Indian Nuclear Policy: A Case of Deliberate Strategic Ambiguity

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- Introduction
- Beginnings of the Indian Tryst with Nuclear Energy
- Opposing the Norm: The CTBT and the NPT
- Going Nuclear and Debating Doctrine
- Nuclear Energy and the Deal
- Conclusion

Introduction

“India stands for the total elimination of all nuclear weapons and ushering in of a nuclear weapons free world. However, till such time as this is achieved, India will be constrained to keep her nuclear option open” – Indian Ministry of Defence, 1996-97

At a time when the Chinese had already possessed a nuclear weapon for over ten years and less than three years after its decisive victory over Pakistan in 1971, India conducted its first nuclear test in May 1974. The second and more decisive set of nuclear tests in May 1998 saw India declare itself a nuclear weapons state. Of course, over the years India has carved out for itself an image, which is that of a peace-loving nation and a reluctant nuclear power thrust by circumstances into the realm of nuclear high politics. Yet, India is now on the verge of operationalising its ‘nuclear triad’ in 2013 with the nuclear submarine INS Arihant, it has successfully tested its first ICBM, the Agni V, with a range of 5,000 kilometres, signed a deal to acquire 126 Rafale fighter bombers from France and there is talk of a Ballistic Missile Defence

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1 For a full appraisal of the state of Indian nuclear forces, see Kristensen, Hans M. and Norris, Robert, S., ‘Indian nuclear forces’, 2012’
Shield\(^2\) ready for deployment. Not a signatory to the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) or to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) owing to their discriminatory nature and yet a nuclear weapons state despite its commitment to the worldwide elimination of nuclear weapons, the Indian nuclear posture has a strong component of ambiguity. What has also marked the narrative of Indian nuclear policy is its claims to ‘exceptionalism.’ It is this ‘exceptionalism’ that has seen a nuclear weapons state (albeit not recognised as such due to the inflexible and obdurate nature of the NPT) inspite of its non-conformist nature gain a waiver from the NSG (Nuclear Suppliers Group) and a clean chit from the IAEA for a civilian nuclear pact with the United States. There is now a strong bid from the Indian side to gain membership into the NSG as well as a host of other export control regimes. This article seeks to understand how the Indian nuclear policy reconciles these contradictory characteristics.

While geo-strategic considerations vis-à-vis China and Pakistan are no doubt important in Indian strategic thought, Indian nuclear policy has been the product of a larger domestic narrative that pre-dates the bitter animosities that have marked these specific bilateral relationships. This article lays a greater emphasis on the domestic narrative in India regarding nuclear policy. It assesses the development of Indian nuclear policy, right from the days of its independence in 1947. The deliberate strategic ambiguity maintained in the Indian positions on nuclear policy and the development of nuclear weapons warrants some explorations and this article shall seek to do so. It seems that through the years of ‘principled opposition’ to international non-proliferation regimes like the NPT and the CTBT, the Indian government deliberately ensured that the road to a nuclear weapon would never be constrained by any legally binding commitments. As India acquired nuclear weapons in 1998 this course of action became amply clear and the debate now turned to what kind of nuclear posture would be adopted. Of course a unilateral moratorium on testing as well as assurances of a ‘credible minimum deterrent’ posture did not stop sanctions from being imposed upon India. But the signing of the Indo-US nuclear deal changed all of that and with it sparked of a new set of domestic debates in India related to nuclear energy. Some of these current debates regarding nuclear energy and weapons that have gained prominence in India shall be duly discussed.

\(^2\) While the DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organisation), the primary agency responsible for the development of military technology in India, claims that it is ready for deployment, serious doubts about its efficacy have been raised.
Beginnings of the Indian tryst with nuclear energy

“Of course if we are compelled to use atomic energy for other purposes, possibly no
pious sentiments of any of us will stop the nation from using it that way. But I do hope
that our outlook in regard to this atomic energy is going to be a peaceful one...and not
one of war and hatred.’ – Jawaharlal Nehru, Constituent Assembly, 1948. (Abraham
1998,49)

None of the main theories of International Relations can adequately explain the reason for
India’s nuclearisation. Scott Sagan in his “Why do States Build Nuclear Weapons: Three models
in search of a bomb” identifies three main models for the nuclearisation of states and comes
closest to explaining the Indian situation. The ‘security model’, which attributes nuclearisation to
reasons of national security, ‘the domestic politics model’, which attributes it to parochial
political and bureaucratic interests of politicians and the ‘norms model’, which posits that
nuclear weapons are often developed as a symbol of power and pride of a nation (Sagan 1996,
55). Sagan finds the second model most applicable to India. He explains Indian nuclearisation
from the vantage point of the need of the 1973-74 Indira Gandhi government to increase its
popularity given recent reverses. Sagan also correctly finds the role of the scientific community
of India (primarily the Atomic Energy Commission) crucial in influencing the final decision
towards Operation Smiling Buddha, the ‘Peaceful Nuclear Explosion’ of 1974 (Sagan 1996, 67-
68). But the fact of the matter is that the Indian quest for nuclear power pre-dated the Indira
Gandhi government by decades. The nuclear debate has been at the heart of Indian political
discourse from soon after its independence in 1947. It was under Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first
Prime Minister, that the Atomic Energy Commission was set up in 1948 and six years later, the
Department of Atomic Energy in 1954. Nehru and Homi J. Bhabha (also known as the father of
the Indian nuclear bomb) were clear on the need to develop nuclear weapons and the former
hence never closed that option down, despite his clear pro-disarmament public stand. Nehru
employed Moralpolitik and championed the cause of non-violence and even global
disarmament3(Karnad 2002,66), while simultaneously giving his blessings to and being actively
interested in the growth of the Indian nuclear programme. Nehru can thus be credited to be the

3 Note that ‘global disarmament’ brings under its purview not only nuclear arms, but conventional armaments too.
architect of the tradition of strategic ambiguity that marked Indian nuclear doctrine till the overt nuclear weaponisation in 1998.

The development of nuclear power though was not with the direct and obvious end to developing weapons and announcing military might. There is a deeper discourse regarding the need to embrace science and harness technology and use them as tools of progress and development. As Itty Abraham argues, central to the ‘production of the state through technology’ was the production of the atom and the scientific knowledge attained in the process would ‘transform an independent nation to a modern state’ (Abraham 1998,29). The fact is, to the leadership of an independent India, Indian science was what would overcome the legacy of backwardness that the colonial British regime had bestowed upon it and in doing so would achieve the highest symbol of modernity (Perkovich 2000,17). It was believed that the key to rapid and sustainable economic development lay in the development of a high energy supply capable of feeding the needs of a burgeoning economic power. Atomic energy was the key to acquiring this energy supply (Perkovich 2000,17) that could propel the nation onto the path to prosperity. Much of this also coincides with the Nehruvian vision of India as the ‘pivot of Asia’ (Gopal 1979,33 cited in Karnad 2002,81) and a leader of the ‘non-aligned’ third world that needed to be seen as a confident, flourishing and more importantly, successful democratic republic.

“The future belongs to those who produce atomic energy. That is going to be the chief national power of the future. Of course defence is intimately concerned with this. Even the political consequences are worthwhile.” – Nehru (Chengappa 2000 cited in Karnad 2002,183)

Atomic power even in its non-military avatar no doubt was and remains a strong currency of power and the ‘Indian project’ needed to acquire it to gain higher standing in the world order. Such was the ambition of the Indian Prime Minister regarding atomic energy that he not only hoped to empower the developing countries of Africa and Asia with atomic energy, but even conceived of a ‘nuclear weapons-armed India, Yugoslavia and Egypt as a countervailing influence to the NATO and Warsaw Pact led blocs’ (Karnad 2002, 199-200). As Karnad points out, a factor that made the parallel development of the atom for military purposes a viable policy option was the fact that it was seen as a more economical alternative to a numerically large conventional military (Karnad 2002,185).
Even though the foreign policy of India was single-handedly managed by Nehru in the early years of Indian independence, it was by no means unchallenged. With respect to Indian nuclear policy, the biggest challenge came from C Rajagopalachari, who was the first Indian Governor-General of the country and a renowned Gandhian. Rajagopalachari vehemently opposed the Nehruvian plan of harnessing atomic energy and using it as a trump card to attain ‘great power status’ (Karnad 2002,204). To him nuclear programmes were ‘a delusion and a snare’ (Karnad 2002,204). Rajagopalachari deemed the concept of ‘deterrence’ to be ‘another word for a race in nuclear armament’ (Karnad 2002,205) and it was his vociferous opposition that prompted Nehru to craft an ‘activist disarmament policy’ (Karnad 2002,211). Rajagopalachari’s moral opprobrium contributed heavily to the development of a two-level nuclear policy, where the first and public level found the Indian stand to be a moral and principled stand that championed the cause of disarmament and a non-violent world order marked by equality. The second level meanwhile created a shroud of mystery around the real nuclear policy of India that would forevermore be mired in secrecy. The popularity of the legitimising facade with its deep moral underpinnings would not only mark the Indian position on non-proliferation in the coming decades, but also prove to be foundational in the logic of building a case for ‘responsible nuclear state’ in the next millennium. To that extent, opposing the norms being set up by the NPT, the Conference on Disarmament as well as the CTBT were crucial in ensuring that Indian non-conformity was not mistaken as ‘hawkish’ behaviour with the aim of acquiring the bomb.

Opposing the norm: The CTBT and the NPT

At the Conference of the Eighteen Nation Committee on Disarmament, having understood the direction in which the future NPT would go, the Indian representative, V.C. Trivedi likened the nuclear weapons states to an Emperor “who...himself a drunkard...prohibited drinking in the empire” (Trivedi 1965,15). While the Indian activism for ‘nuclear disarmament’ had been with the understanding of the term as a reduction of nuclear weapons with the end of their phased obsolescence, the US inserted phrases like ‘arms control’ and ‘non-proliferation’, which they deliberately let hijack the discourse on disarmament (Jayaprakash 2000,526). This led to the bringing about of a structure that would prevent horizontal proliferation, in so far as only the 5 nuclear weapons states would retain their weapons without any sanction, but non nuclear weapons states could develop or possess nuclear weapons. While one does not endorse the
proliferation of nuclear weapons among numerous states, it is an unjust treaty that unconditionally grants just five states the right to possess nuclear weapons whilst chastising all other nations who may aspire to do the same. There is a price to the nepotistic exceptionalism and ‘nuclear apartheid’ (Singh 1998,48) that has been the mandate of the nuclear non-proliferation lobby and it is a price that the West is increasingly starting to understand with the recalcitrance of states like Iran and North Korea.

The CTBT, on the other hand, had a lack of ‘comprehensive’-ness about it and key terms like ‘qualitative improvement of nuclear weapons’, ‘nuclear weapons test explosions’, ‘other nuclear explosions’ etc. have not been defined in technical terms leaving them open to liberal interpretations (Jayaprakash 2000,528). Jayaprakash goes as far as to contend that if India and Pakistan, after their nuclear tests in 1998 had termed the explosions as ‘use of nuclear weapons’, according to the US administration’s interpretation of Article I of the CTBT, there would be no legal recourse against the two states (Jayaprakash 2000,529). Condemnation for having crossed the nuclear threshold would have been forthcoming anyway but the emphasis is on the fact that semantic cunning could have provided a strong legal loophole had the treaty been in force.

Beyond its principled opposition to these treaties as instruments of exclusion and maintenance of ‘nuclear status quo,’ India had in the late eighties sought proactively to push for a phased plan to abolish nuclear weapons when Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister had proposed at the Third Special Session on Disarmament of the United Nations General Assembly at New York in 1988, the ‘Action Plan for a Nuclear Weapons Free and Non-violent World Order.’ The document envisioned the elimination of all nuclear weapons from the world by 2010 and the establishment of a ‘single integrated multilateral comprehensive verification system.’ (RGAP 1988,6). It is needless to say that Gandhi’s starry eyed idealism did not gain much support in the quarters that it was directed towards.

Jawaharlal Nehru’s championing of the cause of disarmament was more an effort in good faith to assuage the larger Indian civilisational conscience that all that could have been done to attain disarmament had been done. It did much to enhance India’s image as a principled nation on the international stage, but the morally laden stand also simultaneously ‘calcified into a cross’ that Indian policy had to bear, which inhibited freedom of action in the nuclear realm in the decades to come (Karnad 2002,227-228). It is widely believed that India’s international stance served a
cunning dual purpose, firstly, to gain it a moral high ground and international standing and secondly (and simultaneously), to ensure that India did not enter into any legally-binding treaties that could possibly jeopardise the Indian quest for a nuclear weapon. To that extent the first purpose provided excellent cover for eventually going nuclear in 1998.

**Going nuclear and debating doctrine**

"India is a nuclear weapons state. This is a reality that cannot be denied. It is not a conferment we seek; nor a status for others to grant...It is India’s due, the right of one-sixth of human kind." – Paper Presented to Parliament on Evolution of India’s Nuclear Policy, 1998

May 1998 saw India conduct 5 nuclear tests on May 11 and 13 and announcing that it was now a ‘nuclear weapons state.’ While the event itself may have shocked the world and caught almost everyone off guard, there was a steady progression for a while towards this end. According to Achin Vanaik, the story of why India went nuclear in 1998 has to be situated in the deeper, more encompassing story of India’s overall and steady drift to the right from the 1980s onwards in foreign, economic and other domestic policies (Vanaik 2009, 85). It is believed that by the mid-eighties, India already possessed nuclear weapons and had begun concentrating on its Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme in order to find a reliable delivery system. In 1986-87, India conducted its largest ever military exercise, Operation Brasstacks. Such was the level of mobilisation, that Pakistan feared that the exercise may turn into an attack and they launched their own mobilisation drive Operation Sledgehammer. In the tense months that followed, Pakistan indicated that it had acquired nuclear capability (Sidhu 2004, 8). It was in 1988 that the ‘Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities’ was signed between India and Pakistan thus making it amply clear that both countries possessed nuclear capability. The 90’s saw strong pressure from the scientific community to test nuclear weapons. In 1995 the P.V. Narasimha Rao government tried to conduct a nuclear test, but under pressure from the USA, who had caught on to the test preparations, India had to stall its plans (Perkovich 2000, 2). Even former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, considered a nuclear dove, admitted that the
pressure to nuclearise had become so high that if he had continued in office till September 1999, he would have found it difficult to resist it (Sidhu 2004, 14).

The Hindu right-wing nationalist, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), took the decision to nuclearise with minimal external consultation. But the framing of the discourse around nuclear weapons now was made to encompass everything ranging from national strength and civilisational honour to scientific progress. There could be no criticism of it and the voices that argued for emphasis on economic strength instead of nuclear power were muffled and overrun. Pakistan conducting its nuclear tests a month later in reaction to the Indian tests, only seemed to reinforce the conviction that India had done the right thing by ‘asserting its authority and superiority by having crossed the threshold first.’

Questions of doctrinal position that would determine nuclear posture naturally followed. In August 1998, Prime Minister Vajpayee announced to the Parliament the main components of India’s nuclear doctrine; a policy of Minimum Deterrence would be followed and that there would be a No First Use Policy with regard to nuclear weapons (Poulose 1998, 80). Vajpayee also declared a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing and even considered acceding to the CTBT. As a measure of pacification to the opposition he also stated that the latter decision could be reviewed in the face of ‘extraordinary events’, which may in the future ‘jeopardise India’s supreme national interests’ (Poulose 1998, 80). The problem of adopting a policy of minimum deterrence as the nuclear hawks put it, is that while India may maintain effective equivalence with Pakistan, the Chinese nuclear capability is so far ahead that equivalence on that front would not be possible without a proactive development of nuclear weapons. There have been calls from the hawks to develop and maintain at least 300-350 warheads to preserve a deterrent capacity against China.

The current doctrine, that was announced after a review of the old one by the Cabinet Committee on Security in 2003, builds on the previous posture and adds that “a posture of ‘No First Use shall only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or anywhere” as well as ‘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’ (Cabinet Committee on Security 2003). The document adds that the ‘Political council’ of the Nuclear Command Authority headed by the Prime Minister would be the sole decision-taking authority
on the use of nuclear weapons. The Indian commitment to ‘a nuclear weapon free world, through
global, verifiable and non discriminatory disarmament’ was also reiterated in this document. The
dilution of the principle of ‘No First Use’ in this declaration as well as the inclusion of the clause
that ‘Nuclear retaliation to a first strike would be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable
damage,’ all pointed to a comparatively more aggressive nuclear posturing of India vis-a-vis its
neighbours (almost certainly Pakistan). There has been no review of the Indian nuclear doctrine
since 2003 despite calls from various quarters to review the document. But according to Bharat
Karnad, a member of the National Security Advisory Board, which drafted the first Indian
Nuclear Doctrine, nothing much has changed since the last review to warrant a new doctrine.
The calls for added transparency and defining of what numerically constitutes ‘minimum
credible deterrence’ are all weak and unnecessary suggestions to dilute the nuclear doctrine
(Karnad 2012). At any rate the Nuclear Doctrine as it stands today is one of ‘assured retaliation’
(Rajagopalan 2010,101) as opposed to the original ‘credible minimal deterrence.’

While this debate on doctrine was largely restricted to the strategic elite, what brought the
‘nuclear debate’ into the drawing rooms of an entire nation was the Indo-US nuclear deal and the
political storm it kicked up. The following section deals with this phase of the debate on Indian
nuclear policy.

**Nuclear energy and the deal**

The US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement of 2008 provided the answers to a number of Indian
problems at the same time. In spite of its status as a non signatory to the NPT and the CTBT, the
NSG waiver and the IAEA go ahead ensured that India would not only retain its nuclear weapons
programme, but also preserve its access to international nuclear cooperation (Rajagopalan 2010,
110). The deal has larger implications in terms of Indian access to the international nuclear fuel
market for its civilian nuclear programme, which in turn frees up its indigenous nuclear fuel
supply to be used for its military nuclear programme. There was of course huge opposition to
the deal in India from both the organised Left parties as well as the right wing BJP on the
grounds that it compromised Indian security and defence needs as well as jeopardised its

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4 This contention is only in the realm of the theoretical, given that India already has a ton’s worth of nuclear fuel, but
has not channelized it for weapons making purposes (Rajagopalan 2010: 111)
sovereignty. The government nevertheless survived the no confidence motion that was brought against it in the Parliament and went on to conclude the deal. The fruition of the deal this year, between the U.S. based Westinghouse Electric and Co. and the Nuclear Power Company of India Ltd, to build the first U.S. reactor in India with a capacity of 1000 MW is a sign that the nuclear deal could be crucial in solving some of India critical power woes.

All is not well on the front of domestic support for nuclear energy though. The operationalisation of the nuclear plant at Kudankulam in the state of Tamil Nadu as well as the proposed 9900 MW Jaitapur Nuclear Power Project have been targets of a number of anti-nuclear protests, over environmental safety. The conclusion of future deals with the objective of alleviating India’s energy woes will surely find more opposition on the issues of nuclear safety and liability.

India has also been trying to indigenously develop a Ballistic Missile Defence system for more than a decade now (Rajagopalan 2010, 111). Recently the DRDO has claimed that it is on the verge of operationalising a missile shield over two Indian cities, but there is considerable doubt over the veracity of the claims that this shield does in fact work.

Meanwhile, India, along with its aspirations for NSG membership is also currently simultaneously pursuing membership into three other export control regimes – the MTCR (Missile Technology Control Regime), the Australia Group and the Wassenaar Arrangement and the precedent of a non-NPT signatory gaining membership into the coveted NSG may clear the road for India’s membership into the others. With the United States assuming chairmanship of the NSG this year, it is felt that the Indian case will be strengthened considerably. Given the French and Russian support for Indian membership, this is possibly a very good opportunity for the west to co-opt India into a multilateral non-proliferation framework, given the unlikelihood of it acceding to the CTBT or the NPT in the future.

Conclusion

Nuclear energy has been at the heart of the post colonial Indian project of modernity and nation building. The Indian nuclear project though has been full of contradictions given the wide nature of it acceding to the CTBT or the NPT in the future.

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5 There is a strong lobby demanding more nuclear tests given the reports that the thermonuclear explosion in 1998 was a fizzle. The finality the CTBT brings to the debate will be met with a fair bit of opposition, even though there is no likelihood of India testing any more nuclear weapons in the near future.
of its scope ranging from strategic ambiguity to overt nuclearisation. Indian nuclear policy has in effect been a microcosm of the reconciliation between its purported civilisational heritage of moralpolitik and aspiration to acquire greater standing in the world order. Decades of grappling with the problematique have demonstrated that the two need not be in conflict with each other. So while possessing nuclear warheads, India could still propose and push for a global multilateral disarmament agenda in keeping with the vision of a nuclear weapons-free non-violent world order. While it is amply clear that the day such a multilateral arrangement comes to pass India will whole heartedly endorse it, it is also quite clear that till the day such an arrangement comes to pass India shall not compromise on developing its strength in the realm of ballistic missiles and missile defence systems. The geopolitical constraints of being neighboured by two nuclear weapons states prohibit any complacency on that front.

“...and the industrial age came in. India with all her virtues did not develop that source of power. It became a backward country because of that. The steam age and the industrial age were followed by the electrical age which gradually crept in, and most of us were hardly aware of that change...Now we are facing the atomic age; we are on the verge of it. And this is something infinitely more powerful than either steam or electricity.” – Nehru (cited in Abraham 1998,28)

Sources:


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