

Smiling Buddha and its Aftermath

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the nuclear bomb blast by India in 1974 and the consequences thereafter till the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. The internal crisis that arose just after the blast and its consequences are also sought to be examined. The reaction by the USA after the bomb blast is under perusal here. Mrs. Gandhi's visit to the USA and the result of this visit is sought to be examined.

Key words: Pokhran, Nuclear, Bomb, Gandhi, USA.

The nuclear explosion of 1974 by India astounded the world and led to various consequences. There were expectations that India would follow up this nuclear testing with more tests. However, that did not happen. If the reasons for the 1974 test is considered to be external security matters, then this restraint in conducting further tests is unexplainable, 'unless the one test so fundamentally improved the security situation as to obviate the need for further tests and robust weaponization.' However, this was not the case.

After the nuclear explosion the Indian government and Mrs. Gandhi was so beset with internal problems that there was little opportunity to give priority to nuclear testing. Mrs. Gandhi's authority was challenged soon after the 1974 explosions. The opposition in India alleged that she had won the 1971 elections through unfair means. The Congress party was accused of resorting to electoral malpractices to win the election. Mrs. Gandhi's election was challenged in a court of law and a suit was filed in the Allahabad High court. The Allahabad High Court found Mrs. Gandhi guilty of electoral fraud and declared her election as null and void. The court also prevented her from contesting elections for a period of six years. Simultaneously, there was internal unrest caused by protests from various sections of the society led by Jayprakash Narayan and others. Mrs. Gandhi sought to establish her authority by

declaring a state of emergency in 1975 under article 352 of the Indian constitution, on the ground of internal disturbances threatening the security of India. When elections were held in 1977, after the withdrawal of the state of emergency, Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress party lost their majority.

Morarji Desai assumed office in 1977 as the leader of a coalition government. He was the first non-Congress prime minister. He was very much opposed to nuclear explosions and any development of a nuclear policy. His stance was very moralistic. He said that the nuclear reactors that India possessed would never be used to develop bombs. The personal relations between Morarji Desai and U.S. President Carter were quite positive. President Carter visited India in January 1978 which was reciprocated by Morarji Desai's visit to the U.S. in June 1978. A joint communiqué was released by the U.S. and India when Carter visited India. The two leaders gave special emphasis to world peace and agreed that 'world peace can only be assured through effective measures to halt the arms race, particularly in the nuclear field, including the prevention of the proliferation of nuclear weapons and their ultimate elimination.' The President and the Prime Minister discussed in detail 'the Indo-U.S. Nuclear Cooperation Agreement and statutory requirements affecting the continued supply of enriched uranium from

the United States. They discussed measures to ensure non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, including appropriate universal means of ensuring that nuclear energy is not misused for military purposes. They agreed that the dialogue between the two countries will continue. President Carter pledged to make every effort consistent with American law to maintain fuel supplies for Tarapur and continue nuclear cooperation with India.'

However, it would seem that the U.S. sought to downplay the nuclear issue by focussing on various other issues of the world. Nevertheless, the relations between the two countries improved greatly and the personal relation between Prime Minister Desai and President Carter played an important role in this respect. Morarji Desai however reacted decisively when the U.S. sought to push for mutual restraint by both India and Pakistan in pursuing their nuclear activities. He stated that 'if he discovered that Pakistan was ready to test a bomb or if it exploded one, he would act at once to smash it.' Prime Minister Desai's U.S. trip was hailed as a success by the Indians. The United States on its part responded when the U.S. Congress voted in July 'to sustain President Carter's order to export previously held-up fuel to Tarapur.'

However, Morarji Desai's inaction with regard to the development of a nuclear policy was criticised heavily. Desai replied in the Lok Sabha that he was not ruling out nuclear blasts in the future. However, he made a distinction between blasts and explosions. On the other hand, the Janata government sought to improve relations with Pakistan and China during this time. However, the Indian overtures were not returned by China. By 1979, it became abundantly clear that instead of China, India should be more concerned about a threat from Pakistan.

While the Chinese threat had loomed large during the 1974 nuclear tests, during the 1980s it was the Pakistani threat which loomed large. Pakistan was steadily developing its nuclear arsenal and India was very much aware of it. The Indian leaders including the military considered three alternatives to deal with the situation. 'Destroy Pakistan's nuclear infrastructure with

a pre-emptive air attack; increase India's own nuclear strength; and third, use diplomacy to stabilize relations with Pakistan and improve ties with the United States.'

The fact that Pakistan was stealthily increasing its nuclear weaponry was a cause of concern for the Indian military. During the PNE of 1974, the military was kept out of the decision making. However, that was not the case now. Since the political community was beset with internal problems and did not consider nuclear weapons advancement as its priority, a small group of nuclear scientists continued their work slowly and surreptitiously. The efforts of this group 'fell into two broad categories: extending the "option" strategy through the adoption of a "nonweaponized" deterrent, and developing the theoretical justification for a declared but limited nuclear force.'

Indian governments refused to develop nuclear policy and they held the belief that India could easily develop its nuclear capability if a foreign threat emerged. Moreover, they also believed that by demonstrating to the world the capability of building a nuclear bomb in 1974, they had strengthened their position in the world order and could effectively influence nuclear debates.

The fact that Pakistan was developing its nuclear arsenal was corroborated by the United States in its various briefings. The U.S. was deeply alarmed by the fact that extensive nuclear facilities were already built and under construction. Side by side they were also concerned about the fact that the Pakistani nuclear arsenal development would lead to India developing its nuclear weaponry further, leading to nuclear proliferation in the region. The U.S. invoked the Symington amendment and cut off all aid to Pakistan on the grounds of nuclear proliferation 1979. This act was very much applauded in India, since it was felt that India's position was justified. However, this also meant that the threat of an aggression by Pakistan could no longer be ignored now. India now needed to act immediately to counter the Pakistani threat.

The Janata government failed to capitalise on the failures of the Congress government and Mrs. Gandhi. Morarji Desai was removed from office

as a result of internal strife and Charan Singh replaced him as the prime minister. With Morarji Desai's exit from the political scenario, the relations between India and the United States deteriorated. Mrs. Gandhi returned to power with an overwhelming majority in the elections held on January 1980. During this period also India did not opt for another nuclear test which is quite puzzling. The nuclear scientists tried to persuade her to authorize another test. Indira Gandhi 'once again acceded to the recommendation of the top scientists and authorised a test. However, within 24 hours she changed her mind and cancelled the authorization.' Thereafter she refused to be swayed by any argument made by the security and military analysts. It would appear that she did not foresee any further benefits from nuclear testing and was much more occupied with domestic politics which was now her priority.

The soviet invasion of Afghanistan on December 25, 1979 did not elicit a strong reaction from India. When Mrs. Gandhi returned to office, she did not criticise the Soviet Union very strongly. This was not viewed favourably by the United States. However she realised that India needed Washington to stop the Pakistani nuclear program. Also, her statement evoked a lot of criticisms. This led her to further state that there could be no justification in a country 'entering another country.' India realised that she would have to work towards maintaining American goodwill so as to prevent the formation of a 'Chinese-Pakistani -American axis.' Mrs. Gandhi sought to clarify India's position on the nuclear issue by stating that if the national interest of the country required it, India would not hesitate to conduct nuclear tests. It would seem that India brought its nuclear policy back to its 'pre-Pokhran status. India possessed the capacity to produce and detonate nuclear explosives and would augment that capacity without declaring if and when it would exercise the option to deploy nuclear weapons. In declaratory terms, India continued to eschew nuclear weapons and urged the rest of the world to follow suit.'

However, India's refusal to sign the NPT worked against it. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission voted unanimously to disapprove

the shipment of 38 tons of enriched uranium fuel to India. The reason for this refusal, according to the NRC, was that India had refused to sign the NPT, has refused to open up its nuclear facilities for international inspection and it has never stated definitely that it would not explode again in the future. However, President Carter felt that the shipments should be sent to India in order to strengthen Indo-US ties. So, the shipments would be sent to India by an executive order. This was a new phase of Indo-US ties, wherein the United States tried to balance the power equations in South Asia and to counter the destabilisations caused by Afghanistan and Iran. The fuel that India was requesting was needed for its nuclear station at Tarapur.

India tried out three main ways to deal with the growing Pakistani nuclear threat from 1980 to 1984. 'The first was to increase and demonstrate India's own nuclear strength. This included preparations to conduct another nuclear explosive test and, beginning in 1983, the development of missiles that could conceivably carry warheads. The second option was to attack key nuclear facilities in Pakistan. The third alternative was to use diplomacy to stabilize relations with Pakistan and improve India's ties with the United States.'

When President Ronald Reagan came to office in January 1981, the U.S. attitude towards India changed a lot. At first the relation between the two countries was somewhat negative. The Tarapur crisis led to major differences between the U.S. and India. It was felt that a supply agreement between the two countries will almost certainly be scrapped. Indian official were reported as saying that any further discussions on the issue would be just a formality and that it would amount to a 'decent burial' for the agreement. India on its part holds firm to the stand that the US should honour its 1963 agreement to supply enriched uranium for the U.S. built atomic power plant at Tarapur, until 1993. But the Reagan administration refused to continue the supply on the ground that India had not signed the NPT. India's rejection of the NPT act of 1978 and her refusal to accept international inspection of all her nuclear sites have also worked against her. India rejected the act on the

grounds that it is discriminatory toward countries which have nuclear power but no nuclear weapons. It contended that the act should not affect the earlier agreement. The issue has become a major irritant in Indo-U.S. relations, and both countries appear interested in an amicable termination of the pact. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has said that the Tarapur plant, which provides power for important industries in western India, will be kept going if the U.S. supplies are stopped. Experts say that, if the agreement is revoked, India will be free to obtain alternative supplies from other sources. For instance, she could turn to the Soviet Union, and officials have not denied reports that a leading Indian atomic scientist recently visited Moscow for talks with Soviet scientists.

This changed as a result of the positive personal relationship between Ronald Reagan and Mrs. Gandhi which played an important role in this respect. Indian leaders also felt that if the relation with the United States improved, then the U.S. would be more likely to pay heed to Indian views. They felt that this would help them to counter the Pakistani threat. Mrs. Gandhi's visit to the U.S. on July 1982 helped a great deal in enhancing the Indo-U.S. relationship. The Tarapur crisis was temporarily solved during this period. The two countries agreed to end a dispute that has soured the relation between them for four years. They announced a compromise under which India can continue to receive nuclear fuel for its American-built Tarapur atomic power plant. The agreement provides that India will be able to operate the power plant, Bombay's primary source of electricity, with French-supplied nuclear fuel. India agreed that the Tarapur plant, the used fuel from the reactor that is stored on its site and the fuel to be provided by France all will remain under international safeguards against possible misuse. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act bars resupplying the plant because India refuses to accept full international inspection of all its nuclear facilities. Under the new agreement, the United States won assurances that the fuel it supplied to Tarapur will not be reprocessed without its consent. Under the agreement, the fuel will remain stored under safeguards at the Tarapur reactor. The agreement

specifies that the Indians may only reprocess our fuel if there is a joint determination that the reprocessing plant is safeguarded.

Under heavy pressure from India, the Carter administration persuaded the Senate in September, 1980, to approve one final shipment of fuel to Tarapur. But the Reagan administration reluctantly decided in early 1981 that there was no hope of getting any future shipments approved. Since that time, the administration has focused on finding a formula that would permit India to back off its threats to reprocess the Tarapur fuel. All other provisions of the 1963 agreement would stand as they are, except the French would provide the fuel. The agreement was expected to play a major role in efforts by Reagan and Gandhi to "set a new tone" in relations on the Indian leader's first U.S. visit since 1971.

Throughout the 1980s, Mrs. Gandhi and later on Rajiv Gandhi pursued the course of increasing India's nuclear strength. However, they did not approve any nuclear tests and instead sought to push forth a nuclear weapons building strategy. Mrs. Gandhi also approved the testing and development of ballistic missiles. India's research into ballistic missiles began in the 1960s under the aegis of the Defence research and Development Organisation (DRDO). In July 1983 India created the 'Integrated Guided Missile development Program (IGMDP) with the aim of developing an indigenous missile infrastructure. The IGMDP's first indigenously developed missile was the Prithvi.' Along with this India also developed its Agni missiles, a variant of long range missiles. 'The induction of the Agni into India's nuclear doctrine was held up in the first half of the 1990s by successive government's reluctance to order further tests of the missile.' Indian missile technology was already developed to a great extent when the Missile Technology Control Regime was formed in 1987. However, in this respect also India has shown considerable restraint and has not deployed missiles. India's foreign policy in this period 'was Indira's foreign policy, as she was its dominant shaper and executor.' 'Since then India has successfully tested the Prithvi short range, ground-launch missile and the medium-range

Agni. While analysts disagree on the exact extent of the MTCR's impact on India's missile program, its most lasting effect has been to spur greater self-sufficiency, with signs of eventual success. As with its nuclear capability, India has exercised restraint in missile deployment. In many ways it exemplifies India's tendency to have technology "demonstrators" as part of its strategic posture for sending strong signals of its capability without necessarily ratcheting up the arms race.'

Indira Gandhi's commitment to international disarmament has not been properly acknowledged. Her deep commitment to and long standing involvement in the cause of international disarmament has not been properly evaluated. Her participation in the Five Continent Peace Initiative along with Argentina, Mexico, Sweden, Greece and Tanzania included a pledge that she and the other would do everything in their powers to facilitate agreement among the nuclear weapons states. She gave a call to all nuclear states to halt all testing, production and deployment of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems to be immediately followed by substantial reduction in nuclear forces.

Mrs. Gandhi's assassination in 1984 marked the end of an era in Indian politics. Rajiv Gandhi assumed office after the assassination of his mother Indira Gandhi. The Indian nuclear policy during this time was remarkably restrained despite the growing Pakistani threat. However, Rajiv Gandhi was gravely concerned with the inaction on the part of the U.S. to dissuade Pakistan from acquiring and increasing its nuclear capability sensibilities.

End Notes

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