

# India's Nuclear Odyssey

Andrew B. Kennedy

## Implicit Umbrellas, Diplomatic Disappointments, and the Bomb

India's search for security in the nuclear age is a complex story, rivaling Odysseus's fabled journey in its myriad misadventures and breakthroughs. Little wonder, then, that it has received so much scholarly attention. In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars focused on the development of India's nuclear "option" and asked whether New Delhi would ever seek to exercise it.<sup>1</sup> After 1990, attention turned to India's emerging, but still hidden, nuclear arsenal.<sup>2</sup> Since 1998, India's decision to become an overt nuclear power has ushered in a new wave of scholarship on India's nuclear history and its dramatic breakthrough.<sup>3</sup> In addition, scholars now ask whether India's and Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapons has stabilized or destabilized South Asia.<sup>4</sup>

Despite all the attention, it remains difficult to explain why India merely

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1. Ashok Kapur, *India's Nuclear Option: Atomic Diplomacy and Decision Making* (New York: Praeger, 1976); Shyam Bhatia, *India's Nuclear Bomb* (Ghaziabad, India: Vikas, 1979); and Mitchell Reiss, *Without the Bomb: The Politics of Nuclear Nonproliferation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 204–243.

2. Mitchell Reiss, *Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995), pp. 183–230; and Stephen Peter Rosen, *Societies and Military Power: India and Its Armies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 251–253.

3. Among others, see Sumit Ganguly, "India's Pathway to Pokhran II: The Prospects and Sources of New Delhi's Nuclear Weapons Program," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Spring 1999), pp. 148–177; George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Ashley J. Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2001); Bharat Karnad, *Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security: The Realist Foundations of Strategy* (New Delhi: Macmillan India, 2002); and Scott Sagan, "Introduction," Kanti Bajpai, "The BJP and the Bomb," Karthika Sasikumar and Christopher Way, "Testing Theories of Proliferation in South Asia," Itty Abraham, "Contra-Proliferation: Interpreting the Meanings of India's Nuclear Tests in 1974 and 1998," and Vipin Narang, "Pride and Prejudice and Prithvis: Strategic Weapons Behavior in South Asia," in Scott Sagan, ed., *Inside Nuclear South Asia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 1–21, 25–67, 68–105, 106–133, and 137–183, respectively.

4. S. Paul Kapur, "Ten Years of Instability in a Nuclear South Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Fall 2008), pp. 71–94; S. Paul Kapur, *Dangerous Deterrent: Nuclear Weapons Proliferation and Conflict in South Asia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007); Sumit Ganguly and Devin T. Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry: India-Pakistan Crises in the Shadow of Nuclear Weapons* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005); and Vipin Narang, "Posturing for Peace? Pakistan's Nuclear Postures and South Asian Stability," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Winter 2009/10), pp. 38–78.

flirted with nuclear weapons in the 1960s and 1970s only to emerge as a nuclear power in the 1990s. It was not merely a response to growing nuclear threats from China and Pakistan. As discussed below, Indian officials worried about China's nuclear program at least as early as 1960, and by the mid-1960s, India was actively seeking to counter China's emerging capabilities. Nor was India's prolonged restraint simply a function of technological limitations; Indian nuclear scientists pressed their political leaders to move more quickly toward the bomb than they did. India's decision also went against the grain of changing international norms, which became less tolerant of nuclear proliferation between the 1960s and the 1990s.

Other explanations for India's prolonged restraint and subsequent breakthrough are more helpful, but incomplete. Some scholars have emphasized domestic political change and, in particular, the decline of the once-dominant Congress Party and the rise of the pro-bomb Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the late 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Yet if this shift contributed to the 1998 decision, it cannot explain why India became a de facto nuclear power in 1990, well before the BJP came to power, or why India verged on testing in the mid-1990s. Others have argued that Indian leaders were daunted by the economic cost of nuclear weapons, especially because they preside over a relatively poor democracy and must be careful what they ask the country's voters to endure.<sup>6</sup> Although economic considerations have influenced the calculations of Indian leaders, this explanation also leaves critical questions unanswered. Most important, it is unclear when one would expect a poor democracy—which India remains—to invest in a nuclear arsenal.<sup>7</sup> Although liberalization in the 1990s made the country more prosperous and confident in the economic sphere, it also made India more integrated with the world economy, which tends to constrain nuclear ambitions.<sup>8</sup> More generally, neither of the explanations cited above sheds light on what India actually did to enhance its security prior to the 1990s.

This article offers a different explanation for India's shifting approach to nu-

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5. Bajpai, "The BJP and the Bomb," pp. 25–67; and Jacques E.C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 171–203. Note that Hymans focuses on BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in particular, rather than on the party as a whole.

6. Baldev Raj Nayar and T.V. Paul, *India in the World Order: Searching for Major Power Status* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 174, 193, 201.

7. The World Bank estimates that India's gross national income per capita in 2009 was \$1,180 (13 percent of the world average). In purchasing power parity terms, the figure was \$3,260 (31 percent of the world average). See World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 2011 (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, April 2011), <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>.

8. For the most in-depth work on this subject, see Etel Solingen, "The Political Economy of Nuclear Restraint," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Fall 1994), pp. 126–169; and Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

clear weapons. The goal here is not to deny the role of domestic political change or economic constraints, but to highlight strategic considerations that have previously been neglected and, in doing so, to offer a more complete account. It begins with a simple point: the question facing policymakers who confront nuclear-armed adversaries is not simply whether or not to develop nuclear weapons. It is how to make their state less vulnerable to nuclear attack or coercion. Developing nuclear weapons is one means of accomplishing this goal, but it is not the only option: there are also nonmilitary measures that states may employ.

Two nonmilitary measures are particularly relevant in the Indian case. The first entails seeking shelter under the “umbrella” of an extant nuclear power. Such protection may buy time in which the state can develop its own nuclear capabilities, or it may serve as a long-term substitute for the bomb. Several recent studies have reinforced the latter point, finding that states that conclude a defense pact with a nuclear power are less likely to acquire nuclear weapons themselves.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, the relevance of these studies might seem unclear in the Indian case, because India has never had an explicit defense pact with a nuclear power.<sup>10</sup> Nuclear umbrellas, however, can also be implicit. In fact, Thomas Schelling wrote in the midst of the Cold War that “some of [the United States’] strongest commitments may be quite implicit.”<sup>11</sup> As Schelling explained, the key question is not whether a commitment to defend another country has been formally articulated, but whether the relevant leaders believe that it exists. Building on this point, other scholars have noted several cases in which national leaders perceived and were reassured by nuclear umbrellas

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9. Philipp C. Bleek, “Why Do States Proliferate? Quantitative Analysis of the Exploration, Pursuit, and Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons,” in William C. Potter with Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, eds., *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century*, Vol. 1: *The Role of Theory* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 183–184; Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 121; Matthew Kroenig, “Importing the Bomb: Sensitive Nuclear Assistance and Nuclear Proliferation,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (April 2009), pp. 171–172; Dong-Joon Jo and Erik Gartzke, “Determinants of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (February 2007), pp. 184, 186. Note that Bleek finds that states under an umbrella are also less likely to explore a nuclear weapons program, in contrast to the studies by Horowitz and Jo and Gartzke. For more on this literature, see Jeffrey Knopf, “Security Assurances: Concept Clarification and Initial Hypotheses,” in Knopf, ed., “Security Assurances and Nuclear Nonproliferation,” unpublished manuscript, 2010, chap. 1.

10. Defense pacts are defined in the quantitative literature as treaties that “commit states to intervene militarily on the side of any treaty partner that is attacked.” In contrast, agreements that commit the allies only to “consultation” or “cooperation” in a crisis or conflict are coded as “ententes.” The 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty is an instance of the latter. See Douglas M. Gibling and Meredith Reid Sarkees, “Measuring Alliances: The Correlates of War Formal Interstate Alliance Dataset, 1816–2000,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (March 2004), p. 215.

11. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 52.

that were never explicitly articulated.<sup>12</sup> This article shows how India has relied on implicit umbrellas in its search for security as well.

The second nonmilitary measure of interest here entails diplomacy, or more precisely, diplomatic efforts to constrain the capabilities of one's rivals through international institutions. States often seek to constrain actual or potential rivals through international institutions, and nuclear weapons capabilities have historically been an important focus of such efforts.<sup>13</sup> In particular, states have made both bilateral and multilateral efforts to arrest horizontal proliferation (the spread of nuclear weaponry to new states) and vertical proliferation (the development of greater capabilities by extant nuclear powers). More ambitiously, states have sought to reduce or eliminate the capabilities of nuclear-armed rivals through disarmament diplomacy. India, in particular, has stood out for its advocacy of nuclear restraint since the early days of the Cold War, a tradition that is sometimes attributed to Gandhian idealism or a desire for moral superiority over Western powers.<sup>14</sup> This article shows how India's forays into nuclear arms control and disarmament, even when unsuccessful, have often sought to advance national security aims as well.

Umbrellas and institutions are not without their shortcomings as foreign policy options, of course, especially because they require cooperation with other states. As other scholars have emphasized, states may rely on the protection of allies only to be abandoned in their hour of need or to become entrapped in conflicts they would otherwise avoid.<sup>15</sup> Relying on international institutions, in turn, runs the risk that other parties will defect from their commitments.<sup>16</sup> Developing nuclear weapons, however, entails a great many risks

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12. Saudi Arabia, Sweden, and Taiwan have all been highlighted in this regard. On Saudi Arabia, see Sonali Singh and Christopher R. Way, "The Correlates of Nuclear Proliferation: A Quantitative Test," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 6 (December 2004), p. 879; on Sweden, see Thomas Jonter, "The United States and Swedish Plans to Build the Bomb, 1945–1968," in Knopf, "Security Assurances and Nuclear Nonproliferation," chap. 11; and on Taiwan, see Vincent Wei-Cheng Wang, "Taiwan: Conventional Deterrence, Soft Power, and the Nuclear Option," in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *The Long Shadow: Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21st Century Asia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 404–428. In addition, it has been argued that Ukraine's decision to join the NPT as a nonnuclear weapons state was influenced by U.S. security assurances, which "caused Kiev to desire and even expect that Washington will take an active interest in the broad range of security challenges facing Ukraine," even though these assurances fall short of the "guarantees" provided to treaty allies. See Sherman Garnett, "Ukraine's Decision to Join the NPT," *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (January/February 1995), pp. 10, 12.

13. On the pursuit of security through international institutions, see Helga Haftendorn, Robert Keohane, and Celeste Wallander, eds., *Imperfect Unions: Security Institutions over Time and Space* (New York: Clarendon, 1999).

14. See, for example, Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 6.

15. On the risks of entrapment and abandonment, see Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (July 1984), pp. 461–495.

16. For a classic discussion of the risk of defection and international cooperation in the nuclear

and costs of its own. Nuclear weapons programs can be economically costly, technologically demanding, and internationally provocative.<sup>17</sup> Governments that are daunted by one or more of these challenges are thus likely to seek security through a combination of alliances and institutions whenever possible. Indeed, even states as technically proficient and economically affluent as Germany and Japan have eschewed the bomb in favor of such nonmilitary options.<sup>18</sup>

The remainder of this article explores how India's reliance on nonmilitary measures helps to explain both its prolonged nuclear restraint and its eventual decision to become a nuclear power. It consists of two sections. The first section discusses India's restrained approach to nuclear armament in the 1960s and 1970s. While acknowledging that multiple factors contributed to India's restraint, the analysis highlights India's efforts to enhance its security through nonmilitary measures, which were successful enough to make acquiring the bomb a less pressing question. The analysis emphasizes India's reliance on the superpowers, in particular, drawing on new evidence from Indian archives and declassified U.S. materials to document the implicit protection that New Delhi sought and received from both Washington and Moscow during this period. The second section then asks why India chose to develop its own nuclear weapons at the end of the Cold War. It explores Indian policymaking both prior to its covert weaponization in the late 1980s and its nuclear breakout in the 1990s. Drawing on interviews with former Indian government officials and other sources, the analysis documents India's growing inability to ensure its security through nonmilitary means and shows how this factor contributed to its decision to become a nuclear power. The article concludes by summing up the findings and considering their broader implications, as well as India's future trajectory in the nuclear sphere.

### *China's Bomb and India's Answer*

On October 16, 1964, China conducted its first nuclear test at Lop Nor, in Xinjiang. The test had been anticipated in India for some time. In fact,

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era, see Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 211–214.

17. Jacques Hymans argues that there are so many risks involved in developing nuclear weapons that they cannot be calculated. See Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation*, pp. 9–11. The point here does not go as far; I merely suggest that the potential costs of acquiring nuclear weapons are frequently substantial enough to motivate consideration of alternative means of enhancing national security.

18. On Japan, in particular, see Llewelyn Hughes, "Why Japan Will Not Go Nuclear (Yet): International and Domestic Constraints on the Nuclearization of Japan," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Spring 2007), pp. 67–96.

Indian diplomats worried at least as early as 1960 that China might test sometime in the next few years.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the dramatic blast was deeply unsettling for India when it finally came. India was still smarting from its decisive defeat in the Sino-Indian war just two years earlier, and it was now investing heavily in new conventional forces to ensure that such a fiasco would not be repeated. It was against this backdrop that the country's leadership directed the military to assess the implications of China's test for India. According to U.S. intelligence, the ensuing report concluded that China would be limited in the near term to targeting northern Indian cities such as Calcutta and that its primary objective would be to induce panic. The report also noted that the test would give China "a clear political and psychological advantage" in the Afro-Asian world.<sup>20</sup> More publicly, some Indian strategists worried that Beijing would be emboldened by its new capability, which it would exploit to intimidate India.<sup>21</sup>

Despite India's fears, and despite its advances in nuclear technology, the Indian government took only tentative steps to develop nuclear weaponry in the two decades that followed China's first test. To be sure, the Indian government did launch the Subterranean Nuclear Explosions Program shortly after China's blast, a program that eventually led to the "peaceful" nuclear blast of 1974. The explosive employed in the 1974 test, however, was an unwieldy experimental device, one that was not built to military specifications and that would have been difficult to deliver.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, cognizant that the device used in the 1974 test was too bulky to serve as a weapon and eager to test a smaller design (as well as a boosted fission explosive), Indian nuclear scientists unsuccessfully pushed for additional tests in the early 1980s.<sup>23</sup> In addition, India did not acquire an effective delivery vehicle for nuclear strikes against China during this period. The Indian air force had limited ability to deliver nuclear ordnance against Chinese cities, and the Integrated Guided Missile Development Program (IGMDP) was not launched until 1983.<sup>24</sup> Subsequent claims that India possessed an "existential" nuclear deterrent referred to India's emerging capa-

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19. "Possibility of China Exploding Atom Bombs," National Archives of India (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 1960), file no. 9(1) EAD/60.

20. Department of the Air Force Staff Message Branch, "Incoming Message," December 7, 1964. Accessed online through the Declassified Document Reference System (DDRS), July 14, 2009.

21. Ganguly, "India's Pathway to Pokhran II," p. 152.

22. Gaurav Kampani, "From Existential to Minimum Deterrence: Explaining India's Decision to Test," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall 1998), p. 14; Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 183; and Karnad, *Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security*, p. 324.

23. Raj Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace: The Secret Story of India's Quest to Be a Nuclear Power* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2000), pp. 207, 246–248, 257–261.

24. Note that the IGMDP, which built on earlier missile research that had been abandoned in 1978 as well as the Indian space program, was not primarily concerned with developing a delivery vehicle for nuclear weapons when it was launched. See Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, pp. 244–249.

bilities starting in the late 1980s, and were concerned with India's ability to deter Pakistan, not China.<sup>25</sup> In short, India had little military means of countering China's nuclear capabilities until the 1990s, at the earliest.<sup>26</sup>

India's remarkable (if not total) restraint reflected a variety of obstacles that impeded the development of its nuclear program. Following China's test, persistent concerns about the economic cost of developing a nuclear arsenal helped to limit the enthusiasm of Indian leaders for a bomb program.<sup>27</sup> India also came to face considerable foreign pressure not to follow China's path, especially after 1974.<sup>28</sup> In addition, scholars have cited a moralistic aversion to nuclear weapons on the part of some Congress Party leaders.<sup>29</sup> To focus only on India's nuclear program during this period, however, is to miss a crucial part of the story. Indian leaders after 1964 were not simply faced with the question of whether or not to develop nuclear weapons, but rather how to enhance India's security in the context of its rivalry with a nuclear-armed China. In this context, it is essential to appreciate how India invested in nonmilitary means of countering China in the 1960s and 1970s. As the following narrative indicates, these efforts were successful enough to reduce the pressure on India to pursue nuclear armament more actively.

#### INSTITUTIONAL EFFORTS

Let us first consider India's efforts to constrain China through international institutions. In the 1950s, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had personally invested considerable energy in the cause of nuclear disarmament: in 1954, he became the first world leader to propose a nuclear test ban, and he repeatedly called for further steps to reduce the danger of nuclear war thereafter. Nehru's nuclear diplomacy reflected a sense that India possessed a certain moral authority in the international system, particularly in the wake of its nonviolent independence struggle, and it aimed at nothing less than slowing the nuclear arms race between the superpowers. In the early 1960s, however, Nehru became increasingly concerned about China's growing capabilities in the nuclear

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25. Devin T. Hagerty, "The Power of Suggestion: Opaque Proliferation, Existential Deterrence, and the South Asian Nuclear Arms Competition," *Security Studies*, Vol. 2, Nos. 3/4 (Spring/Summer 1993), pp. 256–283. Ashley Tellis critiques the idea that India relied on existential deterrence, maintaining that "the effectiveness of India's nuclear devices—especially that tested in 1974—was suspect to begin with and consequently could not have given New Delhi the assurance it needed to make existential deterrence a viable national security strategy." See Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture*, p. 186.

26. On the limitations of India's nuclear deterrent vis-à-vis China even after the 1998 tests, see *ibid.*, pp. 67–70.

27. For an overview of these concerns, see Karnad, *Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security*, pp. 263–280.

28. Ganguly, "India's Pathway to Pokhran II," pp. 160–161.

29. See, for example, Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, pp. 6, 74, 77.

sphere, even as he continued to search for a global solution to the arms race. It was against this backdrop that Nehru celebrated the conclusion of the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963, which banned all but underground nuclear explosions. China rejected the treaty, however, and it proceeded to conduct its first nuclear test in the atmosphere, five months after Nehru's death.<sup>30</sup>

In the wake of China's test, Indian diplomats continued to look for opportunities to constrain the Chinese nuclear program, and this agenda was evident as India joined disarmament talks that would eventually lead to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). In the summer of 1965, India's representative to the talks, Vishnu Trivedi, stressed that the crux of the proliferation problem was the behavior of the existing nuclear powers, not that of nonnuclear states. He proposed a two-stage treaty under which extant nuclear powers would first cease all production of nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles and then reduce their remaining capabilities. Only in the second stage would nonnuclear countries commit not to acquire nuclear weapons themselves.<sup>31</sup> Although this plan would have constrained all of the nuclear powers, its emphasis on the immediate cessation of weapons production was particularly important for India, as it could have prevented China from translating its technological breakthrough into an arsenal.<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, in discussions of nuclear technology sharing, India stressed the importance of preventing the spread of military technology from one nuclear power to another, a clear attempt to isolate China's program.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, however, as it became clear that the emerging treaty would not substantially constrain the nuclear weapons states, and that China would not participate in any case, India revived an earlier attempt to secure a nuclear guarantee from the superpowers in the course of the negotiations. When it became clear that this approach would not succeed either, Indian leaders reached a preliminary understanding not to sign the treaty.<sup>34</sup>

The outcome of the NPT talks was a tremendous setback for India. Rather than constraining the nuclear powers, the NPT constrained the nonweapons states. Rather than pressuring China to disarm, the NPT recognized China—but not India—as a nuclear power. In the wake of this discouraging defeat,

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30. On Nehru's nuclear diplomacy, see Andrew B. Kennedy, *The International Ambitions of Mao and Nehru: National Efficacy Beliefs and the Making of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), chap. 8; and Kanti Bajpai, "Nehru and Disarmament," in M.V. Kamath, ed., *Nehru Revisited* (Mumbai: Nehru Centre, 2003), pp. 353–393.

31. United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *Documents on Disarmament, 1965* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), p. 338.

32. Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, pp. 103–104.

33. Kapur, *India's Nuclear Option*, p. 137.

34. Chetakar S. Jha claims that this decision was made as early as May 1967. See Jha, *From Bandung to Tashkent: Glimpses of India's Foreign Policy* (Madras: Sangam, 1983), p. 303.



India's leaders seem to have invested much less hope in nuclear diplomacy. As a result, Indian leadership and activity in this arena waned, and New Delhi's approach became essentially defensive.<sup>35</sup> Although Indira Gandhi later supported the Six-Nation Five-Continent Disarmament Initiative in the early 1980s, she apparently did so without much hope that it would have an impact on the nuclear powers.<sup>36</sup>

In short, India's nuclear diplomacy began as an attempt to rein in the superpowers' arms race, but by the early 1960s, India had one eye on China's nuclear program as well. By the end of the decade, however, it was apparent that India's investment in nuclear diplomacy had not paid off, and interest in this area appears to have waned. In contrast, India's efforts to secure support from external powers against China would ultimately prove more successful.

#### THE SEARCH FOR EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Following the war with China in 1962, India developed a defense relationship with the United States, which manifested in arms sales and an air defense agreement that was reached in July 1963. The latter provided for joint training exercises among U.S., British, and Indian forces within India, while noting that the United States would "consult" with India in the event of a Chinese attack.<sup>37</sup> It was against this background that the United States and India responded to China's first nuclear test in October 1964. On October 16—the day of the test—President Lyndon Johnson declared that the United States "reaffirms its defense commitments in Asia," while adding that China's emerging nuclear capabilities "would have no effect upon the readiness of the United States to respond to requests from Asian nations for help in dealing with Communist Chinese aggression."<sup>38</sup> On October 18, Johnson made a second declaration, one that sought to reassure nonnuclear states about Chinese "nuclear blackmail," in particular. As he put it, "The nations that do not seek national nuclear weapons can be sure that if they need our strong support against some threat of nuclear blackmail, then they will have it."<sup>39</sup> The administration did not subsequently explain to the world that this statement applied

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35. On this change, see Michael J. Sullivan III, "Re-Oriented of Indian Arms Control Policy, 1969–1972," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 13, No. 7 (July 1973), pp. 691–702.

36. M.K. Rasgotra, interview by author, New Delhi, January 30, 2004. Rasgotra served under Indira Gandhi as foreign secretary in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs from 1982 to 1985.

37. For the content of the air defense agreement, see "Telegram from the Embassy in India to the Department of State," July 10, 1963, in *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS]: 1961–1963* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), Vol. 19, item 307, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v19/d307>.

38. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–1964*, Bk. 2: July 1–December 31, 1964 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), p. 1357.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 1379.

to India, and its reticence in this regard was deliberate. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff worried that a clearer commitment to India would alienate Pakistan, while State Department officials were concerned that offering an explicit umbrella to a nonaligned country would oblige the United States to offer such protection to all of its allies.<sup>40</sup> In February 1965, however, Secretary of State Dean Rusk privately sought to assure New Delhi that Johnson's statements did apply to India, noting past U.S. support for India against China to underline this point.<sup>41</sup>

Top Indian leaders took Johnson's implicit assurances seriously. Both Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Defense Minister Y.B. Chavan made statements in October and November 1964 maintaining that China would not be able to threaten India with nuclear weapons without provoking a response from the superpowers. As Indian scholar A.G. Noorani wrote a few years later, they seemed to be counting on "a tacit guarantee of India's territorial integrity against a Chinese nuclear attack."<sup>42</sup> More specifically, U.S. intelligence reported that Indian leaders were "relying on President Johnson's assurances to come to the aid of any nation menaced by China."<sup>43</sup> This confidence in implicit U.S. support was bolstered by the Indian military's report following China's test. The report, which apparently reflected input from all three services, asserted that the United States and the United Kingdom, and probably the Soviet Union, could be counted on to retaliate against a Chinese nuclear attack on India.<sup>44</sup> By January 1965, even though not all Indian politicians were convinced that the country could or should rely on external support against China, a correspondent for *The Hindu* summed up the leadership's views as follows: "The Government's attitude is that it would be folly to think in terms of an independent Indian nuclear deterrent. In fact official circles point out that there is no need at all for India to manufacture the atom bomb. Their

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40. See "Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense: 'The Indian Nuclear Problem: Proposed Course of Action,'" October 23, 1964, attached to "Letter from Robert McNamara to Dean Rusk, October 28, 1964 (SECRET)"; and "Memorandum from the State Department, Ambassador at Large: 'New Delhi's 1862 of December 31, 1964,' December 31, 1964 (SECRET)," both in Joyce Battle, ed., *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book*, No. 6 (Washington, D.C.: National Security Archive, George Washington University, n.d.), docs. 2, 5, respectively, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB6/index.html>.

41. Rusk sought to convey this message through Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Averell Harriman, who was then on an official Asian tour. See "State Department Telegram for Governor Harriman from the Secretary, February 27, 1965 (SECRET)," in *ibid.*, doc. 7, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB6/index.html>.

42. A.G. Noorani, "India's Quest for a Nuclear Guarantee," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 7, No. 7 (July 1967), p. 491.

43. Central Intelligence Agency Intelligence information cable, "Indian Government Policy on Development of Nuclear Weapon," October 22, 1964 (accessed online through DDRS, July 17, 2009).

44. Department of the Air Force Staff Message Branch, "Incoming Message," December 7, 1964.

thinking is that the Chinese would never and dare not attack India with atomic weapons. Obviously they believe that the moment there is a Chinese attack then inevitably the other nuclear Powers would rush to India's aid even if India did not ask for it."<sup>45</sup> Although this summary may have reflected a degree of journalistic exaggeration, it is striking that the United States and other nuclear powers were seen as so interested in containing China that they would likely retaliate against a Chinese nuclear attack on India even in the absence of an Indian request.

Top officials in India's Ministry of External Affairs took the implicit U.S. assurances seriously as well, though there was concern that New Delhi would have to be careful if it wanted to maintain U.S. support. In early 1965, this issue arose during a debate within the ministry over the stance that India should take on the Anglo-American plan to establish a military base in the Indian Ocean. In a memo dated January 20 and marked "Secret," the deputy secretary in the Disarmament Unit, A.S. Gonsalves, summarized the debate.<sup>46</sup> Referring to a meeting in the Foreign Secretary's Office held two days earlier, Gonsalves noted that the prevailing view was that India should take a strong stand against the base, for the following reasons: "i) our policy has always been one of opposition to all foreign military bases; ii) the base would be of no particular strategic importance to us from the point of view of the nuclear threat from China in view of the fact that American bases in the Pacific are adequate for the purpose of nuclear strikes at targets in China; [and] iii) the Afro-Asian countries would be greatly incensed by the establishment of this base and our failure to associate ourselves with their opposition to it would be greatly misunderstood."<sup>47</sup> The second consideration is obviously the key one for the purposes here. The debate took for granted that the U.S. ability to conduct nuclear strikes against China was of "strategic importance" to India. Those arguing that India should oppose the base in the Indian Ocean did so assuming that the base would not be useful for this purpose. Gonsalves proceeded to note that there was concern about criticizing the Anglo-American base, even if it was not needed to support nuclear strikes against China. As he put it, "[The joint secretary for UN affairs] expressed the view that it may not be in our interests to take an unduly strong stand against the establishment of this base in view of the fact that we should avoid alienating the Western powers on whom our defence against China would eventually depend."<sup>48</sup> Gonsalves

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45. K. Rangaswami, "AICC May Debate Nuclear Policy," *Hindu*, January 7, 1965.

46. A.S. Gonsalves, untitled memo, January 20, 1965, National Archives of India (New Delhi: Disarmament Unit, Ministry of External Affairs, 1965), file no. U.IV/125/24/1965.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

48. *Ibid.*

made clear that he supported this view, and his note appears to have been forwarded to Foreign Minister Swaran Singh on February 6 by Foreign Secretary Y.D. Gundevia, who appended a brief note of his own.<sup>49</sup> Gundevia backed Gonsalves' point of view and asserted that India "should not be vociferous on the question of the proposed Western base in the Indian Ocean."<sup>50</sup> Although other countries might object more strenuously, "if our friends want us to join in the howl against Indian Ocean bases, we must expect them to not remain silent on the question of Chinese nuclear bases, much closer to us."<sup>51</sup> Subsequently, the advocates of restraint won out. India's response to the Anglo-American base plan was "mild and low-key" in 1965, and indeed for several years thereafter.<sup>52</sup> Only in 1970, when New Delhi was developing a stronger relationship with Moscow, did India step up its rhetoric against the idea of a Western base in the Indian Ocean.<sup>53</sup>

Other scholars have documented India's pursuit of a more explicit guarantee against the Chinese nuclear threat, which began in late 1964.<sup>54</sup> In particular, while visiting London in early December, Prime Minister Shastri suggested at a press conference that the nuclear powers provide "some kind of guarantee which was needed not just by India but by all the nonnuclear countries."<sup>55</sup> It soon became clear that Shastri did not seek a more explicit umbrella from the United States, but a multilateral commitment delivered through the UN, because the latter would be more compatible with India's commitment to nonalignment. Shastri's campaign may have reflected a desire for more robust external support against China. After all, President Johnson's assurances were only implicit. It is also possible that Shastri's pursuit of clearer external support was designed to reduce the pressure he was feeling at home to invest in a nuclear weapons program.<sup>56</sup> Either way, the key point here is that Shastri was not trying to create a new commitment out of thin air, but building on what

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49. Ibid, pp. 4–5. Note that the foreign secretary is the highest-ranking civil servant in India's Ministry of External Affairs. The foreign minister, in contrast, is a political appointee and the ministry's representative in the cabinet.

50. Ibid., p. 5.

51. Ibid.

52. Rasul B. Rais, *The Indian Ocean and the Superpowers: Economic, Political, and Strategic Perspectives* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 161.

53. A. Subramanyam Raju, *Democracies at Loggerheads: Security Aspects of U.S.-India Relations* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 2001), pp. 87–88. Note that Indira Gandhi criticized U.S. policy toward Vietnam as early as 1966, however. See Dennis Kux, *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies, 1941–1991* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2002), pp. 254–255, 259.

54. Noorani, "India's Quest for a Nuclear Guarantee," pp. 490–502.

55. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 491.

56. On this point, see Itty Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy, and the Postcolonial State* (London: Zed, 1998), p. 125.

the Indian leadership believed was an existing implicit commitment from the United States.

By the summer of 1965, it had become apparent that Shastri's quest for a more formal and multilateral nuclear umbrella was making little headway.<sup>57</sup> This setback, along with other developments in Indo-U.S. relations at this time, may have begun to erode Indian confidence in implicit American support. New Delhi was particularly disappointed by Washington's reaction to Pakistan's instigation of a military conflict with India that year.<sup>58</sup> American promises that Pakistan would never be allowed to use U.S.-supplied weapons against India were proven empty, and the United States cut off economic and military assistance to both countries, even though Pakistan had started the conflict. On the other hand, Indian officials presumably understood that the United States would view a Sino-Indian war differently than it would an Indo-Pakistani conflict. Indeed, both the United States and the Soviet Union warned China not to intervene in the conflict, and the two also passed a Security Council resolution on September 20 that called on third parties "to refrain from any action which might aggravate the situation."<sup>59</sup> Shortly thereafter, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Arthur Goldberg, publicly repeated President Johnson's assurances from the previous October against Chinese "nuclear blackmail."<sup>60</sup> Even so, these actions did not entirely assuage Indian fears: when speaking with U.S. Ambassador Chester Bowles in the fall of 1965, high-level Indian officials expressed doubts about U.S. support against the Chinese nuclear threat, particularly if the Soviet Union were to side with China.<sup>61</sup>

After Indira Gandhi came to power, India continued its efforts to build on Johnson's assurances. When the new prime minister made a state visit to

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57. Noorani, "India's Quest for a Nuclear Guarantee," p. 494.

58. On the 1965 war, see Sumit Ganguly, *The Origins of War in South Asia: Indo-Pakistani Conflicts since 1947* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986), pp. 57–96; Kux, *India and the United States*, pp. 235–240; and Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, pp. 106–111.

59. U.S. and Soviet warnings were publicized in the American media at the time. See Richard Halloran, "Rusk Warns China on Kashmir," *Washington Post*, September 14, 1965; and Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Inside Story . . . A Warning to China," *Washington Post*, September 16, 1965. India subsequently requested a more formal unilateral warning from Washington, but President Johnson opted instead to focus U.S. efforts on the UN Security Council. See "Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in India" and "Record of Meeting," both September 17, 1965, in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 25: *South Asia*, items 208, 209, [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xxv/s.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xxv/s.html). For the text of the UN resolution that passed on September 20, see <http://www.un.org/documents/sc/res/1965/scres65.htm>.

60. Glenn T. Seaborg, *Stemming the Tide: Arms Control in the Johnson Years* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1987), p. 372.

61. "India's Position on Developing Nuclear Weapons Discussed by Amb. Bowles," Department of State cable, October 19, 1965 (accessed online through DDRS, July 15, 2009).

Washington in March 1966, her delegation asked Secretary of State Rusk about enhancing the security of nonnuclear states. In response, Rusk said that it was a "complex question" and blamed Moscow for the lack of progress toward some kind of joint superpower assurance.<sup>62</sup> Subsequently, the Indian government decided to pursue the matter more thoroughly in the context of the NPT negotiations in the spring of 1967. Toward this end, the prime minister dispatched her principal secretary, the distinguished civil servant L.K. Jha, to Washington, Moscow, London, and Paris to discuss the possibility of a joint nuclear guarantee. Shortly before Jha's mission, Indian Foreign Minister M.C. Chagla had declared in parliament that "we are not under anybody's nuclear umbrella," and other Indian officials expressed doubts about implicit U.S. nuclear support in conversations with American journalists and visitors.<sup>63</sup> Jha himself, however, offered a more sanguine view of the situation in two top-secret memos that he wrote upon his return.<sup>64</sup> The first memo, dated May 2, made clear that Jha saw both superpowers as willing to protect India against Chinese nuclear coercion or attack. The difficulty, Jha explained, lay in translating this willingness into a statement of more general intentions. "If it were merely a question of dealing with a possible Chinese attack on India in the near future," he wrote, "both the USA and the USSR would undoubtedly take the strongest possible action, guarantee or no guarantee. (This was the French view also.) But a commitment to help any country at any time, regardless of the circumstances, would have to be spelt in very much weaker terms."<sup>65</sup>

Jha's second memo, which was dated May 3 and written specifically for the prime minister, went into more detail about the nature of the Chinese threat, India's external support, and Indian policy toward nuclear weapons. Jha believed that China might engage in subversive activities and guerrilla warfare against India, but he saw a full-scale war with China as unlikely, and he did not believe that China would use nuclear weapons in the event of such a war. Jha was confident of Chinese restraint, in turn, because he believed that Beijing appreciated India's implicit support from Washington and Moscow: "One reason [that a Chinese nuclear attack is unlikely] is that they would know that in

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62. "Memorandum of Conversation," March 29, 1966, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 25, item 308, [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xxv/zb.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xxv/zb.html).

63. Quoted in Warren Unna, "India Rejects A-Treaty in Present Form," *Washington Post*, March 28, 1967. For expressions of doubt by other Indian officials, see Warren Unna, "Uneasy India Debates Atomic Defense," *Washington Post*, November 24, 1966; and Jha, *From Bandung to Tashkent*, p. 306.

64. L.K. Jha, Prime Minister's Secretariat, "Nuclear Security," May 2, 1967, and "Nuclear Policy," May 3, 1967, in P.N. Haksar Files, installment III, subfile no. 111, Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi, India. I am grateful to Srinath Raghavan for making these two documents available to me.

65. Jha, "Nuclear Security," May 2, 1967, p. 6.

such an event, neither the USA nor the USSR could stand by and watch. . . . The danger to both these powers from a nuclear China, which has subjugated India, would be too tremendous for them to face.”<sup>66</sup> Jha later reiterated the view that the superpowers would not tolerate Chinese domination of India and concluded that “so long as this position obtains, whatever the wording of the Declaration, we can count on these two powers acting.”<sup>67</sup> The principal secretary therefore advised against a nuclear weapons program for the time being. In Jha’s view, developing an arsenal would be extremely costly, and it was not imperative at the moment given India’s external support. In fact, he suggested, acquiring nuclear weapons might not enhance Indian security, both because India would lag behind China in weapons development and because such action would “weaken the political compulsions on the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. to come to our help” in the event of a Chinese attack.<sup>68</sup>

Given Jha’s evident faith in superpower support against China, why did he see a U.S.-Soviet declaration as worth pursuing at this time? He did not think that the superpowers were willing to make a binding legal commitment that went beyond their existing obligations under the UN Charter. Even if they were, he noted, “guaranteeing powers can always, if they so wish, wriggle out of even a formal Treaty, leave alone [*sic*] a unilateral Declaration.”<sup>69</sup> Nor did Jha believe that China needed to be made aware of U.S. and Soviet intentions; he thought that Beijing already understood the situation. Instead, he felt that a joint superpower declaration would serve three purposes: it would allow both superpowers to act without concern that the other would act at cross-purposes; it would further strengthen India’s deterrence of China; and it would represent a step forward in outlawing the use of nuclear weapons against nonnuclear states. Based on his conversations up to that point, Jha believed that some kind of “political guarantee” that accomplished these goals was “possible.”<sup>70</sup> In the end, of course, Jha’s optimism about a joint superpower statement was off the mark, and no such declaration materialized.<sup>71</sup> His

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66. Jha, “Nuclear Policy,” May 3, 1967, pp. 2–3.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

71. Note that the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom did make individual statements in the UN Security Council on June 17, 1968, in which they pledged to seek immediate Security Council action to provide assistance to any nonnuclear weapons state party to the NPT that was subjected to nuclear aggression or threats. See *Arms Control and Disarmament Agreements* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1990), pp. 93–94. The Indian foreign minister had earlier criticized the notion of a guarantee being made through the Security Council, however, because it might act too slowly or become deadlocked. See Warren Unna, “India Seeks Assurance of 2 Top Atom Powers,” *Washington Post*, April 12, 1967.

memos make clear, however, that at least some top Indian officials believed that India could count on superpower support against China for the time being, "guarantee or no guarantee."<sup>72</sup>

In the waning years of the decade, as the United States seemed to lessen its commitment to Asia with the articulation of the Nixon Doctrine, India began to deepen its strategic relationship with the Soviet Union.<sup>73</sup> As noted above, Indian officials had expressed some hope for Soviet support against China's nuclear capabilities as early as 1964, and this hope had matured into an expectation (at least on L.K. Jha's part) by 1967. At the same time, Indo-Soviet relations were not without their problems during this period. New Delhi was particularly displeased when the Soviets began improving their relations with Pakistan in the mid-1960s, a process that culminated in Soviet arms sales to Pakistan in 1968.<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, as Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in 1969, Moscow made reinvigorating its ties with India a priority. In June of that year, General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev proposed "a system of collective security in Asia," a vague concept that nonetheless clearly sought to enlist India and other Asian countries against China.<sup>75</sup>

New Delhi was uncomfortable with Brezhnev's idea. Indian participation in such a system would have undermined nonalignment, alienated Washington, and created new obstacles to improving relations with Beijing. Indeed, Indira Gandhi had sought to improve relations with China in the late 1960s, and thereby reduce India's need to rely on either superpower.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, Moscow soon made clear that the suspension of its military assistance to Pakistan depended on India's willingness to sign a treaty that at least nodded in the direction of Brezhnev's proposal. Preliminary discussions of an Indo-Soviet treaty had taken place during the first few months of 1969, and these were now explored further. By mid-1970, a draft treaty had been readied that

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72. Jha, "Nuclear Security," p. 6.

73. The Nixon Doctrine, articulated on July 25, 1969, emphasized that Asian nations would take primary responsibility for their self-defense, but noted that the United States would still honor its treaty commitments and still protect its allies against nuclear threats. Nixon stated that "as far as the problems of internal security are concerned, as far as the problems of military defense, except for the threat of a major power involving nuclear weapons, . . . the United States is going to encourage and has a right to expect that this problem will be handled by, and responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves." See *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1969* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 549.

74. The arms package was to include MiG jets, Il-28 bombers, tanks, and guns. See Robert C. Horn, *Soviet-Indian Relations: Issues and Influence* (New York: Praeger, 1982), p. 24.

75. A.G. Noorani, *Brezhnev Plan for Asian Security: Russia in Asia* (Mumbai: Jaico, 1975), pp. 1–23.

76. Tanvi Madan, "'The Stakes Were Far Bigger': U.S. Policymakers' Responses to the 1965 and 1971 India-Pakistan Crises," paper presented at the conference "India and the Cold War, 1947–1991: Archival Perspectives and Historical Revisions," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., May 19, 2009, p. 26.



was apparently identical to the treaty that was ultimately signed, but without a security clause comparable to Article 9 of the final text. Even so, Indira Gandhi was not prepared to sign what was sure to be a controversial agreement at this time, particularly because she headed a minority government and was preparing for elections.<sup>77</sup>

In the end, India did not sign the treaty until August 1971. The decision came as war over East Pakistan loomed and in the wake of the dramatic breakthrough in U.S.-China relations that summer. In early July, U.S. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger had stopped in New Delhi for consultations prior to visiting Beijing. India's foreign secretary at the time, T.N. Kaul, later recalled that Kissinger strove to reassure his Indian hosts that any future improvement in U.S.-China relations would not be made at India's expense, but without disclosing his plans to visit Beijing.<sup>78</sup> Following his successful visit to China, however, Kissinger delivered a different message. On July 17, Kissinger told L.K. Jha, now the Indian ambassador in Washington, that although the United States would not welcome an unprovoked Chinese attack on India, it would not be able to provide any help against China in the event that India took military action against Pakistan.<sup>79</sup>

The Indian government reacted to this disclosure quickly. It took several steps to improve its relations with Beijing, including secret meetings in Moscow in late July between the Chinese ambassador and D.P. Dhar, the head of policy planning in India's Ministry of External Affairs.<sup>80</sup> When this gambit failed to pay off, however, India played its Soviet card. On August 9, the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation was signed in New Delhi by the foreign ministers of India and the Soviet Union. As earlier drafts had, the treaty contained language designed to prevent the Soviet Union from selling arms to Pakistan. Article 9, however, was new: "Each high contracting party undertakes to abstain from providing any assistance to any third party that engages in armed conflict with the other party. In the event of either Party being subjected to an attack or a threat thereof, the High Contracting Parties shall immediately enter into mutual consultations in order to remove such threat and to take appropriate effective measures to ensure peace and the security of their

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77. Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 196–198.

78. For Kaul's account, see T.N. Kaul, *The Kissinger Years: Indo-American Relations* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1980), pp. 47–49.

79. The content of this conversation was revisited by Kissinger and Jha in September. See "Memorandum of Conversation," September 11, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969–1976*, Vol. 9 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005), p. 408.

80. Horn, *Soviet-Indian Relations*, p. 63.

countries.”<sup>81</sup> With U.S. backing against China ebbing, New Delhi now increased its reliance on the other superpower.<sup>82</sup>

It has been argued that India's interest in the treaty reflected mainly a desire to ensure that the Soviet Union would side more firmly with India against Pakistan.<sup>83</sup> Such support would make it easier to pressure Pakistan over the crisis in Bengal, improve flagging morale in the Indian bureaucracy, and reassure India's anxious military that China would be unlikely to intervene in a war with Pakistan. In contrast, the possibility that rapprochement between the United States and China would have negative implications for India, and specifically that China might actually join a South Asian conflict, was “of no great concern” to India's top political leaders.<sup>84</sup> According to this argument, the treaty was formalized in August 1971 not because Indian leaders were concerned about U.S. abandonment, but simply because they thought the public criticism of the apparent departure from nonalignment would be muted under the circumstances.

Although India's desire to drive a wedge between Moscow and Islamabad was real, the evidence makes clear that India's leaders were genuinely concerned about U.S.-Chinese rapprochement and its implications for India's defense against China. If Indian leaders had not been concerned about China, the diplomatic overtures to Beijing in late July would have been unnecessary. Moreover, internal documents now available make clear that India was very much concerned about the loss of U.S. backing against China. On August 3, Foreign Secretary Kaul authored a thirteen-page top-secret memo for Prime Minister Gandhi and Foreign Minister Singh describing the situation and making the case for concluding the treaty with Moscow.<sup>85</sup> Kaul began by noting that the Soviet Union had been interested in closer security relations with India for about two years, but India “had been stalling this idea so far by prolonging informal discussions between our ambassador and the Soviet Government regarding the implications of such an understanding or arrangement and its consequences.”<sup>86</sup> Kaul then summed up the recent changes in the situation: “With the possibility of a Sino-American détente and the change in

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81. For the full text of the treaty, see Noorani, *Brezhnev Plan for Asian Security*, pp. 405–409.

82. The treaty was to remain in force for twenty years, to be automatically extended for five-year periods thereafter unless either party objected.

83. Sisson and Rose, *War and Secession*, pp. 198–202.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

85. T.N. Kaul, “Points for Consideration by FM and PM,” August 3, 1971, in P.N. Haksar Files, installment II, subfile no. 49, Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi, India.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 1. Kaul's reference to “stalling” here is worth noting. P.N. Dhar, an adviser to Indira Gandhi at the time and later her principal secretary, recalled that she was not eager to sign the treaty and did so only because she felt there was no alternative given the changes under way in U.S.-China relations. Dhar, interview by author, New Delhi, July 31, 2003.

the attitude of US government to the Bangla Desh problem, our ambassador in USA has reported that there is every possibility of America increasing arms supplies to Pakistan. Dr. Kissinger told him after his return from Peking that America would not intervene in any conflict between India and Pakistan even if China did so. This has changed the whole perspective in which the Soviet proposal has to be considered.<sup>87</sup> Kaul seems to have simplified Kissinger's message a bit, stating that the United States would not intervene in "any conflict" between India and Pakistan, rather than one that India had instigated. This may have reflected an assumption that Washington would blame India for any conflict that erupted at the time, which was probably accurate. Kaul's memo proceeded to take his readers through the latest draft text, which he said had been revised "in light of the changed circumstances."<sup>88</sup> He noted that "there is nothing controversial in Articles 1 to 7, which anybody can take exception to."<sup>89</sup> Articles 8 through 10, in contrast, were "the real essence of the agreement" and had been drafted "with great care to safeguard our national interests."<sup>90</sup> Article 8 was "a virtual non-aggression Pact and is unexceptional."<sup>91</sup> Article 9 was "perhaps the most important article from our point of view."<sup>92</sup> It called not only for "mutual consultations" but also for "appropriate effective measures even in the case of a threat of an attack."<sup>93</sup> This article would be "important in case of a conflict with Pakistan and/or China and would act as a deterrent on both."<sup>94</sup> Article 10, in turn, would preclude the Soviet Union from "entering into any obligation to supply weapons or spares to Pakistan, as they would obviously be aimed against India."<sup>95</sup>

Kaul's memo makes clear that India's leaders were worried about China (as well as Pakistan) in August 1971. Reinforcing this point, U.S. intelligence sources reported that Kissinger's July 17 warning to Jha had aroused "considerable concern" among India's leaders, even though they did not see it as a deliberately anti-India move.<sup>96</sup> Concern about China, in turn, combined with the brewing crisis to make the Indo-Soviet treaty a necessity. As Kaul put it, "If the Sino-American *détente* works out successfully, then there is no other alternative left to us but to have a reliable friend in case of necessity."<sup>97</sup> Kaul did

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87. Kaul, "Points for Consideration by FM and PM," pp. 1–2.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*

93. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

94. *Ibid.*

95. *Ibid.*

96. "Memorandum from Director of Central Intelligence Helms to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," July 29, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969–1976*, Vol. 11, p. 291.

97. Kaul, "Points for Consideration by FM and PM," p. 6.

not refer specifically to the threat posed by China's nuclear capabilities at this point in time, or to how the Soviet treaty would address that threat. Instead, his memo suggested that Article 9 would deter China from initiating any kind of large-scale military action against India, which clearly would have included a nuclear attack. This sanguine view was not restricted to Kaul: Indian diplomats serving in Moscow at the time believed that Soviet support against the Chinese nuclear threat was implicit in Article 9.<sup>98</sup> Or as K. Subrahmanyam has written, "The treaty was intended to get Soviet deterrence for India against any possible Chinese intervention."<sup>99</sup>

Although the limitations of space preclude an in-depth exploration of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war that ensued, the Soviet Union's credibility as an ally was probably enhanced by its behavior during the conflict. To be sure, only after discussions in late October, held as "consultations" under Article 9 of the Indo-Soviet treaty, did Moscow abandon its efforts to forge a negotiated peace and endorse India's stance on East Pakistan more fully. In addition, once the war was under way, Soviet officials pressured India to complete its intervention quickly and made clear that they were not offering New Delhi *carte blanche*.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, the Soviet Union was helpful to India during the conflict, blocking U.S.-sponsored resolutions at the UN and giving India the political cover it needed to complete its intervention in East Pakistan, which now became Bangladesh.<sup>101</sup> Most important for the purposes here, Soviet support lessened India's vulnerability to coercion or military action from China. Kissinger claims that Indira Gandhi was told by Moscow that the Soviet Union would take action against China if it intervened.<sup>102</sup> In fact, Moscow reportedly moved new ground and air forces to the Sino-Soviet border, and there was apparently some discussion within the Kremlin of attacking China's nuclear facilities at Lop Nor in the event that China attacked India.<sup>103</sup> In addition, Soviet submarines kept watch on the USS *Enterprise* battle group after it was deployed to the Bay of Bengal in support of Pakistan. This latter development

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98. Romesh Bhandari, interview by author, New Delhi, January 19, 2004. Bhandari served at the Indian embassy in Moscow from 1969 to 1971.

99. K. Subrahmanyam, "Indian Nuclear Policy," in Jasjit Singh, ed., *Nuclear India* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 1998), p. 31. Other secondary sources also note the Soviet Union's role as India's implicit nuclear protector after 1971. See Stephen P. Cohen and Richard L. Park, *India: Emergent Power?* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1978), p. 50; John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 322; and Ganguly, "India's Pathway to Pokhran II," pp. 159, 161.

100. Madan, "The Stakes Were Far Bigger," p. 31.

101. Horn, *Soviet-Indian Relations*, p. 72.

102. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 901.

103. Jack Anderson, with George Clifford, *The Anderson Papers* (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 261-262.

raised the possibility of a more formidable nuclear threat to India, one that the Soviet Union would have had more difficulty deterring. Still, despite taking umbrage at the *Enterprise* deployment, Indian leaders may not have been too worried about overt U.S. intervention as long as India did not launch an all-out attack on West Pakistan.<sup>104</sup>

In the wake of India's 1971 victory, Indian leaders maneuvered to reduce their strategic dependence on the Soviet Union. In 1972, India began working to improve its relations with China in an effort to normalize the situation in South Asia and to increase its latitude vis-à-vis Moscow.<sup>105</sup> India's decision to conduct a peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974 may also be seen in this light. As Indira Gandhi later stated, "We had to do it to demonstrate our independent capability."<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, these initiatives did not go far. Relations with China remained frosty until the late 1970s, and serious sources of friction would remain thereafter. Domestically, Indira Gandhi chose not to develop an actual nuclear weapons capability after the 1974 test, as noted above. Indo-Soviet relations, in contrast, remained on solid ground despite New Delhi's exploration of other options, and the Indian prime minister seemed to remain confident that Moscow would continue to take a strong interest in India's security.<sup>107</sup> In 1976, in fact, she told her newly appointed ambassador to the Soviet Union that India was an indispensable factor for Moscow in Asia.<sup>108</sup> In short, although India may not have been enthusiastic about its strategic reliance on the Soviet Union in the 1970s, Moscow's implicit umbrella remained its only real answer to the Chinese bomb.

### *Dwindling Options and India's Bomb*

India's security environment took a sharp turn for the worse following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Moscow's move prompted the United States to reinvigorate its economic and military relationship with Pakistan, a move that undermined India's conventional military dominance in South Asia. The invasion also prompted Washington to reduce its efforts to rein in Pakistan's nuclear program. Pakistan's emerging nuclear capabilities subse-

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104. Sisson and Rose, *War and Secession*, pp. 216–217.

105. Horn, *Soviet-Indian Relations*, pp. 84–85.

106. Quoted in Rodney Jones, "India," in Jozef Goldblat, ed., *Nonproliferation: The Why and the Wherefore* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1985), p. 114.

107. On the congruence of Soviet and Indian views during this period, see Horn, *Soviet-Indian Relations*, p. 112.

108. Ramesh Thakur and Carlyle A. Thayer, *Soviet Relations with India and Vietnam* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), p. 297.

quently became a growing concern for New Delhi as the 1980s progressed, especially as Indo-Pakistani relations deteriorated over Kashmir and other issues during this period. Indeed, Pakistan appears to have suggested as early as January 1987, in the midst of India's "Brasstacks" military exercise, that it was capable of launching a nuclear attack on India.<sup>109</sup> Although China now became a less immediate worry, Chinese animosity remained a concern, even after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Beijing in 1988. This was not only because the border dispute remained, but also because it became clear that China was assisting Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs.<sup>110</sup>

India reacted to this new set of circumstances by developing its own nuclear weapons. In the late 1980s, Rajiv Gandhi authorized covert efforts to weaponize India's nuclear capabilities. In the 1990s, subsequent prime ministers took additional steps to enhance India's readiness, the most vivid of which were the breakthrough tests of 1998. India's acquisition of nuclear weapons, however, should not be seen as a straightforward response to a more daunting threat environment. Instead, the following analysis emphasizes that India was left with little alternative to the bomb because of the dearth of nonmilitary options during this period. The first section below documents how Soviet support for India began to fade even before the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. The second and third sections then explain that India's decision to acquire its own nuclear weapons was a reaction not simply to the disappearance of Soviet support, but also to disappointments in nuclear diplomacy. The second section shows how Rajiv Gandhi's failures in this regard contributed to covert weaponization in 1989, and the third section shows how subsequent setbacks on this front contributed to overt weaponization in the late 1990s.

#### THE END OF THE IMPLICIT UMBRELLA

Following the assassination of his mother, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi became prime minister on October 31, 1984. The new prime minister was concerned by the intelligence reporting Pakistan's progress toward the bomb. Starting in April 1985, therefore, he convened a high-level "interdisciplinary group" to study India's options in the nuclear realm. At least some of the group's members urged the prime minister to approve the development of nu-

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109. *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: Sage, 1999), p. 191.

110. On China's assistance to Pakistan, see Evan S. Medeiros, *Reluctant Restraint: The Evolution of China's Nonproliferation Policies and Practices, 1980-2004* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 39-40. On nuclear assistance, more generally, see Matthew Kroenig, "Exporting the Bomb: Why States Provide Sensitive Nuclear Assistance," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (February 2009), pp. 113-133.

clear weapons, but in their own words, "It was obvious that Rajiv Gandhi was far from enthusiastic about it."<sup>111</sup> Even so, the prime minister did ask a committee of top military and scientific officials to estimate what kind of arsenal India might need and what it would cost. The committee's report, which was delivered in October, estimated that India could start with an arsenal of about sixty fission bombs that would be delivered by aircraft. The cost for this basic capability, including such ancillary costs as standing up a command and control system, was estimated at Rs. 7,000 to 8,000 crore (at 1985 rupee value, \$5.7 to \$6.5 billion), which presumably would have been spread over several years. The higher range of this estimate was roughly equal to the annual Indian defense budget at the time. The report imagined that India might eventually seek to acquire more than 100 warheads, including some thermonuclear weapons, and that it would develop land- and submarine-launched missile systems as well. The cost of these additional warheads and delivery vehicles was not included in the estimate, however.<sup>112</sup> The prime minister apparently also consulted his chief economic adviser around this time about the impact of increased defense expenditures, and the response was discouraging.<sup>113</sup>

In response to this counsel, Rajiv Gandhi chose to defer a decision about investing in a nuclear arsenal. Even so, the prime minister did authorize several steps to enhance India's state of nuclear readiness in 1986. These included the development of weapons designs for a smaller, safer, and more reliable bomb. In addition, India's scientists began working with the air force for the first time to ensure that the bombs that were being designed could be mated with the delivery systems. Defense Minister Arun Singh was directed to set up a national command post near New Delhi. In short, Rajiv Gandhi put India in a position to develop a basic nuclear arsenal without actually funding the production of the weapons themselves. The decision to stop short was deliberate; the prime minister was not prepared to invest in an arsenal in 1986.<sup>114</sup>

Nonetheless, India's circumstances were changing in ways that would prompt the prime minister to reconsider his decision a few years later. For one, it was becoming clear that the Soviet commitment to India's security had begun to wane. In the summer of 1986, a confrontation developed between Indian and Chinese forces in the Sumdorong Chu valley in the eastern sector of the border. New Delhi quickly looked to Moscow for expressions of sup-

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111. Subrahmanyam, "Indian Nuclear Policy," p. 40.

112. Former Indian government official, interview by author, New Delhi, August 11, 2003. My interlocutor helped to prepare the report and emphasized that previous descriptions of it have overstated the size and sophistication of the arsenal for which a cost estimate was provided.

113. Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, pp. 302–303.

114. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

port, but the Soviets remained silent. This was no oversight: in late July, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had launched an effort to improve relations with Beijing, delivering an important speech in Vladivostok, and it was apparent that he was reluctant to jeopardize this effort by taking India's side. In October, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping threatened that China might have to "teach India a lesson" if it continued "nibbling" at Chinese territory, language that recalled China's attack on Vietnam in 1979. In November, Gorbachev visited New Delhi and tried to reassure Indian leaders of Moscow's support. When pressed by Indian journalists, however, the Soviet leader conspicuously refused to take a side in the Sino-Indian border dispute. In fact, some Indian observers later charged that Gorbachev had implicitly endorsed China's position. Subsequently, in early 1987, the Soviets restarted border negotiations with China after a hiatus of nine years and announced that they would withdraw a mechanized division and other military units from Mongolia. In addition, when Sino-Indian clashes that spring prompted both China and India to reinforce their forces on the border, Moscow reportedly informed New Delhi that its priority was to improve relations with Beijing. In this context, it is not surprising that Indian diplomats speaking off the record began to describe relations with Moscow as increasingly uncertain.<sup>115</sup>

Soviet support for India vis-à-vis Pakistan was also ebbing. Starting in late 1985, Moscow began to adopt a less hostile tone toward Pakistan as it began transmitting exploratory gestures regarding Afghanistan.<sup>116</sup> Subsequently, during his November 1986 visit to New Delhi, Gorbachev failed to offer unconditional support to India in its rivalry with Pakistan, in marked contrast to Soviet statements made only one year before.<sup>117</sup> In early 1987, Moscow reportedly cut off fuel supplies for India's MiG-25 planes during the aforementioned Brasstacks military exercise, which Pakistan had seen as an attempt to intimidate it.<sup>118</sup> In the spring of 1988, the Soviet Union began its withdrawal from Afghanistan, opening the door further to improved ties with Pakistan. In 1990, while Moscow and New Delhi agreed to renew the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty for another five years, the Soviets also disclosed that they would no

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115. John W. Garver, "The Indian Factor in Recent Sino-Soviet Relations," *China Quarterly*, No. 125 (March 1991), pp. 78–82; and Peter J.S. Duncan, *The Soviet Union and India* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1989), pp. 35–39, 53–54. On the perspectives of Indian diplomats during this time, I am indebted to a personal communication from Sumit Ganguly.

116. Ali T. Sheikh, "The New Political Thinking: Gorbachev's Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 11 (November 1988), pp. 1175–1179.

117. Duncan, *The Soviet Union and India*, p. 51.

118. Mushahid Hussain, "United Nations: Gorbachev's Fall Expected to Dampen Peace Efforts," *Inter Press Service*, August 19, 1991. On the Brasstacks crisis, more generally, see Kanti Bajpai, P.R. Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, Stephen P. Cohen, and Sumit Ganguly, *Brasstacks and Beyond: Perception and Management of Crisis in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995).



longer use their veto on India's behalf should resolutions on the Kashmir issue come before the UN Security Council.<sup>119</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed once and for all the possibility that Moscow would support India against China and Pakistan. Yet although the Soviet collapse was a watershed moment in Indian foreign policy, the preceding account makes clear that Soviet support for India had diminished considerably even before Rajiv Gandhi left office in late 1989. This development was most problematic for India's position vis-à-vis China; China's arsenal was well established, and Soviet support had long been India's answer to the Chinese bomb. In contrast, Pakistan's nuclear capabilities were merely nascent in the late 1980s, and India was in a position to match them as they developed. Even so, Rajiv Gandhi was not eager to invest in a nuclear arsenal, as the preceding account has shown. In this context, his efforts to constrain India's rivals through diplomacy took on added significance.

#### DIPLOMATIC DISAPPOINTMENTS AND COVERT WEAPONIZATION

Whereas India seemed to invest less hope in nuclear diplomacy after the late 1960s, it would experience a revival under Rajiv Gandhi. As other scholars have noted, Rajiv took office mindful of his status as Nehru's grandson, as well as India's tradition in nuclear arms control and disarmament, and he was eager to make his mark in this sphere.<sup>120</sup> Yet his initiatives were also congruent with India's security needs. In keeping with his concern about Pakistan, for example, the prime minister made a concerted effort to constrain the Pakistani nuclear program early on in his tenure. While visiting Washington in June 1985, he publicly and privately pressed President Ronald Reagan to stop Pakistan from acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>121</sup> In October, the prime minister met with Reagan once again while visiting the UN and continued to press his case. This latter visit momentarily sparked real (if not universal) hope within the Indian government that the United States would increase the pressure on Pakistan not to obtain nuclear weapons.<sup>122</sup> In the end, of course, the effort to enlist the United States against Pakistan would fail.

Rajiv Gandhi also undertook broader initiatives that would have constrained China and the superpowers. In January 1985, he hosted a meeting of the Six-Nation Five-Continent Disarmament Initiative, which called for a nu-

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119. Thakur and Thayer, *Soviet Relations with India and Vietnam*, p. 296.

120. Nayar and Paul, *India in the World Order*, pp. 198–199.

121. Stuart Auerbach, "Gandhi Shifts Tone over Nuclear Issue; Talks in U.S. Called Satisfactory Overall," *Washington Post*, June 19, 1985.

122. Subrahmanyam, "Indian Nuclear Policy," p. 41.

clear test ban as a first step toward broader disarmament measures.<sup>123</sup> Soon thereafter, he asked his advisers to come up with an alternative to the NPT, one that would be more in line with India's interests and that he could propose. Although these early efforts were not terribly fruitful, the prime minister's interest in multilateral nuclear diplomacy was subsequently reignited by Gorbachev's strong interest in this arena.<sup>124</sup> The Soviet leader's visit to New Delhi in November of 1986 closely followed the U.S.-Soviet summit at Reykjavík, where the superpowers had seemed to narrowly miss agreement on deep reductions in nuclear armament.<sup>125</sup> While in New Delhi, Gorbachev spent nearly ten hours in private talks with the Indian prime minister, after which the two leaders issued the "Delhi declaration on the principles of a nuclear-weapon-free and non-violent world."<sup>126</sup> The following October, shortly after Moscow and Washington had finalized the text of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the prime minister asked Muchkund Dubey, additional secretary for international organizations and South Asia at the Ministry of External Affairs, to devise a global plan for nuclear disarmament. Working with nuclear scientists and strategic analysts, Dubey developed Rajiv Gandhi's "Action Plan for Disarmament." The plan called for the elimination of nuclear weapons by 2010 in three distinct stages. In keeping with India's interests, the first two stages prioritized disarmament on the part of the declared nuclear powers, though the plan also called on other states not to acquire nuclear weapons while this process was under way.<sup>127</sup> Dubey later recalled that the prime minister was genuinely enthusiastic about the plan both publicly and in private.<sup>128</sup> The prime minister also consulted Romesh Bhandari, who served as foreign secretary from 1985 to 1986, about the proposal, and Bhandari recalls that Rajiv was seriously interested in it.<sup>129</sup> In June 1988, the prime minister personally launched the action plan with an address at the Third Special Session on Disarmament of the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>130</sup>

In the end, the action plan proved too ambitious. Fairly soon after the plan

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123. For the meeting's declaration, see *Disarmament: India's Initiatives* (New Delhi: Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 1988), pp. 90–94.

124. Muchkund Dubey, interview by author, New Delhi, July 31, 2003. Dubey's role in developing Rajiv Gandhi's nuclear diplomacy is discussed below.

125. On the summit, see Jack F. Matlock Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 215–236.

126. Duncan, *The Soviet Union and India*, pp. 35–39.

127. For the text of the action plan, see *Disarmament: India's Initiatives*, pp. 44–53.

128. Dubey, interview by author.

129. Bhandari, interview by author.

130. For the text of his remarks, see United Nations General Assembly, "Provisional Verbatim Re-

was unveiled, Rajiv Gandhi began to realize that it was not being taken as seriously as he had hoped it would be. The failure was a “bitter disappointment” to the prime minister.<sup>131</sup> In the wake of this setback, Rajiv’s enthusiasm for nuclear diplomacy began to wane in the fall of 1988. In November, India organized a conference designed to elicit support from nongovernmental organizations for the action plan. In a marked change to his earlier attitude, the prime minister now seemed “disinterested,” according to former advisers, and he did not bother to look at the publications his team prepared for the conference.<sup>132</sup>

By late 1988, therefore, India seemed to be running out of options. Soviet support had become unreliable, and Rajiv Gandhi’s nuclear diplomacy had reached a dead end. Under these circumstances, the Indian prime minister took a fresh look at India’s own nuclear program. According to Raj Chengappa, Rajiv reluctantly agreed in March 1989 to begin funding the development of a nuclear weapons capability. Chengappa’s account indicates that the prime minister’s decision was not simply a reaction to the fact that India had now produced significant quantities of weapons-grade plutonium, or to Pakistan’s growing nuclear capabilities. It also reflected worries about external support and a sense that India’s disarmament diplomacy was “being ignored.”<sup>133</sup> As a result of this decision, India came to possess an undeclared nuclear weapons capability in 1990, though the bombs it produced were few in number, were not fully assembled or operationally deployed, and were not yet supported by a reliable delivery system.<sup>134</sup> India had become a “de facto” nuclear weapons state.<sup>135</sup>

#### DIPLOMATIC DISAPPOINTMENTS AND INDIA’S NUCLEAR BREAKTHROUGH

India’s nuclear program continued to progress in the early 1990s. By the summer of 1994, India was believed to have enough weapons-grade fissile material for as many as twenty-five nuclear weapons, several of which could be assembled within days and delivered by aircraft.<sup>136</sup> India had also conducted suc-

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cord of the Fourteenth Meeting,” A/S-15/PV.14 (June 15, 1988), <http://www.ipfmlibrary.org/gan98.pdf>.

131. Subrahmanyam, “Indian Nuclear Policy,” p. 44.

132. Former Indian government official, interview by author, New Delhi, July 2003.

133. Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, p. 332.

134. Subrahmanyam, “Indian Nuclear Policy,” p. 44; Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb*, p. 293; and Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, p. 357. The Indian government also formed a secret committee in 1990 to address questions of nuclear command and control, but this work would not be completed until after the 1998 tests. See Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb*, pp. 313–314.

135. On the various terms used to describe India’s arsenal between 1990 and 1998, see Kapur, *Dangerous Deterrent*, p. 5 n. 16.

136. Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb*, p. 340.

cessful flight tests, dropping bombs with dummy warheads from Mirage 2000 fighters.<sup>137</sup> U.S. government specialists even speculated that India could now assemble a testable thermonuclear device.<sup>138</sup> Nonetheless, the Indian government had not yet decided whether to conduct another nuclear test, and making that decision was not a short-term priority for Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in the early 1990s. Relations between New Delhi and Beijing were improving at this time, with Rao visiting China in 1993 to sign agreements to reduce troop levels and respect cease-fire lines along the disputed border.<sup>139</sup> Although relations with Pakistan were more difficult, Pakistan's nuclear weapons were not believed to be assembled or operationally deployed, so it was unclear that a more assertive posture on India's part was needed.<sup>140</sup> Lastly, a nuclear test would have aroused ire from Washington just when Rao's government needed U.S. help to stabilize the Indian economy.<sup>141</sup>

Furthermore, there was no consensus within Rao's government at this time that further tests were essential for Indian security. This lack of consensus became clear with the start of negotiations on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1994. Within the Ministry of Defense and the Defense Research and Development Organization, there was considerable resistance to the idea of a test ban, which was seen as a threat to the viability of India's deterrent.<sup>142</sup> Perhaps more important, Naresh Chandra, who had served as defense minister under Rajiv Gandhi and later became principal secretary and senior adviser to Rao, believed that India could not afford to sign a CTBT without first conducting additional nuclear tests. Even so, Chandra supported India's involvement in the negotiations, because he believed that it would take years for this effort to produce a treaty, and because it was unclear whether the U.S. Senate would even ratify such an agreement.<sup>143</sup>

In contrast, J.N. Dixit, foreign secretary from 1991 to 1994, believed that

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137. Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, pp. 382–384.

138. Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, pp. 271–272, 349.

139. Lena Sun, "China, India Sign Accord to Ease Border Dispute; Other Agreements Seen Boosting Trade," *Washington Post*, September 8, 1993.

140. Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates testified in January 1992, for example, that the United States did not believe that India or Pakistan maintained assembled or deployed nuclear weapons, but that such weapons "could be assembled quickly." Quoted in Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 326. Note, however, that the reliability of Pakistan's weapons was apparently confirmed by a test conducted in China in 1990. See Thomas C. Reed and Danny B. Stillman, *The Nuclear Express: A Political History of the Bomb and Its Proliferation* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Zenith, 2009), pp. 252–253.

141. In fact, the United States supported an International Monetary Fund bridging loan for India in 1993 on the condition that India not press forward with its nuclear program at that time. Arundhati Ghose, interview by author, January 24, 2004.

142. Karnad, *Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security*, p. 379.

143. Naresh Chandra, interview by author, New Delhi, August 6, 2003.

India should be open to signing a CTBT, even if doing so precluded India from testing. As Dixit later recalled, "That [option] we were willing to foreclose as we had the basic technology."<sup>144</sup> Dixit's stance was an informed one: he had helped to organize an informal experts committee on nuclear technology issues, and he was briefed on its discussions.<sup>145</sup> Dixit's support for the test ban depended heavily on the content of the treaty, however; the CTBT would have to be universal and nondiscriminatory. More specifically, Dixit sought a treaty that would enhance India's security by reducing the gap between the declared nuclear powers and the rest of the world. While the foreign secretary was not certain that such a treaty could be concluded, he had been encouraged by conversations with U.S. officials, particularly UN representative Madeleine Albright during a meeting in New York. Dixit had also been encouraged by Washington's recognition by 1994 that nonproliferation initiatives focusing on South Asia, which India found objectionable, were unworkable.<sup>146</sup> He thus told U.S. officials that if the CTBT were drafted "within a framework of non-discriminatory provisions, you might be able to prevent India from overtly becoming a nuclear weapon power."<sup>147</sup>

India's participation in the early rounds of the CTBT negotiations was positive and constructive, and it appeared in 1994 that New Delhi was willing to sign a test ban treaty.<sup>148</sup> Developments in 1995, however, caused the Indian government to see the test ban talks in a very different light. In May, the NPT renewal conference extended the treaty indefinitely, rather than for twenty-five years as India had expected, even though the declared nuclear powers made essentially no commitment to disarm. Nuclear tests by China and France shortly thereafter further underlined the privileged status of the nuclear weapons states—and their determination to maintain this status.<sup>149</sup> In addition, Indian diplomats became aware that representatives of the declared nuclear powers were meeting privately on the sidelines of the CTBT negotiations, and

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144. J.N. Dixit, interview by author, New Delhi, August 4, 2003.

145. *Ibid.*

146. Initiatives focused on South Asia had little appeal in New Delhi given that they aimed to cap Indian and Pakistani nuclear capabilities in the short term, and eliminate them in the longer term, without comparable commitments at the global level. Although the Rao government could not simply reject these proposals, given its need for Washington's assistance with economic matters, Indian diplomats sought to ensure that they did not go anywhere. *Ibid.*

147. *Ibid.*

148. Dinshaw Mistry, "Domestic-International Linkages: India and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall 1998), pp. 27–29; and Dinshaw Mistry, "The Unrealized Promise of International Institutions: The Test Ban Treaty and India's Nuclear Breakout," *Security Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Summer 2003), pp. 129–130.

149. On the NPT renewal and the subsequent tests, see Arundhati Ghose, "Negotiating the CTBT: India's Security Concerns and Nuclear Disarmament," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Summer 1997), pp. 247–249; and Mistry, "Domestic-International Linkages," pp. 33–34.

it was suspected that they were discussing means of maintaining their arsenals in the aftermath of a test ban.<sup>150</sup> These developments undermined the notion that India would be able to enhance its security through the test ban negotiations. Rather than eroding the privileged position of the declared nuclear powers, it now appeared to Indian analysts that the CTBT would help to lock in a two-tiered nuclear regime—with India in the lower tier. As India's ambassador to the test ban talks, Arundhati Ghose, later put it, "We were convinced [by the second half of 1995] that we were being had or had been had, and that this was not going to work."<sup>151</sup> Nor was the government alone in this regard: the perception that the two-tiered nuclear regime was here to stay after mid-1995 mobilized considerable opposition to the CTBT throughout the Indian media.<sup>152</sup>

With hopes for a less discriminatory nuclear order fading, so did the rationale for restraint on India's part. New Delhi thus shifted course. On the diplomatic front, the Rao government toughened India's stance in the test ban negotiations to ensure that India would not become a second-class citizen in the emerging nuclear order. Shortly after the NPT renewal in May, India moved in the UN Disarmament Commission to reintroduce the 1988 action plan, which had situated the idea of a test ban within a process of disarmament on the part of the declared nuclear weapons states.<sup>153</sup> In September 1995, the prime minister convened an internal meeting on the test ban talks and instructed that India should insist on a clear link between the CTBT and progress toward disarmament.<sup>154</sup> In October, this position was vigorously presented by Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee at the UN and by Rao himself at the Nonaligned Summit in Cartagena. In January 1996, India also stiffened its position on the scope of the treaty, calling for a ban not only on nuclear explosions, but also on "nonexplosive" means of testing nuclear weapons.<sup>155</sup> In the end, these conditions would not be met, and India would reject the treaty in June 1996.<sup>156</sup>

On the military front, Rao prepared to move ahead with India's own weap-

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150. Ghose, interview by author.

151. *Ibid.*

152. Mistry, "The Unrealized Promise of International Institutions," pp. 140–143.

153. Ghose, "Negotiating the CTBT," p. 249.

154. Karnad, *Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security*, pp. 380–381. Karnad reports that Rao's meeting took place in October, but Arundhati Ghose recalls that it took place in September. Ghose, interview by author.

155. Ghose, "Negotiating the CTBT," pp. 252–253.

156. Besides criticizing the absence of a meaningful commitment to disarmament, Indian Ambassador Arundhati Ghose also criticized the scope of the treaty, which allowed computer simulations of nuclear explosions, and the entry-into-force provisions, which made it necessary for threshold states such as India to ratify the treaty before it became valid. For the text of Ghose's statement, see [http://www.fas.org/news/india/1996/ctbt\\_cd\\_june\\_20\\_96.htm](http://www.fas.org/news/india/1996/ctbt_cd_june_20_96.htm).

ons program. Preparations for new nuclear tests appear to have been under way by August 1995, and by the end of the year, India was on the brink of testing. Ultimately, Rao decided not to go forward with the tests. The prime minister was apparently concerned about the economic repercussions of moving ahead at this time, as well as the wisdom of testing so close to an election.<sup>157</sup> A series of short-lived successor governments were subsequently deterred by circumstantial considerations as well. When the BJP came to power in May 1996, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee made a preliminary decision to proceed with testing, only to suspend it pending the results of a confidence vote, which his government then lost.<sup>158</sup> Deve Gowda then came to power at the head of the United Front coalition, and he contemplated testing in early June but ultimately opted against it as well. Like Rao, Gowda seems to have been concerned about the economic fallout.<sup>159</sup> Inder Gujral subsequently succeeded Gowda as the United Front prime minister in April 1997. Gujral later recalled that he, too, weighed the question of testing but was deterred by the thought of the “punishment” that would be imposed.<sup>160</sup> In the end, the Indian government made the fateful decision to proceed with the tests after Vajpayee and the BJP returned to power in March 1998.<sup>161</sup>

It is tempting to attribute India’s nuclear breakthrough primarily to the BJP’s return to power. As other scholars have noted, the party’s more “oppositional” brand of nationalism, its long-standing pro-nuclear stance, and Vajpayee’s desire to consolidate his position as prime minister all militated in favor of testing.<sup>162</sup> More broadly, however, India’s disappointments on the diplomatic front had undermined the rationale for restraint even among India’s other parties. The point here is not to suggest that the Indian tests were a foregone conclusion after the NPT renewal and the CTBT setback; there was an economic rationale for restraint that Indian prime ministers took seriously, as the preceding narrative makes clear. Yet this was not a rationale that was likely to hold India back indefinitely. Rao came very close to testing in late 1995, notwithstanding the economic considerations—Chandra later characterized the decision as “touch and go.”<sup>163</sup> Even more important, those who resisted testing

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157. Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, pp. 392–394.

158. *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32; and Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb*, pp. 374–375.

159. Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb*, p. 376.

160. Inder Gujral, interview by author, New Delhi, January 25, 2004.

161. Note that Indian officials were not overly worried about the pressure that India’s tests would put on Pakistan. If Pakistan responded by conducting its own tests, this would reduce India’s international isolation. If Pakistan did not test, then it would appear comparatively weak. More generally, Indian analysts doubted that Pakistan had enough weapons-usable fissile material to compete with India’s testing program. See Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb*, p. 419.

162. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation*, pp. 171–203; and Bajpai, “The BJP and the Bomb,” pp. 25–67.

163. Chandra, interview by author.

at that time, particularly Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, apparently argued that Rao should defer the tests until the economy was more resilient, not that he should abandon the idea entirely.<sup>164</sup> In this context, India's tests in the wake of the CTBT talks should have come as no surprise to the outside world, even if the BJP had not come to power.

### *Conclusion*

This article has sought to explain India's shifting approach to nuclear weapons primarily as a function of its changing ability to ensure its security through nonmilitary means. Although India has faced nuclear-armed rivals since 1964, its leaders were able to rely on nonmilitary measures (particularly implicit superpower support) to protect their country for most of the Cold War, making the question of acquiring the bomb less pressing. Only when nonmilitary options became nonviable at the end of the Cold War did India's leaders choose to invest in an actual military capability. The waning Soviet commitment in the late 1980s, coupled with the failure of Rajiv Gandhi's diplomatic initiatives, led to the creation of India's de facto nuclear arsenal. Following the Cold War's end, India chose to develop a more overt capability, not simply because the BJP came to power, but also because it no longer enjoyed external backing and because its efforts to improve its security through diplomacy proved unsuccessful.

India's willingness to rely on implicit support from the United States and the Soviet Union for much of the Cold War is a striking finding. It is possible that these implicit commitments were credible to Indian leaders, despite their ambiguities, because the superpowers were so much more powerful than China, particularly in the nuclear sphere, and therefore relatively invulnerable to retaliation from Beijing.<sup>165</sup> Nonetheless, there is more to the story here. Indian leaders were also reassured by the perception that the superpowers had strong interests in deterring a Chinese nuclear attack on India. As L.K. Jha argued in 1967, neither Washington nor Moscow could afford to "stand by and watch" while China subjugated India.<sup>166</sup> While American support subsequently faded, Indira Gandhi remained optimistic that the Soviets continued to see India's security as important.

The notion that Indian leaders assessed the credibility of U.S. and Soviet commitments based on the ability of the superpowers to protect India and

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164. Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, p. 393. See also Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 370.

165. On the role of superior forces in making extended deterrence more credible, see Paul K. Huth, *Extended Deterrence and the Prevention of War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 74–77.

166. Jha, "Nuclear Policy," p. 2.



their interest in doing so resonates with recent research on how leaders assess the credibility of military threats.<sup>167</sup> It also accords with an important strand of the literature on extended deterrence, namely, the work on the “inherent credibility” of commitments.<sup>168</sup> In this view, the credibility of an extended deterrence commitment rests foremost on the interests that the protector has at stake in defending its protégé, as opposed to the techniques used to signal the commitment. To be sure, commitments that remain only implicit are particularly vulnerable if and when the protector’s interests are seen as changing. Indian confidence in U.S. support against China disappeared in July 1971, following Kissinger’s fateful meeting with Jha. Subsequently, India was quick to question the Soviet Union’s reliability as an ally in the 1980s, when it became clear that Mikhail Gorbachev was willing to sacrifice some goodwill in New Delhi as he wooed Beijing and Islamabad.

India’s repeated attempts to enhance its security through international institutions also warrants further discussion. As noted above, India’s failure in the NPT negotiations was a serious setback for New Delhi, one that left Indian leaders on the defensive and more cynical about disarmament. Two decades later, however, Rajiv Gandhi would once again pursue nuclear disarmament with serious interest. While Rajiv’s enthusiasm quickly faded, at least some Indian officials were intrigued by the possibility of a nuclear test ban treaty in the early 1990s. One could attribute this persistent interest in nuclear diplomacy to the economic constraints that India faced, which made investing in nuclear armament unappealing, or to India’s traditional leadership in this field. Another key element, however, was undoubtedly Indian leaders’ perceptions of superpower preferences at the end of the Cold War. Rajiv Gandhi’s meetings with Mikhail Gorbachev in late 1986, coupled with the signs of progress in superpower arms control, were an important impetus to the development of his action plan.<sup>169</sup> A few years later, J.N. Dixit’s interest in the CTBT was encouraged by interactions with American officials, who were eager to conclude a test ban as a means of facilitating NPT renewal. Ultimately, of course, these diplomatic forays ended in disappointment. At the time, however, Indian leaders had reasons for hoping that they might not.

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167. See Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

168. Vesna Danilovic, “The Sources of Threat Credibility in Extended Deterrence,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (June 2001), especially pp. 347–349. See also Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, “What Makes Deterrence Work? Cases from 1900 to 1980,” *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (July 1984), pp. 496–526.

169. See the earlier discussion on this point. Note also that Rajiv Gandhi’s speech presenting the action plan at the United Nations had highlighted recent progress in relations between the superpowers. See UN General Assembly, “Provisional Verbatim Record of the Fourteenth Meeting,” pp. 12–13.

In the wake of the CTBT negotiations, India has focused on the development of its own nuclear weapons capabilities. It has also made considerable progress in winning international acceptance of its nuclear weapons program, particularly with the conclusion of the landmark “nuclear deal” with the United States in 2008. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that India has completely abandoned nonmilitary approaches to nuclear security. Of course, India is unlikely to be interested in sheltering under another state’s nuclear umbrella in the years ahead, even if such protection were offered. Such an arrangement would entail strategic submission on India’s part, and New Delhi has already borne most of the costs of acquiring an overt nuclear arsenal in any case. Under the right conditions, however, India does seem willing to invest in new institutions in the nuclear sphere. Indeed, India now worries not only about nuclear-armed states, but also about nuclear terrorism, and it is clear that India’s nuclear arsenal offers little protection against this threat. As a result, while India remains wary of the CTBT, it is interested in new institutions that could reduce the likelihood of nuclear material falling into terrorist hands, such as the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty.<sup>170</sup> In short, notwithstanding India’s emergence as a nuclear power, India’s nuclear odyssey remains a developing story, one in which nonmilitary paths to security may still play an important role.

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170. On this point, see the remarks by Shyam Saran, special envoy of the Indian prime minister for nuclear issues and climate change, at “The U.S.-India Nuclear Agreement: Expectations and Consequences” conference, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., March 23, 2009, [http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/0323\\_india\\_nuclear.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/0323_india_nuclear.aspx).