* claimed that India's 1998–1999 defense budget increased by more than 14 percent from the previous year's \$9.38 billion to \$10.70 billion.³⁹

Thirdly, China is aware of India's potential to target it with nuclear weapons, and it keeps a watchful eye on the development of Indian nuclear doctrine. A senior Chinese official in Beijing said that, "from mutual confidence we have now moved to mutual apprehension."⁴⁰

In August 1998, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee spoke to the Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament) about the government's

nuclear policy. He made the commitment not to use nuclear weapons first, announced a moratorium on further underground nuclear tests, and accepted the basic concept of a test ban. Thus, while India has declared itself to be a de facto nuclear-weapon power, its nuclear-weapon policy and doctrine remain unclear. Whether India decides to sign the CTBT is a question that will have a strong effect on China's national security.⁴¹

In December 1998, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee declared that his country would "maintain the deployment of a deterrent which is both minimum and credible," marking his first public statement that India may have already deployed nuclear weapons.⁴² A Chinese senior colonel also claimed recently that India has provided its army with Agni missiles with a maximum range of 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles).⁴³

Fourth, the Indo-Pakistan relationship also worries China. In 1947, the two countries declared independence from Britain and immediately fought their first war over the disputed territory of Kashmir. In 1965, India and Pakistan fought a second war. In 1971, their third war, fought in what was then East Pakistan, resulted in the defeat of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh as an independent country. Responding to India's 1974 nuclear test, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistani prime minister, vowed that his country would "eat grass" if necessary to achieve a nuclear force. Since the early 1980s, the so-called Indian-Pakistani cold war has acquired a nuclear dimension. In 1994, Nawaz Sharif (the then-former and now current prime minister) announced that Pakistan had an atomic bomb. In 1996, India tested the Prithvi missile, which is capable of carrying nuclear weapons and which Pakistani officials believed was developed to attack their cities.⁴⁴ Pakistan tested the Ghauri missile, with a range of 1,500 kilometers (930 miles), in April 1998.

Many experts agree that deploying nuclear weapons could put India and Pakistan in a dangerous standoff. One Western diplomat based in Islamabad noted that it would take only about three minutes for nuclear-armed missiles to fly from launch sites near the two countries' border to each other's capitals. "There is no reaction time here. . . . We are eyeball to eyeball," Gohar Ayub Khan, Pakistani foreign minister, told the *Washington Post*.⁴⁵ Pakistan reportedly expected an air strike by India and Israel on the eve of its first nuclear tests in late May 1998, alarming the U.S. and Chinese governments about a possible war in South Asia.⁴⁶

While China has assisted Pakistan's nuclear development and has provided short-range missiles to that country, a nuclear standoff between Pakistan and India and the proliferation of nuclear weapons among Islamic countries are not necessarily China's goals. The nuclear tests by the two South Asian countries perhaps have finally exposed the impact of nuclear proliferation on China's national security. Islamic independence movements within northwest China threaten its own internal stability, while a nuclear conflict between Pakistan and India would impact China's border regions. Zhang Yishan, permanent representative of the Chinese delegation to the UN CTBT Preparatory Committee in Vienna, said that, "We would like to once again solemnly urge India and Pakistan to exercise their greatest restraint, to stop all nuclear tests, to discard plans to develop nuclear weapons, and not to deploy nuclear weapons."⁴⁷

This leads to the final Chinese concern—India's reluctance to follow China in signing the CTBT. In August 1996, India decided not to sign the CTBT, but to keep its nuclear-weapon option open.⁴⁸ The 1998 tests conducted by India and its continuing refusal to sign the CTBT create, in Chinese eyes, new threats to China's southern border security.⁴⁹