FROM EXISTENTIAL TO MINIMUM DETERRENCE: EXPLAINING INDIA'S DECISION TO TEST

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India's decision to conduct nuclear tests and formally declare itself a nuclear weapon state marks an important historical transition. At the regional level in South Asia, India and Pakistan have moved from one nuclear plateau, characterized by a shadow capability, to another, where each country has a demonstrated nuclear capability. At the global regime level, for the first time since the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), two states have attempted to replicate the visibility of the nuclear force architecture and doctrines of the *de jure* nuclear weapon states (NWS).

This article seeks to clarify what has actually changed in Indian policy, then to explain the decision to make this change. The policy change is not best understood as a simple decision to "go nuclear." I argue that to a substantial extent, India had already become nuclear before the tests. Instead, the tests reflect a strategic change from existential to minimum deterrence, and a political effort to become accepted as a member of the nuclear club. First, India's tests have ended a regime of existential deterrence in South Asia, which had prevailed for much of this decade. Its central features were covert weaponization involving a small number of fission devices,[2] informal articulation of a no-first-use doctrine,[3] and the presence of only rudimentary organizational mechanisms to deal with nuclear war planning.[4] In a sharp break with this situation, India's Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has declared its intention to build openly a minimum deterrent,[5] formally articulated a nuclear doctrine of no first use,[6] and decided to institutionalize a national command and control authority.[7] Second, whereas earlier Indian policy emphasized global nuclear disarmament and rejected the nonproliferation regime as discriminatory, India has now signaled a willingness to put its historical nuclear disarmament agenda on the back burner and join the global nonproliferation regime in exchange for tacit recognition of its *de facto* nuclear status.[8]

What triggered this dramatic change in policy? Traditional analysis tends to gravitate towards security rationales to explain nuclear decisionmaking. However, this ar-

ticle argues that the policy changes described above are better explained by a combination of domestic factors, to be described shortly. At first glance, national security considerations would appear paramount in explaining India's decision. India is surrounded by two nuclear weapon states. First, India fought a brief border war and has an unsettled border dispute with China, a declared nuclear weapon state. Second, China has also contributed to the nuclearization of Pakistan, with whom India is engaged in a bitter counterinsurgency war over Kashmir. Indeed, the Indian government has pointed to a deteriorating regional security environment as the principal reason for crossing the nuclear threshold.

However, new information reviewed below shows that India made a discrete decision to weaponize its nuclear capability in 1988.[9] That decision was made precisely to provide India with a hedge against potential regional nuclear threats. This fact makes the security rationale for the tests less credible. Since the early 1990s, there has been no visible deterioration in India's security environment. While relations with Pakistan have remained cool, Sino-Indian relations, until the advent of the BJP, were on the mend. Hence, the citing of security rationales to justify validation of more sophisticated nuclear weapon designs smacks of an *ex post facto* rationalization.

The above arguments are not meant to dismiss India's security concerns. India has real conflicts with its neighbors. But security concerns were not behind the recent tests. India's decision suddenly to declare itself a nuclear weapon state was influenced more by the rise of a nuclear coalition led by the belligerent Bharatiya Janata Party. For both ideological and electoral reasons, the BJP is determined to build a macho national security state with nuclear weapons at its center. Ideologically, the BJP views the construction of such a state structure as essential to cope with India's internal crisis of governance as well as to sustain the myth of a great Indian nation stretching back in a civilizational continuum for nearly 5,000 years. At a subliminal level, nuclear status is considered necessary to exorcise the shameful past of India's colonial subjugation and fortify the national ego against a post-colonial denial by the West of India as a great power. Electorally, more than a short-term effort to boost its poll numbers is involved. Instead, having reached the limits of Hindu nationalism, the BJP hopes to use nuclear nationalism to distinguish itself in a fragmented political marketplace and establish itself as India's natural party of governance. The BJP has not been alone, however, in taking India down the nuclear path. For reasons of mutual advantage, the BJP and a pre-existing nuclear establishment have formed a larger coalition that has also shaped Indian policy. The BJP has allied itself with an increasingly vocal section of India's strategic community (known as the "bomb lobby") that has come to identify nuclear weapons as the ultimate index of state power in the international system. The BJP has also gained support from a civilian-scientific nuclear and defense establishment that hopes to use the tests and further weaponization to increase its organizational prestige, secure additional funding, and build stable coalitions with the political and military leadership in the country. These larger alliances facilitated the BJP's choice of nuclear weapons as an ideological and electoral tool.

This article begins by outlining the status of India's nuclear weapons program prior to the May 1998 tests. It shows that the tests only made an existing capability overt. The article next explains why security considerations do not account for the decision to go openly nuclear. Finally, it argues that domestic factors—a confluence of the ideologies of the BJP and the strategic community, electoral calculations, and bureaucratic coalition building—explain the decision to test.

INDIA'S NUCLEAR STATUS BEFORE MAY 1998

India's nuclear program was farther advanced in 1998 than many observers recognized. Since the early 1990s, analysts had described India's nuclear option through one of two frames. The first was the concept of "recessed deterrence," coined by the convenor of India's National Security Council, Jasjit Singh. Recessed deterrence meant that, although India had the capability to build nuclear weapons, it did not necessarily have a nuclear weapons program. The recessed capability need never surface because any state contemplating nuclear coercion against New Delhi would have to factor India's nuclear weapons potential into its strategic calculus.[10]

The second and more enduring description was George Perkovich's "non-weaponized deterrence." It characterized India and Pakistan as having a virtual nuclear capability. Both countries were believed to have all the components and the neces-

sary scientific and engineering expertise to assemble first-generation nuclear weapons. These weapons could be assembled at short notice. The actual gap between a virtual and real capability was never clear. It could vary from a few days to weeks or even months. But, there existed the assumption that neither India nor Pakistan had either assembled nuclear weapons or deployed nuclear delivery systems in the field.[11]

However, a wealth of details released after the May 1998 tests shows that India's nuclear posture fit neither of the above models.[12] Instead, India's nuclear posture was closer to what Avner Cohen and Benjamin Frankel have described as "nuclear opacity."[13] This, in India's case, was characterized by a low level of weaponization, insulation of the nuclear bureaucracy from other branches within the government, non-articulation of a formal doctrine, non-integration of nuclear weapons into the armed services, and no overt deployment of nuclear forces.

We now know that India's Bhaba Atomic Research Centre (BARC) began producing plutonium cores for nuclear devices soon after India's sole previous test, in 1974. The cores were manufactured on direct orders from the prime minister's office and were identical to the one used in the 1974 implosion device.[14] According to BARC's former Director, P.K. Iyengar, the only gap in India's nuclear weapons program occurred during the 1975-76 "Emergency" and for a short time afterwards (probably during the Janata regime). Once Raja Ramanna, leader of the team that carried out the 1974 test, was shifted to the Ministry of Defence, the nuclear weapons program was resumed with vigor.[15]

There is evidence that, in addition to work on fission and boosted-fission devices, India's program had for a long time sought to develop a hydrogen bomb. Indeed, the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), R. Chidambaram, recently told a television audience that India's nuclear weapons program had constantly been upgraded in the areas of "explosive ballistics, high-pressure physics, neutron kinetics, and physics of 'secondaries' or thermonuclear explosions."[16] A well-known 1985 West German intelligence report cited one agent's unconfirmed report that the brief from the Rajiv Gandhi government to BARC was to "continue working on the development of a nuclear fusion weapon." BARC was told to ensure that "within two months of a Pakistani test, the second Indian test should be carried out. Such an Indian test should simultaneously be used for the development of a fusion explosion."[17]

During the 1980s, India established an inertial confinement fusion (ICF) program to study the high-density physics associated with thermonuclear weapons. In 1989, then director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), William H. Webster, told the U.S. Senate that several other indicators, such as the purification of lithium, production of tritium, and the separation of lithium isotopes, pointed to India's interest in acquiring a thermonuclear weapons capability.[18] The critical breakthrough in thermonuclear weapon design, however, came only in the mid-1990s.[19] If India had tested in 1982-83, as it had once planned, it would have involved the validation of miniaturized fission and boosted-fission designs.[20]

In the early 1980s, India's nuclear weapons capability had several gaps. Although the scientists knew how to build nuclear bombs, the devices designed in the lab were not weaponized and had not been built to military specifications. Furthermore, India did not possess delivery vehicles—modified combat aircraft or ballistic missiles—to conduct nuclear missions. The nuclear device tested in 1974 was not an operational design for a weapon. It took about two years to assemble, was large and unwieldy, and could only be delivered using a transport aircraft.[21] The key policy shift apparently came in 1988. In fact, it was Rajiv Gandhi, according to the famous Indian defense analyst, K. Subrahmanyam, who finally authorized weaponization in 1988. Shortly afterwards, in 1990, a secret Indian nuclear arsenal came into existence—eight years before the current series of tests.[22]

Weaponization involved four steps. Nuclear devices were miniaturized to facilitate delivery from aircraft. Weapon designs were made rugged enough for field deployment and transport. Arming and safety systems were installed in weapon systems to prevent unauthorized or accidental detonations. And by 1989, the Indian Air Force had modified combat aircraft and perfected techniques for the aerial delivery of nuclear munitions.[23]

According to new information released by the Indian government, the process of weaponization was divided between BARC and the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO). BARC worked out concepts related to the

"long shelf life of the nuclear components" and the "optimization of the weight-to-yield ratio." It was also responsible for the fabrication of fissile material into suitable shapes. DRDO labs on the other hand worked on the components and systems integration needed to weaponize the nuclear devices to military specifications. Three other labs, according to the science advisor to the defense minister, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, contributed to the "arming, fusing, safety interlocks and flight-trials."[24]

Weaponization was accompanied by the establishment of a rudimentary command, control, and communications structure to manage possible nuclear war contingencies. In 1990, the former director of DRDO, V.S. Arunachalam, apparently told Harvard academic Stephen P. Rosen that the civilian leadership in New Delhi had fought a difficult struggle with the military over custody of nuclear weapons. That struggle was finally resolved in favor of civilians. Apparently, the military was told neither of the exact number of nuclear weapons that India might have, nor how they would be employed in a nuclear war. But the civilians drew up detailed instructions to deal with problems in the absence of a formally articulated nuclear doctrine. These instructions were given to a certain theater military commander with instructions to open them in the event of a nuclear war. Rosen has quoted Arunachalam as saying, "If New Delhi goes up in a mushroom cloud, a certain theatre commander will go to a safe, open his book, and begin reading at page one, paragraph one, and will act step by step on the basis of what he reads...."[25] Arunachalam later denied making that statement.[26] However, Science Advisor A.P.J. Abdul Kalam recently affirmed that New Delhi had indeed instituted certain measures to manage its incipient nuclear weapons capability. Kalam told a press conference that "we have a command and control system in a different form. Now we have to consolidate and establish it."[27]

Besides building air-deliverable fission weapons, BARC also focused attention on the design of miniaturized warheads for ballistic missiles. Concerns about BARC's interest in ballistic missile warheads caused the Bush administration in 1989 to deny the sale to India of a $1.2 million Combined Acceleration Vibration Climatic Test System (CAVCTS) with a force-level capability of 545 kg. Also know as the "shake and bake" system, a CAVCTS can be used to test re-entry vehicle components for their ability to withstand the heat and stress of missile flight.[28]

Nevertheless, India persisted in its quest to develop re-entry vehicle technology and, by the time the Congress government led by Narasimha Rao authorized tests in the winter of 1995, India had developed light and compact warheads for ballistic missiles.[29] Between 1989 and 1994, India conducted three flight-tests of its Agni intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM). Two of these were successful and validated the re-entry vehicle technology. Results showed that the composite carbon-carbon nose cone of the missile had ablated as designed. More significantly, the payload (which comprised the autopilot, a dummy warhead and its arming and fusing systems, and the inertial navigation system) survived the stress of re-entering the Earth's atmosphere.[30] Referring to the weaponization of warheads for ballistic missiles, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam admitted recently that India had "tested the size, weight, performance, and vibrations." He further acknowledged, "we have been doing this for quite some time."[31]

This evidence suggests that the May 1998 tests marked the "culmination" of India's weaponization program, not a decision to begin weaponization. If current reports attributing the weaponization decision to the Rajiv Gandhi government are true, then India actually exercised its nuclear "option" as early as 1988. Thus, the tests do not represent a decision to create a deterrent capability, since what could at least be labeled an existential deterrent was already in place. The real question, therefore, is why did India suddenly bring its existing nuclear capability out of the closet in the spring of 1998? I first consider possible security reasons, then argue that a combination of domestic factors provides a more convincing explanation. These domestic considerations include ideologically-driven beliefs about security, however, so security concerns are not entirely absent from the explanation.

THREATS TO NATIONAL SECURITY?

Since the late 1980s, all Indian prime ministers have had the option to explode nuclear weapons. But each prime minister decided against going through with field tests.[32] What then led Atal Behari Vajpayee and his BJP coalition to give up existential deterrence, based on an opaque but actual capability, in favor of minimal deterrence, based on demonstrating that capability? Tra-

ditional analysts look first to a country's international situation to explain major strategy decisions. Was there deterioration in India's external security environment? The short answer is no. Two previous prime ministers, Inder Kumar Gujral and Deve Gowda, avowed that there were no threats to the country's national security when the United Front government left office in March 1998.[33] Indeed, it could be argued that India's security environment has remained unchanged from the late 1980s and in some ways actually improved.

The current government has tried to justify the tests in security terms, however. Prime Minister Vajpayee, in his letter to U.S. President Bill Clinton, gave two reasons for India's decision to test. First, he referred to India's unsettled border dispute with China, a declared nuclear weapon state. Second, he highlighted the distrust that China had created by covertly aiding Pakistan's nuclear program.[34] Although there is some merit in both claims, the evidence will show that the BJP has exaggerated both, and there was no compelling security rationale for testing.

Admittedly, India's nuclear debate was triggered by its defeat at the hands of China in 1962, and China's subsequent nuclear capability first created the clamor for a matching nuclear response in New Delhi.[35] But, during the last three decades, Chinese nuclear behavior only undermined the rationale for overt Indian nuclear deployments. China restricted its capability to a minimum deterrent; it is the only nuclear weapon state (besides India) that remains committed to a doctrine of "no first use;" China has scrupulously refrained from engaging in any form of nuclear coercion against nuclear weapon or non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS). By signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), China has also accepted qualitative caps on its nuclear weapons program.

Of course, strategic behavior is not immutable, and nuclear advocates in India have always cited the classic dictum that it is capability and not the articulated intentions of adversaries that needs to be factored into security planning; intentions can change overnight.[36] This is true. Chinese nuclear deployments by their very existence pose an implicit threat to India's security. But India has had an existential nuclear capability since 1974 to deal with any potential threatening changes in Chinese nuclear behavior.

Although the border dispute has bedeviled Sino-Indian relations, both countries have agreed since the late 1980s to shelve the dispute and not hold their relations hostage to the boundary question. Since Rajiv Gandhi's 1989 visit to China, India and China have agreed to freeze the border dispute, abjure the use of "military capabilities" in bilateral relations, and implement mutual confidence-building measures along the border.[37] Relations, until the BJP came to power, had thawed sufficiently to permit the Indian army to withdraw some of its mountain divisions for internal security and training purposes, and even to restore the declining conventional edge against Pakistan.[38] China also terminated support to insurgencies in India's northeastern provinces. In November 1996, Chinese President Jiang Zemin publicly advised Pakistan to settle the Kashmir question with India bilaterally and amicably.[39] There was thus no increased "China threat" that could justify India's overt nuclearization.

On Vajpayee's second claim, the precise extent of Chinese assistance to Pakistan's nuclear weapons program is unclear. According to U.S. intelligence sources, in the 1980s, China helped Pakistan in operating its Kahuta uranium enrichment facility. China is also believed to have supplied Pakistan with a design for a 25 kt fission bomb. This design was apparently proven in China's fourth nuclear test at Lop Nor in 1966 and involved the detonation of a warhead carried across China on a ballistic missile.[40] During the 1990s, Chinese nuclear companies supplied Pakistan with ring magnets for its ultracentrifuges.[41]

However, China's role was not central to Pakistan's nuclear weapons development. As nuclear proliferation efforts by South Africa, South Korea, North Korea, and Taiwan indicate, the key to developing a nuclear weapons capability is not the ability to design crude first-generation fission devices; the real difficulty lies in access to sufficient quantities of fissile material.[42] Pakistan obtained the blueprints for uranium enrichment technology from Europe and then organized one of the most elaborate smuggling networks in history to import an entire enrichment plant from countries in Western Europe. It also acquired components for its nuclear devices from Europe and the United States and then replaced these procurement efforts with indigenous production. The delivery of Pakistan's first-generation fission devices is also probably centered on modified U.S. combat aircraft and not Chinese-supplied ballistic missiles.[43]

India's nuclear hawks have also exaggerated Pakistan's ballistic missile capability. Pakistan only became serious about building ballistic missiles in 1987, four years after India had launched its Integrated Guided Missile Development Program.[44] Pakistan's earliest ballistic missiles—the 80-km Hatf-1 and the 300-km Hatf-2—were failures. The missile engines failed to develop sufficient thrust; the missiles also lacked reliable onboard guidance systems and were grossly inaccurate.[45] According to a technical analysis done by S.Chandrashekar, an engineer in the Indian Space Research Organization, the Hatf-1 and 2 were not built with Chinese assistance; they were probably reverse-engineered from French Dauphin and Dragon sounding rockets.[46] It was these earlier failures that forced Pakistan to turn to China for assistance. China is believed to have supplied Pakistan with 30 to 50 300-km M-11 ballistic missiles.[47] Other forms of assistance include the supply of missile subsystems, technologies for propellant production, and inertial guidance systems.[48] According to U.S. intelligence sources, however, Pakistan primarily developed the 1,500 km-range Ghauri ballistic missile with North Korean assistance.[49]

Indian allegations miss several points entirely. First, Pakistan's ballistic missile program came as a response to India's own larger and more sophisticated ballistic missile program. Second, unlike the transfer of the medium-range CSS-2 ballistic missiles to Saudi Arabia, China supplied Pakistan only with short-range ballistic missiles and did nothing that would upset the balance of power on the subcontinent. When the Indian government raised the issue of nuclear and missile transfers to Pakistan at the highest levels, China explicitly stated that it was in the market for profit and offered to supply India with matching nuclear and missile technology.[50]

India's decision to test was not triggered by Pakistan's test-flight of the Ghauri in April 1998. The BJP made a previous decision to conduct nuclear tests as early as March 1996, when it briefly came to power. However, the BJP lasted only 13 days in office, while the scientists and technicians needed 30 days to complete preparations to test.[51] More significantly, the Indian government does not really seem to perceive nuclear threats at an operational military level. It has done little to create the specific capabilities that would be called for by a genuine need to bolster deterrence. To date, there has been no move to define the deployment plans for a nuclear force, to integrate nuclear weapons into the armed forces, to institutionalize a national command and control authority, or to establish formal procedures for actual nuclear weapons use.[52] India's diplomatic maneuvers also provide clues to its actual motivations in conducting the tests. In the months after the tests, Indian diplomacy did not focus on discussions with China or Pakistan about confidence-building or arms control measures to address the supposed threats to national security Indian leaders said required them to test.[53] Instead, New Delhi's chief efforts involved attaining recognition as a nuclear weapon state.

There was thus no significant change in India's threat environment that can account for India's move from an existential to a minimal deterrent posture. The BJP's decision to test was due to other reasons. A combination of four domestic factors account for the decision: the ideological worldview of the BJP, its domestic electoral compulsions, the institutional beliefs of India's strategic establishment, and the coalition imperatives of India's nuclear and military research and development bureaucracies. Subsequent sections discuss each of these factors in turn.

THE ROLE OF DOMESTIC FACTORS

Reasons of Ideology, State, and Identity

Ideologically, the BJP has two goals: (1) making Hindu revivalism the basis of nationhood and (2) constructing a masculine national security state as the symbol of national myth and achievement. These goals mark a radical break with India's Nehruvian past. It is hence useful to contrast the Nehruvian consensus, which until recently had been the basis for national policy, with the vision of the *Sangh Parivar* (Hindu brotherhood).[54]

Prime Minister Nehru's vision for India was modernistic. It recognized that India was a nation-state in the making and outlined a three-pronged approach to create a viable foundation for nationhood. First, it built on the foundations of the inherited British colonial state structure and established a powerful state through constitutional means. Second, it attempted national unity through the creation of a unified market. And finally, it sought to create an emotional basis for nationhood in India's plural and secular traditions and through the institutionalization of democracy. Inclusive nationalism

became the central theme and legacy of the Nehruvian era.[55]

During the last five decades, several factors have eroded the Nehruvian consensus in Indian politics. One major factor is the decay in the civil institutions of the state. From the late 1960s onward, the spread of democratic ideas and consciousness led to greater social and political mobilization. This resulted in the emergence of "political demand groups" that placed increasing demands on the resources of the state. In response, leaders at both the state and central government levels centralized and personalized power. They created top-heavy political institutions where political, economic, and administrative favors came to be dispensed through a network of politically loyal appointees. This process undermined the civil institutions of the state—police, bureaucracy, and judiciary—with two negative consequences.

First, the state in India now finds itself unable to cope with the social demands of a developing society. Second, the state has become increasingly unable to resolve conflicts in civil society. This has led to a gradual "militarization" of conflicts within India, which have often mutated into armed insurgencies. Delegitimization of the state has followed swiftly and, according to Atul Kohli, India is now faced with the amazing paradox of an overcentralized state apparatus that is afflicted by a "crisis of governance."[56]

A second important element in the decline of the Nehruvian consensus is the fact that India's "mixed economy" has been unable to replicate Asia's economic miracle. The key feature of Nehru's "mixed economic" model was import substitution. Tariff walls were erected to allow a level playing field for Indian capital. The state also intervened directly in the economy to foster development and economic growth. But this approach failed. Local private capital took advantage of tariff barriers to establish domestic monopolies. On the other hand, the government-financed public sector, plagued by inefficiency and corruption, showed little by way of growth or capital generation. These twin processes resulted in what economists deride as India's "Hindu rate of growth."[57]

Finally, political mobilization along regional, sectarian, and caste identities has thrown a wrench into the state's plans to build a more homogeneous brand of nationalism. This has combined with India's political, administrative, and economic failures to produce a collective sense of national failure. Frustration stemming from this sense of national failure has in turn led to a crisis of self-esteem and confidence and provided a fertile ground for the votaries of an exclusivist brand of Hindu nationalism.

Hindu nationalism draws its roots from a century of Hindu reform movements that first arose in the 19th century in response to British colonialism. These Hindu revival movements constructed the notion of a civilizational Indian nation based on the myth of an unbroken brahamanic tradition, language, and symbols—a nation that was independent of the British colonial state structure.[58] The BJP, as the dominant political arm of the Hindu right, draws on this cultural nationalism. However, it has turned it into an exclusionary and atavistic notion of nationhood, by juxtaposing India's Hindu majority against other religious minorities. Not only does it hope to convert India's Hindu majority into "Hindu majoritarianism," or a system that privileges Hindus, it also seeks to remold the secular and laissez faire characteristics of Hinduism into a more doctrinaire version.[59]

At a subliminal level, the Hindu right is driven by historical memories of a socially divided, technologically inferior, and organizationally weak India that for centuries was the final destination for invading hordes. It now seeks to pursue a "proactive" policy to prevent such a scenario from recurring in the future. Thus, it has sought to rebuild the eroded institutions of the state and restore the centrality of the state in the political life of the Indian nation. As the eminent Indian sociologist Arvind Das remarked in a different context, in a perverse neo-Hegelian sense, the reconstruction of the state has almost been raised to an art form.[60] Domestically, the goal of the *Sangh Parivar* is to build a grand, powerful, and masculine national security state that will emerge as the symbol of national mythology and the converging point of high science, national identity, and achievement.[61]

In foreign affairs, Hindu nationalism aims to dispense with the old Nehruvian vision of moral, legalistic, and universal values in international relations. The goal is to replace it with a hardboiled vision of *realpolitik* in which India aggressively pursues its national interests. As the deputy chairman of India's Planning Commission, Jaswant Singh, remarked in the wake of the nuclear tests, "the transition has been from the moralistic to the realistic. It is one-sixth of humanity seeking

its rightful place in the sun of the calculus of the great powers."[62] Nuclear weapons are very attractive in this worldview. They help sustain the mythology of a great Indian nation and build a fortified self-image against what is perceived as post-colonial denial by the imperial West of India's emergence as a great power in the international system.

Electoral Concerns

Besides its ideological attraction, nuclear nationalism has also permitted the BJP to position itself strategically for mid-term elections with the goal of fashioning a winning majority in Parliament. India's domestic political scene, since the mid-1980s, has been characterized by political fragmentation and the decline of the dominant Congress party system. Since 1989, this has resulted in the emergence of weak minority governments or governments with razor thin majorities in Parliament. The larger national parties have become dependent on smaller regional allies. In this political scenario, although the BJP has emerged as the largest party in Parliament, it has not gathered enough momentum to establish itself as India's natural party of governance.[63]

The BJP made its greatest political gains between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. It used the plank of Hindu nationalism to distinguish itself in the political market place and increase its polling percentage from a mere seven percent in 1984 to 21 percent by the 1996 elections.[64] Finally, in the 1998 elections, the BJP increased its voting share to about 25 percent with the help of regional allies. Despite emerging as the largest party in Parliament, the BJP is hampered on several fronts. Its electoral base is limited to north, northwestern, western, and central India. Electoral gains in the southern and eastern parts of the country have come by teaming up with regional allies. As a consequence, the BJP is 70 seats short of a working majority in Parliament and depends on the support of a fragile 13-party coalition to remain in power.[65]

The absence of a parliamentary majority has prevented the BJP from implementing the more controversial items on its right-wing agenda. These include changing the special status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir through the repeal of Article 370 in the constitution, the introduction of a uniform civil code as a way to end the perceived preferential treatment of minorities, and the construction of a grand Ram temple on the ruins of a vandalized mosque in Ayodhya. Any attempts to translate these planks into actual policy would most likely lead to sharp cracks in the 13-party coalition and the subsequent collapse of the BJP government. Even if this did not occur, the social and political turmoil that would probably result would hurt the party's support among its upper-caste, middle- and upper-middle class electoral base.[66]

Thus, the BJP is on the horns of a political dilemma. It has risen to power by riding the tiger of Hindu nationalism. However, political mobilization along religious lines has reached its natural limits. Electoral compulsions and the need to maintain alliances with coalition partners have forced the BJP to moderate its aggressive religious stance. Inherent in this approach, however, is the risk of reducing the BJP's distinguishing ideological profile in the political marketplace. Hence, nuclear nationalism has replaced religious nationalism as the BJP's marketing brand in domestic politics.[67] This is evident in the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad*'s (World Hindu Council's) proposal to build a temple dedicated to "Shakti" (divine energy) at the nuclear test site at Pokhran.[68] By proposing to ferry radioactive sands around the BJP-ruled state of Rajasthan, it has also sought to make a fetish out of India's nuclear status. Addressing a public meeting in the aftermath of the tests, India's home minister, L.K. Advani, admitted that the nuclear tests had been the BJP's sole achievement in its first 100 days in power.[69]

Since the late 1960s, Indian political parties have won national elections on the strength of unusual circumstances that produced huge electoral swings in their favor, a process commentators describe as the "wave" phenomenon in Indian politics. For example, Indira Gandhi won the 1971 elections by propounding the slogan of *Garibi Hatao* (Away with Poverty). She later consolidated power by calling elections in the wake of India's triumph in the 1971 Bangladesh War. In 1977, the Janata coalition rode to power on a wave of popular anger against the Emergency. Once again, in 1985, the Congress under Rajiv Gandhi received its largest mandate in history by reaping a "sympathy wave" generated by Indira Gandhi's assassination.[70] Following this logic, the BJP saw nuclear detonations in part as a way to generate nationalist hysteria and trigger a similar wave of support from the Indian masses. Opinion polls immediately afterward showed that more than 90 percent of Indians approved the tests.[71] The BJP has thus positioned itself for a

mid-term election with the hope that nuclear nationalism will translate into a parliamentary majority, facilitate the implementation of its radical "Hindutva" agenda, and finally allow it to replace the Congress as India's natural party of governance.[72]

Prevailing Institutional Beliefs

However, the BJP did not develop on its own the ideas about the benefits of nuclear status that inform its nuclear nationalism. Instead, the BJP's ideological and electoral compulsions have led it to draw on prevailing institutional beliefs within India's security establishment. This establishment, comprising sections of the civilian bureaucracy, think tanks, media, and armed forces, views nuclear weapons as an essential element of great power status. India's strategic elite regards nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and other high-tech weaponry as symbols of modernity and technological excellence that place India on par with the most advanced states in the world. Ironically, this reflects India's quest for modernization, an effort that has led India's state and political managers to try to reproduce Western paradigms of development and national security.[73] Thus, for example, India's strategic community has attempted to reproduce Western norms of rationality and planning in decisionmaking. The BJP's institution of a National Security Council is an excellent example of this cultural isomorphism.

More ominously, however, influential sections of the strategic community have come to regard nuclear weapons as symbols of a higher strategic culture that they ascribe to the West. The author recalls one article in which a prominent strategic analyst compared nuclear weapons to classical music. According to him, just as classical music was an expression of higher culture, nuclear weapons were symbolic of a higher strategic culture.[74] India therefore needed nuclear weapons to consolidate its strategic profile as the sixth pole in a hexagon of powers in the post-Cold War polycentric world order.[75]

During the 1990s, New Delhi's nuclear priesthood became concerned that India could not keep its nuclear option open indefinitely. First, nuclear design teams could not be kept on stand-by forever. Scientists would move elsewhere or retire. Hence, weapon designs needed validation so that successive generations of scientists could build on the work of their predecessors. Second, by not formally exercising the option, India invited outside pressure to close the option, on the assumption that the Indian government did not regard security threats as acute. Hence, some felt the need to exercise the option formally purely for the sake of doing so.[76] Third, there was fast emerging a global norm against any further horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons. After the NPT's indefinite extension in 1995, and adoption of the CTBT in 1996, the strategic community began to argue that India needed to conduct tests and validate its more sophisticated nuclear weapon designs before the political window of opportunity closed forever.[77]

Those lobbying for tests also argued that nuclear ambiguity had begun to yield diminishing returns. India's tacit nuclear restraint had gone unappreciated. After 1974, India refrained from conducting any further tests. Under U.S. pressure, the Agni IRBM program was capped. Similarly the short-range ballistic missile, Prithvi, was "inducted" into the armed forces but never formally deployed. More significantly, and unlike China and North Korea, India refrained from the export of technologies of mass destruction. Nevertheless, the governors of the nuclear nonproliferation regime refused to ease sanctions against India's civil nuclear program and insisted on "full-scope safeguards." India was also denied technologies for its civilian space program.[78] The example of China was very much on the bomb lobby's mind. Although China had repeatedly violated its nonproliferation commitments, the United States offered Beijing technology sweeteners as incentives to secure its adherence with technology denial regimes.[79] Thus, it was felt that India needed to conduct nuclear tests to negotiate a grand nuclear bargain with the United States. Under such a bargain, India would accept restraints on its weapons program in return for tacit recognition of its nuclear status and the lifting of technology curbs.[80]

The perception also gained ground in New Delhi that India's moralistic positions and idealistic proposals for time-bound nuclear disarmament were non-starters.[81] The process of global nuclear disarmament would be a gradual one. Nuclear bargaining would first be determined by the equation among the nuclear weapon states themselves, which would then bring in the states that are formally part of the nuclear proliferation regime. Only then would India's views be taken into account.[82] India's purist position had become a hindrance to its influ-

ence in a world that had tacitly come to favor arms control over time-bound nuclear disarmament. Nuclear testing and the formal declaration of nuclear status were thus viewed as legitimate mechanisms to increase India's bargaining leverage and secure a better deal as part of any global nuclear bargain.[83]

Many of these observations—such as the reduced prospects for India's existing diplomatic positions and the closing window of opportunity to test—were reasonable. But they depended on underlying assumptions that nuclear weapons are a unique key to prestige and influence in international politics, and only by brandishing them openly can a state attain great power status. These assumptions are at least questionable and were not shared by all of India's leading political parties. They thus reflect an ideological view within the security community that military power is more valuable than improved political or trading relations or moral consistency. The BJP benefited from the fact that such ideas about the importance of nuclear weapons and the reasons for testing had already been articulated and were well developed when it took office. This made it both more likely and easier for the BJP to turn to the nuclear option. It would find both allies and a ready-made rationale for overturning the previous Nehruvian approach.

Bureaucratic Pressures

Finally, the tests also reflect recognition of the benefits of mutual support between the BJP and India's nuclear and military research and development bureaucracies. India's nuclear establishment has a strong vested interest in a nuclear weapons program because the consensus that sustained the civil nuclear program from the 1950s to the 1970s has collapsed. Nuclear energy during the 1960s and early 1970s was considered the wave of the future. It was then believed that, just as steam and electricity had powered the industrial revolution in the West, nuclear power would serve as the engine of growth in energy-deficient India. Ambitious plans were drawn up for nuclear power generation. Huge agro-industrial complexes were planned around nuclear power plants.[84]

But the civil nuclear power sector failed. Mounting cost-overruns, technical bottlenecks, international sanctions, safety problems, and radiation hazards destroyed the consensus that once made nuclear power the mythical symbol of Indian science. With the loss of international collaboration as a result of the 1974 test, India's nuclear power program mutated into a white elephant. Nuclear energy was supposed to generate 10,000 megawatts (MW) of power by 1980. Today, it generates 1,800 MW—a mere two percent of the country's electricity.[85]

India's civil nuclear program was to have unfolded in three stages, culminating in reactors fueled by Uranium-233 and thorium.[86] But the dismal performance of the nuclear sector and stagnation of the nuclear power industry worldwide led to a situation where governments from 1984 onwards refused to fund the program beyond its first stage.[87] In 1992-97, instead of the proposed Eight Year Plan outlays of 140 billion rupees, actual expenditures were only six billion rupees.[88] The civilian atomic energy sector was thus unable to build strong alliances with either electrical utilities or agro-industrial conglomerates. Its sole purpose became the production of unsafeguarded fissile material.

In the military nuclear sector, weaponization of BARC's nuclear weapon designs has also provided DRDO an opportunity to bolster its flagging prestige, stem demoralization within its ranks, and win support from the political leadership for big-budget defense research and development (R&D) projects. According to Eric Arnett, DRDO has traditionally been weak in advanced system design and integration. Hence, although DRDO has had limited success, it has been unable to move from "limited import substitution to indigenous innovation."[89] DRDO's high-profile projects, such as the Arjun Main Battle Tank (MBT), Light Combat Aircraft (LCA), and the Advanced Technology Vehicle (nuclear submarine) are years behind schedule. These organizational failures have prevented the coalescing of stable alliances between India's premier military research and development agency and the armed services, and the latter have traditionally preferred imports over indigenous defense products.

Ambitious coalition builders in the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) and DRDO have therefore used weaponization and the tests as props to build and sustain coalitions with the political leadership and the military bureaucracy. Budgets for both agencies have increased sharply and India's big-ticket conventional R&D programs and the civil nuclear sector will now probably ride piggyback on a weaponization program.[90] Because of the other goals tests would serve, therefore, sections of the security community and sci-

entific bureaucracy eagerly lobbied for tests, when they might otherwise have kept their distance from the BJP and its anti-modernist platform.

CONCLUSION

It is thus clear that the BJP authorized a series of tests for which there was no compelling strategic necessity. The party came into office determined to carry out the tests. It did not consult Parliament nor conduct a promised strategic defense review before reversing the national consensus on maintaining nuclear ambiguity. The Hindu-right in India has advocated nuclearization since 1951, 13 years before China acquired nuclear weapons.[91] Now, the holy cow of national security has been invoked to mask the ideological and electoral interests of the ruling coalition, as well as the vested interests of India's nuclear and defense civilian-scientific establishment.

Authorization of the tests and the proclamation of India's nuclear status, although inter-related, must be distinguished for purposes of analysis. On the one hand, the timing of the Indian tests was determined primarily by the electoral compulsions of a politically shaky coalition in New Delhi; it was also influenced by arguments from India's "bomb lobby," which feared that a growing international norm against horizontal proliferation might foreclose India's option to test forever. On the other hand, India's decision to declare itself a nuclear weapon state has more to do with the Hindu-right's ideological motivations and the changing self-perceptions of India's strategic elite, in their search for a separate Indian national identity.

In their quest for modernization, India's state and political managers have faithfully reproduced Western norms and culture in the area of national security. In doing so, they have come to regard a nuclear deterrent as the ultimate measure of national power and a symbol of modernity, scientific excellence, technological prowess, and a higher strategic culture. Nuclear weapons, they hope, will bolster India's prestige and consolidate its profile as an emerging great power in the international system.

At the core of India's decision, therefore, is the socialization of its ruling elite into a cultural belief that nuclear weapons and status constitute legitimate means to enhance the domestic prestige of the state and expand its power in the international system. Ironically, such beliefs are themselves the expression of a colonized mindset that lacks self-esteem and a nation-state that suffers from a historical inferiority complex.

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