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**The Indian Nuclear Test:  
A Case Study in Political Hindsight Bias**

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## Hindsight Bias in Political Analysis

History is frequently analyzed as a series of discrete events, but for the actors on the historical stage, it is lived as a complex continuum. At any given moment, the past appears relatively clear even as the future remains uncertain. Only later, when the march of time has turned the possible into the actual, may a person look back and discern the influences and impulses that caused a particular historical event to have occurred. At that point, all of the hypothetical events that existed as possibilities before the fact are rendered irrelevant. They simply did not take place, and whatever chain of future events might have led onward from them has been extinguished.

The psychological literature describes a phenomenon that relates directly to this discussion. It has been termed “hindsight bias,” and is defined as “the tendency of people to falsely believe that they would have predicted the outcome of an event once the outcome is known.”<sup>1</sup> Considerable psychological research has been done on this effect, which comes into play particularly when “the focal event has well-defined alternative outcomes, when the outcome has emotional or moral significance, and when the event is subject to

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<sup>1</sup> Stahlberg, Dagmar; Sczesny, Sabine; and Schwarz, Stefan. “Exculpating Victims and the Reversal of Hindsight Bias,” *Sonderforschungsbereich 504*, Universität Mannheim, No. 99-70, p. 1.

imaginative consideration before its outcome is known.”<sup>2</sup> Political decision-makers frequently address focal events that meet these criteria, making it ripe to consider how hindsight bias might affect policymaking.

The key issue in this discussion is “prediction,” because the nature of political action requires an ability to forecast future events. Political leaders are not content to live passively in the historical continuum. It is their objective to shape it and to influence it through their actions. This might be difficult enough in a world where the governing parameters were static, but such a “*ceteris paribus*” world does not exist. Instead, policymakers must contend with vast numbers of other political actors, all of them simultaneously trying to exert their influence in a way that will benefit them or their constituents. A particular political leader, to advance his or her agenda, must accurately analyze the current historical situation, but this alone is not enough. To be successful, the leader must also be able to forecast the future historical environment in which today’s decisions will have an impact. That environment will be determined by the policymaker’s own actions and by the actions of others. Leaders better able to predict the actions of others can more accurately envision that future environment, and are likely to be far more effective in pursuing policies beneficial to their interests.

Because the political arena is so dynamic, absolute prediction is almost never possible. The best that policymakers can do is to make probabilistic predictions, and then take action based on the assessed likelihood of a given outcome. After the fact, however, the actual outcome that has occurred has a probability of one hundred percent and all other

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<sup>2</sup> Hawkins, Scott A. and Hastie, Reid. “Hindsight Biased Judgements of Past Events After the Outcomes are Known,” *Psychological Bulletin*, May 1990, Vol. 107, No.3. This article presents a good overview of the literature on this phenomenon, starting from the first detailed description of it by B. Fischhoff in 1975.



outcomes have a probability of zero. Hindsight bias occurs when an observer assesses – after the fact – that the probabilities were far stronger in favor of the actual outcome than may have reasonably been estimated beforehand. This paper distinguishes “political hindsight bias” from the more general phenomenon identified in the psychological literature in two ways. The first is simply that the bias takes place in the political arena, but the second arises because political hindsight bias has an additional motivational mechanism.<sup>3</sup>

This special mechanism is the political agenda of the observer and of the observer’s audience. This is most apparent when the observer is in the political opposition, causing a propensity to assess the policymaker’s judgment negatively. When political hindsight bias is a factor in assessing a perceived policy failure, the political opponents of that policy will proclaim that the causes of the failure were predictable in advance. The psychology of hindsight bias makes this attack very persuasive, sometimes even to the original proponents of the policy in question. In many cases, the political opponents may themselves be unaware of this motivational mechanism, although political hindsight bias can also be manipulated cynically to deliberately undermine an opponent.

This analysis highlights the difficulty of assessing the quality of policymaking. In a particular case, results alone may be the only measure that matters. For example, if I invest all of my savings in bonds and my neighbor invests all of hers in lottery tickets, I can persuasively claim that she is making a suboptimal choice based on the low probability of hitting the jackpot. Nonetheless, if by chance she hits it, history will judge her to have

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<sup>3</sup> The other causative mechanisms leading to hindsight bias, as described by Hawkins and Hastie, are “...that outcome information affects the selection of evidence to make a judgment, the evidence evaluation, the manner in which evidence is integrated, or the response generation process.” p. 311.

been far more successful than I. Most policymakers, however, want to achieve repeated success over a period of time. For this a one-time jackpot will not suffice; a process is necessary that will forecast probabilities with some accuracy. An objective assessment of the evidence is required to identify when good judgment leads to a mistaken prediction and bad judgment leads to a correct one. Following this assessment, it may be reasonable to criticize some positive outcomes and forgive some negative ones. In order to do this, political hindsight bias must be eliminated, and the probabilities of different outcomes examined from the perspective of before-the-fact possibilities, not from after-the-fact certainties.

This background frames the question under consideration in the following case study. When India tested its nuclear weapons in 1998, the Clinton Administration was caught off guard by an event it had not predicted. After the fact, many pundits claimed that the event was entirely predictable, and that flawed analysis by the U.S. Government had led to a negative outcome. Was this the case? Or were the critics afflicted with political hindsight bias?

### **Case Study Introduction: The Sixth Declared Nuclear Power**

India's first nuclear explosion took place in the Rajasthan desert, at a remote location called Pokhran, on May 18, 1974. At the time, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was at great pains to stress that this was not a weapon, but a "peaceful" nuclear explosion. There was vague talk of harnessing the explosive power of the atom for excavating mines and creating deep-water harbors. None of these pleasant words were any reassurance to the advocates of nonproliferation, and the United States publicly denied that there was any

distinction between explosions with a peaceful or a military intent.<sup>4</sup> U.S. policymakers braced for the likelihood that further testing and overt weaponization of India's nuclear potential would shortly be forthcoming.<sup>5</sup> But to most observers' surprise, this did not occur... not for another twenty-four years, almost to the day.

On May 11, 1998, the world was given a new shock by the Indian nuclear establishment. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, sworn into office less than two months previously, announced that India had detonated three nuclear explosives at the test site at Pokhran, including one that he claimed was "thermonuclear." This time there were no fig leaves about "peaceful nuclear explosions," and Vajpayee openly and defiantly declared "India is now a nuclear-weapons state."<sup>6</sup> This made India the sixth overt nuclear power, and the first country to declare itself such in 34 years. Two days later, India tested two more devices and then declared that this round of testing was complete. Despite strenuous diplomatic efforts to dissuade Pakistan, on May 28 and 30 Islamabad also tested several nuclear devices to become the world's seventh declared nuclear power.

The global response was initially one of shock, because the Indian government's decision to test, and all preparations leading up to the test, had been kept completely secret. Following the shock, almost without exception, global responses were sharply negative. One hundred and fifty-two individual states spoke out against the tests.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P-5) issued a statement June 4 condemning the tests, and the Group of Eight major industrialized nations (G-8) held a

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<sup>4</sup> Chellaney, Brahma. Nuclear Proliferation: The U.S.-Indian Conflict, Orient Longman Ltd., New Delhi, 1993, p.45.

<sup>5</sup> Perkovich, George. India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999, p.185.

<sup>6</sup> Watson, Russell. "Explosion of Self-Esteem," Newsweek, U.S. Edition, 25 May 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Talbott, Strobe. "Dealing With the Bomb in South Asia," Foreign Affairs, March/April 1999.

meeting in London June 12, specifically to address South Asian proliferation, where it issued a highly critical statement. The ASEAN Regional Forum expressed “grave concern” and “strongly deplored” the tests, while the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), where India had long been a leader, held a contentious discussion of the tests at its September Summit in Durban, South Africa. Most significantly, the United Nations Security Council, “gravely concerned at the challenge that the nuclear tests conducted by India and then Pakistan constitute to international efforts aimed at strengthening the global regime of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, and also gravely concerned at the danger to peace and security in the region,” passed resolution 1172 on June 6 denouncing the tests.<sup>8</sup> Fourteen nations, including the United States, imposed sanctions of some kind against India.

The United States was deeply disappointed at India’s decision. The Administration expressed outrage that the Indian Government would so blatantly violate global non-proliferation norms. This was particularly irksome to the Clinton Administration, which had made nonproliferation a central foreign policy objective, but which was also engaged in a concerted effort to improve U.S.-Indian relations. To advance this effort, President Clinton was scheduled to travel to India in November 1998, slated to be the first U.S. President to visit the Subcontinent in twenty years. At the White House, on the day after the first test, Clinton said: “I want to make it very, very clear that I am deeply disturbed by the nuclear tests that India has conducted. This action by India not only threatens the

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<sup>8</sup> Bidwai, Praful and Vanaik, Achin. New Nukes: India, Pakistan and Global Nuclear Disarmament, Olive Branch Press, Brooklyn, 2000, pp. 284-289.

stability of the region, it directly challenges the firm international consensus to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>9</sup>

Clinton was required to impose sanctions on India under the terms of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Prevention Act of 1994, also known as the Glenn Amendment. These included a halt to all non-humanitarian aid, an end to all military sales, an end to U.S. Government credits and guarantees, a prohibition on U.S. bank loans to Indian Government entities, tougher controls on dual-use exports, and a commitment to oppose all loans in the International Financial Institutions, such as the World Bank.<sup>10</sup> Initial estimates of their impact on India ranged from \$2 billion (India) to \$20 billion (U.S.).<sup>11</sup> In either case, the amount is small within an economy of \$1.67 trillion (GDP Purchasing Power Parity, 1998 estimate)<sup>12</sup>, but large when considering the immensity of India’s social needs. In the zero-sum game of South Asian politics, the Indian Government could take comfort in knowing that the same U.S. sanctions on Pakistan would affect its rival’s economy far more seriously.

The second reaction of outrage in the United States was directed, not at the Indians, but at the U.S. intelligence agencies that had failed to detect the imminent test. The primary locus of this outrage was in the Congress, where Senator Richard Shelby, Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, called it “a colossal failure of our intelligence-gathering, possibly the greatest failure for more than a decade.”<sup>13</sup> Shelby

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<sup>9</sup> “Clinton Decries Indian Nuclear Tests,” United Press International, Washington News, May 12, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Synnott, Hilary. The Causes and Consequences of South Asia’s Nuclear Tests, Adelphi Paper 332, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 28-9.

<sup>11</sup> Watson, Newsweek.

<sup>12</sup> According to the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy ([www.cmie.com](http://www.cmie.com)); other estimates of Indian GDP vary widely.

<sup>13</sup> “Don’t Blame the CIA,” The Economist, U.S. Edition, 23 May 1998.

announced Congressional hearings and the CIA immediately announced that its own high-level panel would look into the matter. A “senior State Department official” was quoted saying the intelligence failure “ranks right up there with missing the collapse of the Soviet Union.”<sup>14</sup>

Others suggested that the State Department was itself far from blameless in the affair. Spies and satellites are some of the tools used to provide information to policymakers about the actions and intentions of foreign governments. But diplomatic discourse, in-depth knowledge of domestic power relations in the target country, foreign governments’ national security decision-making rationales, and informed political analysis are also prime responsibilities of the State Department. The U.S. News & World Report commented, “Washington’s main failure was not that it missed the telltale preparations for an imminent test but that it underestimated India’s determination to cross the nuclear threshold.”<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, The Economist wrote: “An intelligence failure, or simply a failure to be intelligent?”<sup>16</sup> Ved Mehta was the most excoriating, writing in The New York Times: “There has been a lot of diversionary self-flagellation about the Central Intelligence Agency’s being asleep at the wheel when, in fact, any casual tourist to India would have known about the aggressive nuclear policy of the Bharatiya Janata Party.”<sup>17</sup>

The U.S. Embassy in New Delhi is staffed with officers having decades of South Asian experience. Was it true? Had they missed something that would have been obvious

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas, Evan; Barry, John and Liu, Melinda. “Ground Zero,” Newsweek, U.S. Edition, 25 May 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Auster, Bruce B.; Chellaney, Brahma; Hedges, Stephen J.; Omestad, Thomas and Whitelaw, Kevin. “An Explosion of Indian Pride,” U.S. News & World Report, 25 May 1998.

<sup>16</sup> “Don’t Blame the CIA,” The Economist.

<sup>17</sup> Mehta, Ved. “India’s Combustible Mixture,” The New York Times, 16 May 1998.

to a casual tourist? Was Ved Mehta exhibiting an acute case of political hindsight bias, or should the U.S. policy community have been able to foresee India's nuclear test?

### **India Was Going to Test: The Arguments That Prove It**

Before proceeding with the analysis, the question needs to be narrowed slightly. That India might eventually test its nuclear weapons capability had been a possibility since at least 1974. Over the years the Indian nuclear establishment had been steadily refining and improving its technology so that, in 1998, the surprise was not that it could test -- this was well-known -- the surprise was that it chose to test. However, India had deliberately kept this option open throughout this period by refusing to join the nonproliferation regimes, and especially the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Predicting that India would carry out some kind of test, without specifying any time frame, would have a very high probability of proving accurate. By the same token, predicting the exact date and time, absent intelligence information, would be almost impossible. For the question not to be trivial, it must be ascribed a reasonable time period, as follows: "Should an informed policymaker have foreseen that the new Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Government would test nuclear weapons within six months of assuming power?"

There are seven main reasons to suggest that it would, three being domestic, three international, and one essentially both. The domestic arguments were that the BJP platform said it would, the weak Vajpayee government needed a boost, and the Indian nuclear establishment was pressing for a test. The international reasons were India's perceived "encirclement" within the global nonproliferation regimes, the security threat from China,

and the security threat from Pakistan. The reason that combines both is India's aspiration to "great power" status.

**The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Platform.** The right-wing, Hindu nationalist BJP and its precursor had been the only Indian political parties to advocate becoming an open nuclear weapons power, a position they had held since the early 1950's.<sup>18</sup> In the election manifesto of 1998, the BJP remained consistent and promised to "re-evaluate the country's nuclear policy and exercise the option to induct nuclear weapons."<sup>19</sup> After they formed the coalition government in March, why should it have come as a surprise that PM Vajpayee authorized testing? As Richard Haass, then at Brookings, noted: "Sometimes, people actually do what they say they are going to do."<sup>20</sup>

**Vajpayee: A Weak Government Needing a Boost.** Of course, sometimes they also do not do what they say they will, but even this argument can be turned around to support the thesis that nuclear tests were likely. By this reasoning, the BJP had compromised on so many of its other core positions that the nuclear issue became definitional for Vajpayee and his party. In early March, the election results showed the BJP winning 26% of the popular vote and 179 seats, or 93 short of a majority in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of parliament.<sup>21</sup> In the election, the BJP had to moderate many of its more extreme positions in order to attract more mainstream voters. To form a coalition government, which required additional MPs from 17 other parties,<sup>22</sup> it had to moderate these positions still further. The BJP abandoned its plans to eliminate the special

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<sup>18</sup> Bidwai and Vanaik, p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> Perkovich, p. 407.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in "Don't Blame the CIA," *The Economist*.

<sup>21</sup> *Times of India* website ([www.webresourceindia.com/election/result.htm](http://www.webresourceindia.com/election/result.htm)).

<sup>22</sup> Bouton, Marshall M. "India's Problem is Not Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1998.



laws governing Muslim marriage, divorce and property, to abolish the special status for Kashmir, and to build a Hindu temple on the site of the demolished Babri Mosque in Ayodhya.<sup>23</sup> Each of these would have been a deal-breaker in forming the coalition; if implemented afterward, each would likely have given rise to communal rioting, causing the downfall of the government.

By contrast, the nuclear issue was far less controversial domestically, however inflammatory it might have been internationally. It could be used to reassure the BJP's core constituency that the party would deliver on its promises. Already Vajpayee was finding it difficult to deliver on many of his economic promises. Allegations of corruption were surfacing within his government. An astute analyst might have foreseen Vajpayee's calculation that a nuclear test, proclaiming strength and independence to the electorate, might very well shore up his position. After all, Indira Gandhi's popularity had soared after the 1974 test, albeit briefly, and this political calculation had also played a major role in her decision to test.<sup>24</sup>

**The Indian Nuclear Establishment Urges a Test.** The core domestic constituency for testing nuclear weapons was not, as might be imagined, the Indian military. They had been deliberately excluded from nuclear decision-making by India's technical and political elites.<sup>25</sup> However, the nuclear establishment, represented by the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) and the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), enjoyed considerable prestige and, through the years, frequently had the ear of the Prime Minister. Since 1974, the domestic nuclear power industry had fallen

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<sup>23</sup> Synnott, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> Pal Singh Sidhu, Waheguru. Enhancing Indo-US Strategic Cooperation, Adelphi Paper 313, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> Perkovich, p. 6.

far short of earlier targets and promises. A nuclear weapons test was a way to vindicate the scientists' prowess. It would burnish the nuclear establishment's credentials, facilitate their recruitment of the top scientific talent in India, and prove the value of their work over the previous 24 years. There can be little doubt that the nuclear establishment lobbied the BJP government hard on the need for the tests, in a way that should have been apparent to U.S. policymakers. As AEC Chairman R. Chidambaran said in a March 1998 interview: "[If computer simulations were sufficient,] ... what was the use of some countries going for 2,000 explosions?"<sup>26</sup>

**Global Non-Proliferation: India Encircled.** India had long decried the global nonproliferation regime. Since the time of Independence, inspired by the pacifist philosophy of Gandhi and Nehru, India had advocated a global ban on nuclear weapons. However, India strongly opposed the discriminatory character of the NPT, with its regime of nuclear "haves" and "have-nots." It would not sign the treaty. India's increasingly active nuclear program therefore placed it as one of the "threshold states," along with Pakistan and Israel, believed to have an undeclared nuclear capability. India's nuclear deterrence capability was variously referred to as "existential," "virtual," "opaque," "recessed," or "phantom."<sup>27</sup>

In the 1990's, with the end of the Cold War, renewed efforts were made globally to improve the non-proliferation regime. Partly due to international pressure, and partly due to its own ambivalent nuclear policy, India zigzagged in support and opposition to these measures. In 1991, Pakistan introduced a resolution at the UN General Assembly to make

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 407.

<sup>27</sup> Synnott, p. 12.

South Asia a nuclear-weapon-free zone, a concept India opposed. In 1993, however, India joined the U.S. in cosponsoring a Canadian UN resolution urging the end of fissile material production for military purposes. In 1994, India issued a statement supporting the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), support that it withdrew in 1995. When more than 170 countries agreed to extend the NPT indefinitely in 1995, India demurred, decrying the system of “nuclear apartheid” this action was said to enshrine.<sup>28</sup>

The CTBT eventually proved to be “the straw that broke the camel’s back” for India.<sup>29</sup> In 1996, India blocked the broad consensus in favor of the treaty at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, only to have the international community use a parliamentary loophole to bring it directly to the UN for a vote in September. Only India, Bhutan and Libya voted against the treaty, and it passed 158-3.<sup>30</sup> Of particular concern to India were the provisions of Article XIV that specified terms for entry-into-force. Specific countries, including India, were required to ratify the CTBT for the treaty to be implemented. India saw this as another lever to pressure it to renounce its nuclear option. But that kind of pressure can have the opposite effect too, as U.S. policymakers might have expected. As nuclear hawk Ashok Kapur noted, an Indian decision to go forward with nuclear tests could serve to “immunize India from harassment on the nuclear option, the NPT, and the CTBT issues.”<sup>31</sup> While many of the anti-discrimination arguments in India are simply emotional appeals to resist “nuclear colonialism,” Kapur makes a more carefully reasoned case as to

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<sup>28</sup> Perkovich, pp. 324-353.

<sup>29</sup> Kapur, Ashok. Pokhran and Beyond: India’s Nuclear Behaviour, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001, p. 203.

<sup>30</sup> Perkovich, pp. 383-4

<sup>31</sup> Kapur, p. 6.

why deliberately flouting the conventions, as by testing, may serve a country's security interests:

“...arms control and disarmament arrangements are simply a method to stabilize military relationships or relationships of conflict; they are a method to preserve a country's scientific, technological, economic, and strategic edge and to diminish the potential edge of a rival state. So arms control and disarmament arrangements should be assessed for their potential to create a political as well as a technological discrimination. Arms control and disarmament arrangements and proposals are usually double games and with one set of rules for the US and its strategic partner(s); and another set of rules for others. The latter usually creates a line of pressure or harassment potential for the duration of the arms control/disarmament arrangement.”<sup>32</sup>

**The Security Threat From China.** India's crushing defeat by the Chinese in 1962 in the high mountains of Arunachal Pradesh left lasting scars on the Indian psyche that its subsequent victories over Pakistan failed to erase. China's first nuclear test in 1964 played a major role in India's decision to test in 1974. It rankled India that China, whom India regarded as an “equal” in terms of size and population, should be an acknowledged nuclear state and a member of the P-5. In 1998, China was the only one of India's neighbors with a fully developed nuclear arsenal and delivery systems. On May 3, just a week before the tests, Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes claimed in an interview that China was India's “potential threat number one,” and that the Chinese relationships with Pakistan and Myanmar, as well as its activities in the Bay of Bengal, seemed intended to encircle India.<sup>33</sup> The history of conflict between India and China, and their potential for rivalry as Asian heavyweights, would seem to provide a security justification for testing as a means to clarify the possession of a nuclear deterrent.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>33</sup> Synnott, p. 17.

**The Security Threat From Pakistan.** Since partition the issue of Kashmir had festered like an open sore between India and Pakistan, with no sign of a lasting solution. Twice it had blossomed into war, but even in peacetime a low level of conflict was fairly continuous. With the hostility inherent in the relationship, an arms race had long been a possibility. As far back as 1965, then-Foreign Minister (and later Pakistan's Prime Minister) Zulfikar Ali Bhutto told an interviewer that if India got the bomb, "then we should have to eat grass and get one, or buy one, of our own."<sup>34</sup>

And so they did. Pakistan braved serious U.S. sanctions to develop nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, with Chinese and North Korean help. In April of 1998, just a month before India's nuclear test, it flight-tested a new missile, the "Ghauri," with a range of 1,500 kilometers and a payload of 700 kilograms.<sup>35</sup>

In examining a security risk, the opponents' ability to inflict harm and his desire to do so must both be considered. Certainly a hostile China had a much greater ability to inflict harm, especially nuclear harm, on India than did Pakistan. However, Pakistan's desire to inflict pain on India, after more than half a century of bitter relations, must have been assessed to be far higher. Knowing that Pakistan possessed the bomb, India could argue for its own need for nuclear weapons as a deterrent.<sup>36</sup> Given the Hindu nationalist ideology of the BJP, analysts might have forecast that the security threat from Muslim Pakistan would assume a larger profile in the new government.

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<sup>34</sup> Perkovich, p. 108.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 409

<sup>36</sup> Ironically, the U.S. provided confirmation that Pakistan possessed the bomb in October 1990 when President Bush could no longer certify to Congress under the Pressler Amendment that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear explosive device. Ibid., p. 312.

**India's Aspiration for "Great Power" Status.** The final rationale for testing would be to satisfy India's need for international prestige. As discussions progressed on the possibility of opening up the membership of the UN Security Council, India strongly argued for its claim to a seat. The Indians could not help observing that the UN P-5 are also the five declared nuclear weapons states within the NPT. For many Indians this became a symbolic marker of "Great Power" status. The rest of the world, noting the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the reasons for it, was moving away from military indicators of global power and status and toward economic indicators. For India, however, the crushing poverty of its masses made economic success a distant and difficult goal. A quicker route to power and status appeared to be contained within the forces of the atom. As Jaswant Singh, PM Vajpayee's Senior Advisor on Defense and Foreign Affairs, wrote after the tests:

"If the permanent five's possession of nuclear weapons increases security, why would India's possession of nuclear weapons be dangerous? If the permanent five continue to employ nuclear weapons as an international currency of force and power, why should India voluntarily devalue its own state power and national security?"<sup>37</sup>

That the Indian public largely viewed the test as an affirmation of power and status was visible in their euphoric response to it. Public celebration and hyperbolic press commentary were the order of the day. Exultant citizens launched fireworks; radio and TV announcers shouted "Kudos for India;" one headline read: "An Explosion of Self-Esteem;"

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<sup>37</sup> Singh, Jaswant. "Against Nuclear Apartheid," Foreign Affairs, September/October 1998.

and the leader of the right-wing Shiv Sena said, in one of many comments that linked nuclear potency to sexual potency, “We have to prove we are not eunuchs.”<sup>38</sup>

None of this is to suggest that the Indian perception of the value of nuclear status was a shared global value. The aspiration for Great Power status through the possession of nuclear weaponry was, at the end of the Twentieth Century, no longer rational from a U.S. perspective. For example, when asked whether this might improve India’s chances of securing permanent membership on the UN Security Council, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright retorted, “The Indians have got to be kidding.”<sup>39</sup>

However, to judge the test as unlikely to occur, simply because it appears irrational from a U.S. standpoint, would invoke a faulty analysis. A good analyst must understand the reasoning and motivations of the political culture he or she is studying, assess the likelihood of an event occurring from that perspective, and then be able to convey this persuasively to policymakers. Whether this motivation was rational from a U.S. perspective or not, the quest for status and respect clearly played a significant role in the Indian decision to test, and it should have been foreseen.

### **India Was Not Going to Test: The Arguments That Prove It**

Considering the forgoing arguments, without any countervailing considerations, one might wonder at the blinders that U.S. analysts and policymakers must have been wearing not to foresee that India would test its nuclear weapons. Yet perhaps the real blinders are the political hindsight bias that “forgets” the counterarguments to the points presented above. In addition, it “forgets” that the fear of sanctions would have militated against an

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<sup>38</sup> Watson, *Newsweek*.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Thomas, et al., *Newsweek*.

Indian nuclear test. Finally, it discounts the Indians' own political and diplomatic signals that misleadingly indicated they would not test in the near term.

**The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Platform.** Given the many pragmatic compromises the BJP had already made in its right-wing agenda, why would Vajpayee not behave moderately on the nuclear issue? Even adhering to the letter of the party platform, he could “induct” nuclear weapons as an element of India’s security posture without testing them, thereby deflecting much of the international opprobrium that would come with testing. The moderating effect of governing in a democracy convinced many observers that the BJP would hold back from testing. As Marshall Bouton, Executive Vice President of the Asia Society, wrote in the very month of India’s tests:

“...having appealed to voters as the party that could bring stable and effective government, the BJP must act cautiously if it is both to preserve its coalition and deliver on its promise. It is unlikely to antagonize Pakistan by curtailing Kashmir’s autonomy or the United States by going openly nuclear.”<sup>40</sup>

**Vajpayee: A Weak Government Needing a Boost.** Vajpayee was undoubtedly governing a weak and fractious coalition, and any panacea must have seemed attractive. But would a bold and controversial move, however popular on the streets, make his coalition more governable, if taken without consultation with any of his “partners”? Besides, if he was thinking about a nuclear boost to his popularity, Indira Gandhi’s example contained two lessons. Yes, it was markedly successful in the short run. However, because it did not deeply affect most people’s lives, it lacked staying power.

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<sup>40</sup> Bouton, Foreign Affairs.



Barely thirteen months after the 1974 explosion, Gandhi was forced to assume emergency powers to continue governing.<sup>41</sup>

Of far greater long-term concern for the Vajpayee government were its economic prospects, and India was in a modest slump suggesting a business-cycle downturn. The lone bright spot was the increase in direct foreign investment, up 52% in the first 11 months of 1997 compared to 1996.<sup>42</sup> Vajpayee had to know that foreign investment would be the economic indicator most vulnerable to contraction as a result of the international outcry certain to follow a nuclear test. Surely he would see that the short-term benefits could not outweigh the long-term liabilities?

**The Indian Nuclear Establishment Urges a Test.** The nuclear establishment had been pushing for a test since 1974. It was true; they had nearly succeeded in December 1995, when U.S. spy satellites detected preparations underway at Pokhran. This discovery was leaked to the press, moving the issue from ministerial chambers to the front pages of newspapers around the world. Considerable pressure came to bear on the Congress-led government of Narasimha Rao to test simply as a demonstration of Indian independence from U.S. influence. In the end, Rao resisted the political pressure and that of his nuclear establishment and had Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee deny that any nuclear test was planned.<sup>43</sup> The lesson for 1998 was that the nuclear establishment could have an influential voice on this issue, but not a decisive one.

**Global Non-Proliferation: India Encircled.** U.S. policymakers were well aware of how India chafed against the global non-proliferation regimes. This issue was at the top

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<sup>41</sup> Perkovich, p. 192.

<sup>42</sup> Bouton, *Foreign Affairs*.

<sup>43</sup> Perkovich, pp. 367-370.

of the U.S.-India agenda and had been discussed in scores of meetings at all levels. The real concern that India would test its weapons and become an overt nuclear power was clearly the main reason this issue was accorded such high importance. (The other concern was proliferation from India to third countries, an issue on which the Indian record has so far been quite responsible.)

There was cause to believe that India might continue its policy of nuclear ambiguity, despite the pressure it felt from the global nonproliferation regime. First, it had a long history of leadership on nuclear disarmament issues, dating back to its Independence. India could accurately say that its vision was broader and more encompassing than the existing disarmament regimes, as it had advocated universal disarmament rather than a world divided into nuclear “haves” and “have-nots.” Nehru exerted global leadership in opposing nuclear weapons and was the first head of state, back in 1954, to call for a ban on all nuclear testing.<sup>44</sup> While its “recessed capability” had eroded India’s moral standing in this debate somewhat, testing would deplete its accumulated moral capital altogether.

Second, India lacked a nuclear doctrine. Would it make sense to test a weapon first, and then begin deciding where and why and how it would be used? Vajpayee had announced on April 10 a task force to develop recommendations for instituting India’s first National Security Council. That Council was then to be charged with undertaking a strategic defense review.<sup>45</sup> It appeared logical than any decision to test weapons would

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<sup>44</sup> Bidwai and Vanaik, p. 57.

<sup>45</sup> Perkovich, p.411.

follow from the conclusions of the defense review regarding the security uses for these weapons.

**The Security Threat From China.** After the fact, this concern, with its aura of Great Power realpolitik, was given the most stress by the Indian Government. Vajpayee listed it as the major rationale in his explanatory letter to President Clinton on the day of the first test. Some Indian observers took it a step further, positing the need to counter a sinister U.S.-China-Pakistan axis attempting to gain dominion over India.<sup>46</sup> However, China's nuclear threat to India had existed theoretically for 34 years, with no evidence that it had become, or was about to become, more serious. In fact, much of the evidence in the broader security relationship – with the marked exception of China's nuclear and missile assistance to Pakistan -- pointed in the opposite direction. The Chinese were not pressing India along their disputed border (as Pakistan was) but had actually reached agreement to reduce troop concentrations. As Bidwai and Vanaik describe it: "For the fifteen years leading up to Pokhran II, Sino-Indian relations on the political, diplomatic, military (border dispositions and atmospherics), cultural, and trade fronts were steadily improving."<sup>47</sup> By testing weapons and highlighting China as a potential enemy, India could set back these positive developments and risk creating a self-fulfilling prophesy. How could this be in the Indian national interest?

**The Security Threat From Pakistan.** Pakistan represented a real security threat. Hostile relations had continued through three wars since independence and showed little sign of improving. Islamabad was improving its nuclear arsenal and its delivery systems.

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<sup>46</sup> Kapur, p. 189.

<sup>47</sup> Bidwai and Vanaik, p. 72.

The Ghauri launch was provocative, although no more provocative than some of the Indian missile tests. If the Indians had believed that Pakistan did not take their “recessed deterrent” seriously, if they were concerned that Pakistan might contemplate its own preemptive strike, then India might have claimed a clear and comprehensible national security rationale for its test.

This was never claimed. In fact, Pakistan was highly unlikely to test its nuclear weapons unless India did so first. By contrast, they were almost certain to do so once India tested. Therefore, no security advantage was likely to accrue vis-à-vis Pakistan by testing and, in fact, none did.

**India’s Aspiration for “Great Power” Status.** India’s insistence on justifying its test with reference to the (lesser) threat from China, rather than the (greater) threat from Pakistan, suggests in itself that prestige and not security concerns drove the decision. India wanted its decision framed as a global strategic issue, not as a response to a localized hot spot. But while aspiration for “great power” status was a widely-held value among the Indian political elite, they were by no means unanimous in seeking a nuclear path to that status. Many, including some of the BJP’s coalition partners, argued that continued leadership in the NAM, a position aided by India’s anti-nuclear rhetoric, conferred geopolitical status that a nuclear test could jeopardize. That the tests were widely supported as a *fait accompli* does not mean that they would have been non-controversial in Indian politics if debated before the fact. Indeed, it might well be argued that Vajpayee’s secrecy in preparing the tests was aimed as much at shielding the decision from internal political debate as from prying American satellites.

Even after the test, some of the most scathing critics of this motivation were themselves Indians. Arundhati Roy wrote:

“For India to demand the status of a superpower is as ridiculous as demanding to play in the World Cup finals simply because we have a ball. Never mind that we haven’t qualified, or that we don’t play much soccer and haven’t got a team.”<sup>48</sup>

**Other Reasons Not to Test: Sanctions.** For an Indian decisionmaker planning a nuclear test, the first in 24 years, a consideration of the likely international reaction would be essential. It would be safe to guess that most of the responses would be negative, but how much of that would translate into concrete actions that could harm the national interest? This might be a calculated risk in most cases, but not with regard to the U.S., where the Glenn Amendment spelled out exactly the steps required with almost no flexibility to adjust sanctions on a case-by-case basis. (This became a problem later since it provided no way to distinguish between a “provocative” Indian test and a “responsive” Pakistani one.) The loss of U.S. development assistance would not have troubled Indian decisionmakers much, as it was only \$140 million. The loss of access to World Bank loans, however, would be far more serious. India was the world’s largest recipient of loans from the World Bank at that time with 84 projects in the pipeline valued at \$14.5 billion.<sup>49</sup> The purpose of the Glenn Amendment was to serve as a deterrent to nuclear testing and, given India’s reliance on World Bank funding, it might have been expected to have greater success than it did.

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<sup>48</sup> Roy, Arundhati, “Introduction: The End of Imagination,” in Bidwai and Vanaik, p. xxvi.

<sup>49</sup> Myers, Steven Lee, “Nuclear Anxiety: The Policy; Clinton to Impose Penalties on India Over Atomic Tests,” The New York Times, 13 May 1998.

## Conclusion: Clear Ambiguity

“Clear ambiguity” may be an oxymoron, but it describes the policymaker’s dilemma in confronting India’s intentions prior to May 11, 1998. Setting aside the false lens of political hindsight blindness, there were sound arguments available to either side, to suggest that India either would or would not test its weapons. No “casual tourist” could have guessed what Vajpayee would decide.

In the face of this ambiguity, the Clinton Administration pursued a middle path. Far from ignoring the possibility that the BJP would carry out its manifesto promises, U.S. policymakers kept a steady pressure on the government, urging it not to do so. From February to May, the State Department sent 13 messages to the field, urging India not to test.<sup>50</sup> Nonproliferation was the top issue in UN Ambassador Bill Richardson’s discussions with the Indian leadership during his April 14 visit. The same may be said of the discussions India’s Foreign Secretary K. Raghunath held with policymakers in Washington April 30 and May 1.<sup>51</sup>

To be fair, most of the Indian interlocutors who counseled patience, and who said that India would not make a decision until after its six-month defense policy review was complete, were not lying. Few in the hierarchy knew of Vajpayee’s decision and the preparations that were underway under extreme secrecy. Defense Minister Fernandes was informed two days before the blasts; the foreign secretary and military service chiefs were told only the day before.<sup>52</sup> But it is understandable that Washington chafed at having been deliberately misled. When intelligence information is lacking, and independent analysis is

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<sup>50</sup> Auster, et al., U.S. News & World Report.

<sup>51</sup> Perkovich, p. 415.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416.

so ambiguous, a policymaker is forced to rely more on the stated positions of the foreign government, especially when he believes that government to be a friend.

### **Epilogue: Was Ignorance Bliss?**

Intelligence and analysis inform policy. In this case they supported the conclusion that the Clinton Administration was not facing an immediate and sudden change in Indian policy on nuclear testing. As a result, U.S. policy, as described above, was one of steady pressure on India to refrain, combining the carrots of an improving relationship with the stick of assured sanctions if India went ahead with its tests.

Seldom does a policymaker want a surprise. Forewarning of an impending event or policy change implies the possibility to take action to avert it, or to shape it in ways that benefit one's own national interests. India's nuclear test may have been the rare exception, however, where surprise was in the U.S. national interest.

Had the U.S. seen the testing coming it most likely would have ratcheted up its effort to prevent it.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the policymakers might have come up with larger carrots; almost certainly they would have employed bigger sticks. The next step from Clinton's "middle way" would have been coercive diplomacy, exerting much stronger pressure at the highest level urging India not to test. Had this approach then succeeded, as it did in 1995, it could have been a significant foreign policy victory for Clinton and his team.

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<sup>53</sup> If the tests were discerned to be "unpreventable," U.S. policymakers might instead have adjusted their policy goals to accommodate the Indian decision – although it might be argued that the purpose of the Glenn Amendment was specifically to foreclose such a compromise. In any case, a shift of this magnitude was most unlikely in early 1998, although it has taken place after the fact to a large degree in the context of the "war on terrorism" in 2001-2002.

However, India seemed to have drawn two lessons from 1995: Hide all testing preparations from the sight of the U.S. satellites, and do not yield to U.S. diplomatic pressure. Even without coercive efforts by the U.S., the test was trumpeted as a victory for Indian independence. BJP President Kushabhau Thakre said, after the test, “The Government has also demonstrated that, unlike previous regimes, it shall not give in to international pressure.”<sup>54</sup>

The nuclear test was an Indian nationalist decision. Any effort to prevent it, especially if it became public knowledge, would have been seen as colonialist meddling and have further stoked the fires of desire. Only a substantially different U.S.-India relationship, pursued over a much longer period leading up to 1998, might have allowed the U.S. to restrain the BJP government. But this relationship had been almost impossible to achieve given the perceived zero-sum game of relations with India and Pakistan, and the past importance of Pakistan in the global contest with the USSR.

Given that the U.S. probably could not prevent the test, the best alternative was not to even try. A failed effort to influence the Indian decision would have far more seriously tarnished bilateral relations, although it might well have burnished the BJP’s nationalist credentials to have defied the sole superpower. Not having tried to stop the Indians, the U.S. still imposed sanctions under the law, and still expressed outrage. But the test was not seen as a personal, deliberate slap in the face of the United States. As such, the U.S. and India could continue to have a constructive relationship on other fronts; could continue to discuss nonproliferation issues, “agreeing to disagree”; and the U.S. could allow the sanctions to lapse when an appropriate moment to do so came along.

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<sup>54</sup> The Pioneer, Delhi, 12 May 1998. (From FBIS Transcribed Text: FBIS-NES-98-132)



This leads to an ironic conclusion. The policy “failure,” embodied in the U.S. inability to foresee the Indian nuclear test, was actually a “success,” in that it caused the least possible harm to the U.S. national interest.