

CHINA'S RESPONSE TO THE INDIAN NUCLEAR TEST

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INTRODUCTION

India is not internationally recognized as a nuclear-weapons state under the terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), even though it has acquired nuclear weapons. In 1974, India detonated its first plutonium device, which it called a “peaceful nuclear explosive”; in 1998, it tested its first nuclear weapons. Since 1998, both its nuclear program and missile arsenal have undergone impressive developments. Because India has not signed the NPT, however, its capability to produce nuclear weapons does not accord it international recognition as a nuclear-weapons state.

India's status as an unofficial nuclear-weapons state is beginning to raise questions due to India's increasing power and the changing geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific region as a whole. From a geopolitical point of view, if India is rising to become a great power, its existence outside the NPT regime will continue to marginalize it vis-à-vis the international nuclear regime. This situation will increase the power asymmetry between India and China, which might be detrimental to U.S. efforts toward rebalancing in Asia.

The Chinese government was deeply shocked by the Indian nuclear tests and thereby expresses its strong condemnation. China voiced its concern by pointing out that the explosions ran against the international trend and were detrimental to the peace and stability of the South Asian region.¹ Further, the official media like People's Daily reported: Indian today conducted three underground nuclear tests in the Pokharan area of Rajasthan. Twenty-four years ago, in May 1974, India carried out its nuclear explosion at

the same location. According to reports, India's major opposition parties, the Congress and the United Front, and other parties have expressed support for this nuclear tests.²

China's initial reaction to the Indian tests was somewhat measured; however, China's reaction and condemnation to India was strongest when Indian Prime Minister, A.B. Vajpayee's letter to the US President, Bill Clinton, appeared in the media citing "China threat" in defence of India's nuclear tests. Vajpayee had cited "deteriorating security environment" in India's vicinity is a matter of concern for India as in China, India had an "overt nuclear weapons state" on its borders which was "materially helping another neighbour" of India to become a covert nuclear weapon state. This in the words of Vajpayee created "an atmosphere of distrust" and remains so due to the unsettled border problem. The letter was leaked and appeared in the New York Times on May 13, 1998 itself.³ Now, partly bitten by Indian Defence Minister, George Fernandes's China bashing and more so by Vajpayee's letter to the US President, China's reaction to the second series of nuclear explosions of May 13 was harsh. It accused that the Indian detonations reflected an "outrageous contempt for the common will of the international community", and further accused India of seeking "hegemony in South Asia". China also called on the international community that it should adopt a common position in strongly demanding India to immediately stop its nuclear development program.⁴

Undoubtedly Indian nuclear tests of May 1998 and subsequent strong Chinese response both caused 'major set back' in bilateral relations. China had carried out an anti-India campaign world wide demanding New Delhi surrender its nuclear option and unconditionally sign non-proliferation treaties like the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). This had vitiated Sino-Indian ties with many other official interactions along being either postponed or delayed. Moreover the few interactions that held were also not as friendly as they could have been.⁵ In short there was brief breakdown in Sino-Indian negotiations in the year 1998.

Despite the negative atmosphere, India continued the policy of engagement and went ahead with *the sixth meeting of Sino-Indian Expert Group* was held at Beijing on June 8-9, 1998. The meeting of India-China expert group was eclipsed by Indian nuclear test (May

1998) therefore, no concrete progress could be made. The frequent emphasis on early solutions of boundary issue from India's side was not liked by Chinese officials. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman expressed his reaction that the Indian government's statements against China had infringed the normal peace process between India and China. Moreover, he suggested that India should refrain from giving negative perceptual remarks against China so that the bilateral relations might be strengthened on the track of normalcy and harmony.⁶

India on the other hand, kept on trying to fix a date for the Joint Working Group meeting throughout the second half of the year but China did not agree.⁷ The joint mechanisms failed to materialise in 1998 and there was break-down in the process of Sino-Indian negotiations despite India's sincere efforts to continue with it. The summer of 1998 witnessed the lowest ebb of Sino-Indian bilateral relations after a long period of time.

The Chinese ambassador, Zhou Gang in India on July 9, 1998, in an interview to The Hindu reiterated that China was committed to "develop constructive partnership with India oriented towards the 21st century." Zhou Gang also emphasized that India immediately stop some baseless allegations towards China and give responsible explanation to anti-China remarks made by some people. The first opportunity for rapprochement came in July 1998 in Manila during the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum meeting from July 25-28. After May nuclear detonations this was first major encounter of India with the world leaders.

Jaswant Singh, India's External Affairs Minister explained to the forum that nuclear tests were conducted out of India's security concerns. He refrained from citing China as a threat. During the conference Jaswant Singh also had a meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Mr. Tang Jiaxuan. This was the highest-level contact both countries had made since the May 1998 nuclear explosions.⁸

In fact throughout the year India showed it willingness to continue the policy of engagement with China and attended meetings of various bilateral mechanisms. Despite refusal from Chinese side, India made 'consistent overturns' and 'conciliatory statements' to assuage perceived Chinese ruffled feeling in a bid to reduce bilateral tensions. The

Prime Minister Vajpayee in a concrete statement to Parliament in September 1998, emphasised ‘the fundamental Indian desire to have friendly relations with China’ and ‘a satisfactory solution to the border dispute through negotiation.’⁹ Another step taken in September was to instruct diplomats to ‘avoid any mentions of China in their dealings with the other four permanent powers.’¹⁰ Furthermore, the statement in October 1998 by the Chief of the Indo-Tibetan Border police that the Chinese were amassing troops along the LAC was also ‘termed as inaccurate’ by the government of India.¹¹ Carrying this further forward, in October, Brajesh Mishra, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister stated that India did not see China as “an enemy” and that it would like to solve all problems through substantive dialogue.¹² Finally in December 1998 when Jaswant Singh was appointed as India’s new Foreign Minister, the Chinese counterpart, Tang Jiaxuan sent a congratulatory message to him. Jaswant Singh stated that China should help India “untie the knot” through frequent consultation.¹³ Thus atleast by the year end both sides showed willingness in some ways to restart engagement policy. India’s diplomatic relations with China remained estranged for 9 months. By February 1999, both appeared to be trying to reconcile their differences.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

China does not believe that the common story that India developed its nuclear weapons in response to China’s nuclear program is complete without also including India’s own aspiration to become a great power as a major motivation for the Indian nuclear weapons program. India’s domestic politics has always played an important role in determining its interactions in foreign affairs, especially with Pakistan and the United States.

China still does not regard India as a legal nuclear-weapons state. At the same time, China does not regard India as a security threat. China has identified a major gap in military technology between India and itself; and because of this gap, China does not believe that India has the capability to threaten it. Further, China’s assessment of India’s thresholds for fighting a war suggests that India also has no intention to threaten China. For reasons of both reciprocity and its own security, China does not think it needs to respond to India’s nuclear program either militarily or diplomatically.

Based on the above dynamics, the nuclear future of the Asia-Pacific region will be much more complicated than past and present capabilities and intentions suggest. In the multidimensional threat scenario that is likely to arise in the future, the traditionally dominant nuclear logic of flexible response and counterforce targeting might become less useful. Instead, a crisis-management-oriented, counter-deficit-targeted logic might be more constructive for developing a framework of nuclear cooperation and de-escalation.

A joint international effort is needed to disconnect India's great power aspirations from its nuclear weapons development. India needs much more than military capability to become a great power. It also needs to cultivate economic strength and flexibility and to focus on sustainable development in order to create the capacity necessary to become a great power and act as a great power.

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