

India faces policy dilemmas following nuclear tests

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan B. Maitra

As the dust settles over India's mid-May nuclear tests and international reactions to the tests become sharper, a consensus is forming among domestic observers that it is time New Delhi cut down on incendiary rhetoric and begin establishing itself as a responsible power. This would require formulation of a new range of policies, and a self-imposed discipline within the ruling elite. Such policies would help develop greater cooperation with neighbors, as well as with larger powers in the region and beyond.

Some security analysts here have urged New Delhi to initiate a dialogue on a no-first-use agreement among India, Pakistan, China, and Russia—the nuclear weapons nations in the region. In order to get to the starting line on that, New Delhi has declared a self-imposed moratorium on further testing of nuclear devices, and the Prime Minister's Office has formally asked Pakistan to agree to a no-first-use policy. But, in the current charged atmosphere, the request has gone unanswered.

In his address to the opening of Parliament on May 27, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee shed no new light on the path his government intends to take. Meanwhile, within India, the debate over developing a nuclear weapons capability, if not the tests themselves, is picking up steam. Former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral spoke at a rally called by 40 organizations to protest the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government's conducting of the nuclear tests. Demonstrators charged that it was a dangerous ploy to cover up domestic failures, in an attempt to make people forget about the lack of power and water.

Analysts have begun to point out that there is an important distinction between testing and weapons development: The latter is a long and expensive process that will encounter continuing severe opposition from major powers, and perhaps considerable domestic opposition as well. As former Foreign Secretary Muchkund Dubey wrote, India will not be recog-

nized as a nuclear weapon state until it becomes one, and after the rest of the world has lived with this fact for some time. And this would entail: Warheads will have to be developed, missiles developed and tested, the two fitted together, a command and control and intelligence system developed and put in place, and a strategy for use of the weapons adopted. Finally, will come deployment. And at every stage of this process, which would take at least two to five years, India would be faced with the stiffest economic and diplomatic opposition from the nuclear weapons states.

Already, the United States has set three conditions for India to "restore its good international standing": Sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), immediately and with no conditions; join negotiations for the Fissile Materials Cutoff Treaty; and forswear weaponization and deployment. While the first two terms may be acceptable to India, there will be strong opposition to the third.

Crisis in the neighborhood

Pakistan, a military rival of India since its inception in 1947, came under intense domestic pressure to test its own nuclear device, and thus assure its population that the 120 million-strong country is not ready to surrender to India's "nuclear threat." On May 28, as *EIR* was going to press, Pakistan announced that it had carried out five nuclear tests.

A U.S. delegation, led by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, CENTCOM chief Gen. Anthony Zinni, and Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Karl Inderfurth, had recently been in Islamabad to assure the Nawaz Sharif government that there was another way to send the same message to its people and the world. The delegation reportedly offered Pakistan some \$6 billion in military aid and release of 48 F-16 fighter planes for which Pakistan had paid long ago, to refrain from testing. Pakistan evidently considered the offer inadequate.

Pakistani Foreign Secretary Shamshad Ahmed's sudden trip to China recently, at the latter's request, was also related to nuclear tests on the subcontinent. Ahmed held extensive consultations with Beijing leaders, and from all available information, China had not only asked Pakistan to refrain from testing, but had also asked it to sign the CTBT forthwith. It is apparent that Islamabad was not in a position to agree to the Chinese or the U.S. request.

Aggravating Pakistan's dilemma on testing, was a litany of provocative statements by at least two senior members of the Vajpayee cabinet. Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani suggested that India would now do its best to stop subversive activities within India, carried out allegedly from Pakistan. This statement has been widely interpreted to mean that India intends to undertake "hot pursuit" into the Pakistan-held part of Kashmir. According to Indian intelligence, it is from the Pakistan-held part of Kashmir that the Afghans enter the Indian-held Kashmir Valley to carry out terrorist activities. The statement raised the hackles of the Pakistani hawks.

Some observers believe this is exactly what Home Minister Advani was trying to achieve, namely, to push Pakistan to an early nuclear test, which would in turn invite tough measures from both China and the United States. Some even suggested that a Pakistani test at this juncture would ease international diplomatic pressures on India. Needless to say, such provocations, made wittingly or unwittingly by senior cabinet ministers, could just as easily send the wrong signals to India's other neighbors.

Chinese-Indian relations

The Chinese responses to India's first tests were cautious, but following two additional tests on May 13, Beijing's statements became decidedly harsher. A follow-up statement issued by the Chinese Foreign Ministry accused India of using the "China threat" to justify its nuclear weapons testing, and claimed that India's action reflected "an outrageous contempt for the common will of the international community." China also accused India of seeking hegemony in South Asia, and urged that "the international community should adopt a common position in strongly demanding India to immediately stop its nuclear development program."

The Indian reaction to the Chinese statements was equally negative at the outset, but now some efforts are being made in New Delhi to get the boat back on an even keel. However, no clear strategy has emerged, and it is evident from Beijing's gestures that the initiative must come from New Delhi.

At the same time, there are indications that China is not ready to downgrade its relationship with India. Indian Ambassador to China Vijay Nambiar, who was called back for consultations, is of the view that Beijing reacted sharply for two reasons: India's official citation of the "China threat" in explaining its nuclear tests, and Defense Minister George Fernandes's, and others', jingoistic trumpeting of that theme.

There is reason to believe that China might not have protested so strongly had India conducted its tests a decade ago,

as observers here generally agree India should have done. There is also a growing acknowledgment in New Delhi that while China's nuclear arsenal build-up did create a weapons imbalance in the region, this happened decades ago, and that India's failure to protest China's buildup was no accident. Further, India was told by Washington years ago that China was helping Pakistan with its nuclear program, but New Delhi did not make that a diplomatic issue.

Defense Minister Fernandes further antagonized Beijing. When Fernandes, who openly opposes India's age-old policy toward Tibet, and who has been identified as a promoter of an international independent Tibet movement, started using the "China threat," and New Delhi issued statements to that effect following the nuclear tests, Beijing issued harsh rejoinders.

There is a growing uneasiness that New Delhi may have resorted to use of the "China threat" to strengthen the nation's security due to a possible policy vacuum surrounding the testing, or perhaps because of a serious misreading of signals coming from the United States. The chaotic discussion in Washington has lent some credence to this latter view.

Beyond the nuclear explosions

After Washington put in place mechanisms to impose sanctions (as required by U.S. law), President Clinton has reportedly appointed a special action group under National Security Adviser Sandy Berger to work out the specifics. Indian analysts claim that if this group becomes functional, then it will put additional strain on India-U.S. relations.

All these developments indicate clearly that the Vajpayee government has no option but to immediately begin wide-ranging discussions to improve India's relations with its regional neighbors and the United States. Since India has close contacts with Israel in military matters, New Delhi can be expected to also exploit this channel.

It is evident from Washington's actions that the bureaucracy built up around various nuclear regulatory acts and disarmament treaties throughout the Cold War, is still very much in control there, and the bureaucrats stubbornly refuse to change the nuclear regulatory status quo. This is not unlike Washington's continued faith in the failed international monetary system, despite the fact that its inadequacy is causing economic devastation worldwide.

India must also take note of recent reports that the Chinese Foreign Minister, in a conversation with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, urged the United States to work with China in pressing India to abandon its nuclear weapons program. This means that China now upholds the international nuclear status quo established during the Cold War era. Under such circumstances, India will find it impossible to pursue its proposal to modify the CTBT without worsening relations with China.

Signing the CTBT does not make India a member of the nuclear weapons club—for that, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968 needs to be modified to include India, and there is no immediate prospect for that—but it

may open the door to a serious dialogue with the nuclear weapons powers.

The key issue for New Delhi is to see that the punitive clauses of the Multilateral Export Control Regime (MECR), which flows from the NPT, are removed. Since 1977, the MECR, which prevents export of dual-use technologies, has hobbled India's civilian nuclear power development. The effect of MECR on India's quest for superior technologies could become severe.

Equally important, India must be extra careful in tinkering with its economy in its efforts to break the U.S. economic sanctions. While it is necessary to dangle attractive contracts before those U.S. companies which are interested in investing in India, certain sensitive sectors, such as insurance, must not be opened up to appease foreign investors. Already, one finds that discussion of foreign direct investment on priority and non-priority areas has stopped. There are also indications that New Delhi may further open up the economy, to the detriment of the domestic manufacturers, under the pretext of breaking the U.S. sanctions. This backdoor approach to further globalization of the economy will in the long run jeopardize national security.

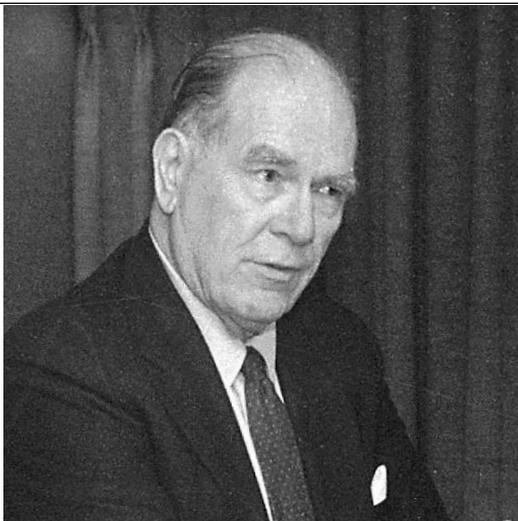
To break the logjam

New Delhi, now faced with an angry and powerful China, has its work cut out. It should quickly open a flank with

Beijing before the situation is muddled further. This should not prove too difficult. Since the Joint Working Group was formed in 1988, a wealth of high-level contacts have been developed with China, and both sides have acknowledged the great potential that exists in improved relations.

As the former Chinese ambassador to India, now a senior member of a leading Chinese think-tank affiliated with the State Council of China, pointed out in a recent seminar in Delhi: "Regional economic cooperation between China, Myanmar, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan could be carried out in a gradual and step-by-step process, including expansion of border trade with preferential treatment, establishment of sub-regional economic zones, cooperation in science and technology, cooperation in education with more exchange of students, cooperation in air transportation with more short airlines opened to form a network, cooperation in developing international tourism, cooperation in exploitation of water, agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and fishery resources," he said.

"Most important, but also most difficult of all, is to construct a new continental bridge in the southwest of Asia. One possibility is to build a railway from the Yunnan Province of China through Myanmar to India. To achieve this goal in the 21st century, joint efforts of China, Myanmar, and India are needed, together with assistance from international institutions and developed countries."



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