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A Pragmatist Perspective of India's Peaceful Nuclear Explosion

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ABSTRACT

Nehru and Indira Gandhi had a made remarkable contribution in the evolution of Indian foreign policy and nuclear programme. Nehru laid the strong basis for peaceful purposes of nuclear power and he remained staunch supporter and preacher of it. He wanted India to remain committed to peaceful use of nuclear energy even in future as nuclear weapons cause wide spread destruction and they were against humanity. Nehru pursued idealism in terms of conduct of nuclear policy. Though Indira Gandhi followed footsteps of her predecessors particularly her father, however, she exhibited pragmatism with regard to use nuclear power. Earlier defeat in war with China, conduct of nuclear test by China, movement of US 7th Fleet coupled with domestic factors of declining image of Indira Gandhi and her government proved very decisive in going for Peaceful Nuclear Explosion. Nuclear test not only improved her own image but also showed to world India's capability in science and technology.

KEYWORDS: Nuclear Energy, Peaceful Explosion, Atomic Bomb, Indira Gandhi, Pokhran

India's journey, in terms of both foreign policy and nuclear policy, can be seen as a transition from idealism and realism under Nehru, to complete realism and pragmatism under Indira Gandhi. In the initial year, India's attitude to acquisition of a nuclear weapon and its overall approach to nuclear weapon proliferation had been dominated by the views of Jawaharlal Nehru. Throughout his political career Nehru preached peaceful use of nuclear energy and showed very critical disinclination to atomic weapons and this disinclination can be attributed to his education, grooming and upbringing around Gandhian values of peace, non-violence and brotherhood. Nehru equated bomb to a symbol of evil at a public meeting in Bombay in 1946. In 1957, during a visit to Japan and standing in front of the peace memorial, Nehru told the cheering Japanese people, "The world must choose between the path of violence symbolized by the atom bomb and the path of peace symbolized by the Buddha" (Mirchandani, 1968). From every available platform national and international level, he carried on his crusade against nuclear weapons, and made it clear that India herself had nothing to do with nuclear weapons and that atomic energy would be developed for peaceful purposes. In fact, in those years 'Ban the bomb' became a creed with the Congress party under his leadership.Pundit Nehru categorically stated, on 20th January 1957, while inaugurating India's nuclear reactor, Apsara, at Trombay:

No man can predict for the future. But I should like to say on behalf of my government and I think I can say with same assurance on behalf of any future government of India-whatever might happen, whatever the circumstances, we shall never use this atomic energy for evil purposes (Subramanian, 2007)

Nehru was aware of the consequences of the piling of nuclear weapons and the possible nuclear catastrophe. In fact even before the use of the explosive power of the atom, he was well aware of the fact that progress in science and technology was divorced from human values (Pathak, 1980, p. 4). Hence, at the eve of independence from Britain in 1947, India became a staunch proponent of nuclear disarmament at the United Nations and other international forums.

Despite being staunch supporter of peaceful uses of nuclear energy, Nehru made it clear that the country's national interests would not be compromised due to his strong adherence to non-weapon stance. He held the viewpoint that India would not hesitate from pursuing any course of action for protecting her interests. Nehru always emphasised to develop it for peaceful purposes, however he had never ruled out using nuclear energy for other purposes when compelled to do so (Khanna, 2002, p. 37). He knew very well the importance of foreign policy of the country and role of atomic energy for development. Therefore, Nehru kept with himself charge of Foreign Affairs Ministry and the Department of Atomic Energy, which was created as a separate department in 1954. He held all the three portfolios with himself until his death in 1964.

Indira Gandhi and Nuclear Policy

Ambivalent attitude and pre-dominance of prestige value

The Nehruvian legacy of suspicion about militarized power politics and its attendant distaste of nuclear weaponry as the "currency of global power" interacted with the older Gandhian moral synthesis, which emphasized "community" over "state" and "service" over "coercion," to reinforce this ambiguous stance (Tellis, 2001, p. 12). On assuming power after the demise of Lal Bahadur Shastri, Mrs. Gandhi continued to adhere to the nuclear policy enunciated by her predecessors. She had to carry the nation with her in following this policy at a time when the pressure from within the country to opt for the nuclear weapons probably was the greatest (Pathak, 1980, p. 24). Prime Minister Nehru and Shastri had taken official policy position that India would not manufacture nuclear weapons. In theory, Mrs. Gandhi was committed to the same policy, but in practice, her attitude became ambivalent. The impression created by her various utterances was that she wanted to keep her options open with regard to nuclear weapons. She had instinctively felt the prestige value, if not the deterrent value, of a nuclear explosion might be useful at a strategic moment either for domestic or for international purposes (Bandhopadhyaya, 2003, p. 262).

Mrs. Gandhi pursued a strongly personalized politics; the nuclear energy became another *ace* in her power game. She was Minister of Atomic Energy as well as Prime Minister ever since September1967 and even in her later term from July 1984 to October 1984, she continued to hold both the ministries together. Morganthau, amply clears in *Politics Among Nations* "It stands to reason that not all foreign policies have always followed so rational, objective, and unemotional a course. The contingent elements of personality, prejudice and subjective preference, and of all the weakness of intellect and will which flesh is higher to, are bound to deflect foreign policies from their rational course" (Morganthau, 1963, p. 7).

PNE, NPT and slowdown of initial years

In the initial years of Indira Gandhi's Government, a complete slowdown in the process of nuclearization took place. This was reflected in the appointment of Dr.Vikram Sarabhai to fill the gap that was created with the demise of Bhabha. Dr. Sarabhai had an aversion to nuclear weapons and did not share Bhabha's enthusiasm for grandiose and self-aggrandizing projects. He ordered the people like Raja Ramanna (leading man behind success of the PNE in 1974) to stop work on the Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE) and such other projects (Pakvasa, n.d., p. 4). However, the country was aware of the growing Chinese nuclear capability and her hostility towards India. This was the period, when the country felt that the super powers were pressurizing India to accede to the non-proliferation treaty. However, the Indian government stuck to its policy of peaceful uses of nuclear energy without either conceding to the internal pulls and pressures or bowing to the external pressures to accept an international agreement detrimental

to the national interests (Pathak, 1980, p. 24). By 1966, international negotiations on a prospective nuclear non-proliferation treaty were in full swing, and India was playing a major role (Pakvasa, n.d., p. 4). When the non-proliferation treaty was being pushed for acceptance in the Eighteen-Nations Disarmament Committee, India reiterated her policy of uninhibited freedom to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and her opposition to nuclear weapons (Pathak, 1980, p. 25). India demanded that a fair treaty must obligate existing nuclear weapons states (the haves) to freeze and then eliminate their existing arsenals, and must provide security guarantees to states that did not acquire nuclear weapons. By the end of 1967, it was becoming clear that neither United States nor Soviet Union would agree to the kind of NPT India was proposing (Pakvasa, n.d., p. 4). When the USA and the Soviet Union jointly sponsored the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968 and tried to pressurize India into signing it, Indira Gandhi stoutly resisted this pressure (Bandhopadhyaya, 2003, p. 262). In April 1968 Mrs. Gandhi explained in the parliament that India would vote against the treaty; but India would not find security in acquiring nuclear weapons and an attempt to build them would weaken the country by diverting precious resources which were needed elsewhere (Pakvasa, n.d., p. 4). She, in April 1968 referring to India's Atomic Programme, emphasised:

Our programme of atomic energy development for peaceful purposes is related to the real needs of our economy and would be effectively geared to this end. Atomic energy power stations would play a very valuable role in future… (LokSabha Debates, 1968, cols. 2870-2)

As far as nuclear weapon programme was concerned Indira Gandhi decided not to go ahead with testing. She also sent her emissaries to the United States to seek guarantees (Bhashyam, 2001, p. 138). By 1970, the nuclear debate intensified and three camps emerged. The First camp argued against nuclear weapons; the second camp advocated a crash programme to build a small nuclear arsenal that could be delivered first by aircraft and subsequently by crude, liquid-fuelled ballistic missiles; and the third camp supported a steadier, less provocative long-term course to develop the capacity to deploy a small but sophisticated missile-based arsenal with attendant command, control, and warning infrastructure (Perkovich, 2000, p. 156). Scientific intelligentsia was in favour of building the bomb. For an instance the statement of Sampooran Singh, Director of the Terminal Ballistics Research Laboratory, in his book, *India and the Bomb* vouched for nuclear weapons as, "China's entry of the nuclear club has enhanced its national prestige and influence on the international scene. Its nuclear forces are now a symbol of national greatness, political power and importance". While advocating a strong case for India he further states, "So long as nuclear power and political power are correlated elements in world politics, it is necessary that India take a close hard look at its defence posture on a long term basis, and view nuclear power as an integral part of its defence and deterrence system" (Singh, 1971, p. 100).

The Director of Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis, K. Subrahmanyam contradicted the Government's stand over the risks and costs and insisted that China posed a threat that must be countered through a nuclear deterrent and it would "stabilize the confrontation and ensure peace" (Perkovich, 2000, pp. 156-157). It would serve India's moral objective, as "India does not subscribe to the outmoded war-fighting doctrine (as followed by the United States and the U.S.S.R.) (Tellis, 2001, p. 262).

Explosion at Pokhran-Display of Pragmatism and Technological Prowess

Developments in early 1970s in the South Asian Region and the American dispatch of the 7th fleet in the Bay of Bengal during the Indo-Pak War in 1971, and also President Nixon's repeated advice to Henry Kissinger to be "more tough" on India, had an overwhelming impact on Indira Gandhi that it became quintessential to demonstrate India's power and technological prowess, which finally culminated into the nuclear explosion in May 1974 (Jain, 1994, pp. 59-60). Conducted on May 18, 1974, the Pokhran explosion became the high water-mark of national agreement in India in the nuclear field. Advertised as a "Peaceful Nuclear Explosion" it obviously had military applications and India produced a small stockpile based upon this basic fission design, the test, codenamed "Smiling Bhudha". It was carried out in a 107 m deep shaft at the Pokhran test site in the Rajasthan desert in the western India, 9 km north- west of the village Khetolai. Initially the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre claimed the explosive yield of the test was 1200 kilo tons. Later they reduced the estimate to 8 kilo tons (Norris, 1998, p. 1). Its key players were Raja Ramanna who led the atomic bomb team, R. Chidambaram, and P. K. Iyengar (Declassified Document, 2011, p. 1). This was shrewdly timed and it coincided with a period of mounting anti-government agitation directed chiefly against Mrs. Gandhi. Personally, the agitation had adversely affected her and her government's image at home and abroad (Mirchandani, 1978, p. 63). The expenditure on the Indian PNE at Rajasthan was somewhat less than the cost projected by U.S Atomic Energy Commission for PNEs. The nuclear energy through PNE was meant to be used not only for generating electricity. PNE according to Ramanna, could be used to make harbourers or dams and to build canals. PNEs could also be used to increase the permeability of the rock in the natural gas reservoir, to increase the driving pressure on an oil reservoir and to expose the metal values in a copper or body to leach solution (Ramanna, 1978, pp. 18-19). This was her bold decision but a risky one. Not caring about international criticism, she decided to carry out the nuclear explosion, described by her as a peaceful one. Though opposed to arms race and stockpiling of nuclear weapons, she did not subscribe to the theory of nuclear monopoly enjoyed by a few privileged nuclear weapon states (Jain, 1994, pp. 59-60).

The declassified documents of Nixon administration reported in early 1972 that two years prior to the test, the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research had predicted that India could make preparations for an underground test without detection by the U.S. intelligence. After the Indian test, reaction that was doing the rounds within the US intelligence establishment, according to the declassified document was as, "India's peaceful nuclear explosion on 18 May, 1974 caught the U.S. by surprise in part because the intelligence community had not been looking for signs that a test was in the works" (Declassified Document, 2011, p. 1). However, Kissinger and the US administration remarked quite differently than that of the US intelligence that the USA respected India as the major power in South Asia and that a "more mature and equal relationship" could now be constituted between the two countries. The nuclear explosion was a great image-booster for Indira Gandhi and the Congress (Bandhopadhyaya, 2003, p. 263). Over 90% of Indians felt proud and felt that it had raised India's stature internationally, reflected in the polls conducted by Indian Institute of Public Opinion. It uplifted the mood of every section of society; this was manifested in the statements of the media and opposition leaders. All the leading newspapers of the country next day came out with very positive and highly eulogising frontline headlines. *The Times of India* published front-page headline, "Thrilled Nation Lauds Feet", *Motherland* mouthpiece of Jana-Sangh Party printed headline as, "India Goes Nuclear at Last", reporting on explosion *The Hindustan Times* wrote, "The Nation is Thrilled". Charan Singh described it as a "good development". The Central Working Committee of Jana-Sangh passed resolution the next day and termed the explosion as a, "A Red Letter Day in History", it also saluted Indian Scientists. The party demanded nuclear weapons showing consistency with its earlier strand. Advani marked, "the demand for an atom bomb is no longer confined to a section or sections which can be termed a lobby. It is the nation's demand". Commenting on nuclear policies of successive Indian Prime Ministers, Mr. Advani said, "Nehru's 'No Bomb Ever' was reformulated by Lal Bahadur Shastri as 'No Bomb Now'. The same policy has continued under Mrs. Gandhi. I think it is time even this stand is re-examined and modified" (Mirchandani, 1978, pp. 63-65).

Conclusion

After independence, the Indian nuclear policy kick-started on the sound foundation of peaceful and civilian purposes. The success that India tasted in the form of PNE in 1974 was the outcome of conscious efforts that were put in since the launch of Indian nuclear programme by Nehru. Undoubtedly, Indira Gandhi was staunch supporter of peaceful and non-weapon stand of her father, however, her pragmatic approach and ambivalent attitude and unfolding of unfavourable circumstances in domestic politics both at party and government level, compelled her to go for test. To arrest the declining graph of her personal image and government's popularity, she took very unprecedented, bold and risky step of nuclear tests. She ensured with her full grit and astute that test be conducted at an appropriate time so that conduct of tests would prove to big image booster for her and her government and at the same time it could uplift public sentiments and gag her detractors both inside and outside the party and government. However, she could not carry too far the fruits of decision nuclear tests and faced political debacle in general elections. She lost power and Morarji Desai led Janata Party took reins in 1977.

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