


Policy Forum 98-06: Implications of South Asian Nuclear Tests: What Can the World Do?

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NAPSNet Forum #17 -- The Implications of India's Nuclear Tests

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Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network

THE IMPLICATIONS OF INDIA'S NUCLEAR TESTS

#17B -- May 27, 1998

The is intended to provide expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia, and an opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis. The Forum is open to all participants of the [Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network \(NAPSNet\)](#) . As always, NAPSNet invites your responses to this report. Please see " [NAPSNet Invites Your Responses](#) ," below, and send your responses to the NAPSNet Coordinator at: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org .

This is the second of a series of essays that make up Policy Forum #17.

Essay #1: [The Proliferation Network, by Wade Huntley](#) .

WHAT CAN THE WORLD DO?

Essay by Ramesh Thakur

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I. Introduction

Professor Ramesh Thakur is vice rector of the United Nations University in Tokyo, Japan. In this essay, he examines the international and domestic causes of the Indian nuclear tests, as well as the international response. He argues that, while regrettable, India's decision to test is not surprising, given both the domestic pressures on the ruling coalition and the flaws of international nonproliferation regimes. He concludes that the international community's response to the tests are unlikely to be effective. US sanctions lack moral equivalence due to the lack of progress on disarmament, and any response is likely to play into the hands of Indian hawks.

This essay originally appeared in the International Herald Tribune on Tuesday, May 19, 1998.

II. Essay by Ramesh Thakur

"India Was Wrong to Test, but What Can the World Do?"

By Ramesh Thakur

TOKYO - The nuclear tests carried out by India are regrettable, disappointing and wrong - but they are also understandable. They demonstrated an underestimated level of nuclear sophistication, an unexpected strength of political will and an unsuspected ability to evade advance detection. India's nuclear pursuit is based on a flawed grasp of contemporary international realities and mistaken calculations of national security needs and responses. By carrying out the tests, India has put itself on the wrong side of history. Why?

Domestically, the Vajpayee government has nothing to lose and much to gain by tapping resurgent nationalist sentiment. The ragtag coalition of 20 parties has been lurching from one crisis to another. Its collapse has often seemed imminent, threatening yet another election. The tests have enhanced the government's stature and the prime minister's authority. Instant polls showed a 91 percent approval rating, even though 80 percent of those polled also said they believed that Pakistan would follow suit with its own tests. The Indian government has seized the high ground, making it difficult for any political party to criticize it for fear of being branded unpatriotic. The Bharatiya Janata Party will argue that only it has the courage of nuclear convictions that previous governments demonstrably lacked. This should ensure some stability for the government, as no other party would risk another election in which the BJP would be returned with a triumphant majority.

Regionally, India has faced strategic encirclement through nuclear missile collusion between Pakistan and China. After the indefinite extension of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1995 and the conclusion of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996, New Delhi faced the cruel choice of "use it or lose it" on the long-held nuclear option. By not testing, India could not match China's conventional or nuclear capabilities. But India's threshold nuclear status enabled Pakistan to neutralize India's conventional military superiority. Pakistan's test last month of the Ghauri missile destroyed India's natural strategic depth and produced much crowing in Pakistan about having achieved parity with India.

India, which tested three types of nuclear weapons (fission, low-yield and fusion), also has sent three clear signals to Pakistan and China. Pakistan's nuclear capability is still considerably behind India's. New Delhi can yet, if it chooses, match China on the nuclear world stage. And the collusion between Beijing and Islamabad will not go unanswered.

The signals of international defiance are even more interesting. The Canberra Commission on the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons in 1996 argued that it defied credulity to believe that a self-appointed group of five countries could forever maintain a monopoly on one type of weaponry. That conclusion has been vindicated.

India's old posture of nuclear ambiguity was increasingly seen as a sham. New Delhi was already paying the price through embargoes on high-technology transfers. The world tried to corner India through a constitutional trick by which the test ban treaty was rescued from the deadlocked Disarmament Conference in Geneva and approved by the UN General Assembly in New York. The resulting hardening of India's nuclear stance was predictable. Now the test ban treaty will be dead on arrival in the U.S. Senate.

New Delhi seems to have concluded that the marginal costs of additional sanctions are outweighed by gains in national security and pride. India has long nursed a sense of grievance about international "nuclear apartheid." India had exhibited nuclear restraint: no test since 1974, no declared nuclear weapon status, no sharing of nuclear technology with others and no overt deployment of missiles. India has also abstained from exporting arms. Despite this restraint, New Delhi was constantly criticized for rejecting the nuclear treaties - even while the world turned a blind eye to the clandestine acquisition of nuclear capability by Pakistan with Chinese assistance.

The world cannot allow India to defy the developing anti-nuclear norm with impunity. But what to do? Under U.S. law, Washington must apply sanctions on credits and credit guarantees, on loans from U.S. banks and on military assistance. It also must oppose loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Japan, India's biggest donor, is bound to reconsider its foreign aid, and other countries will follow to varying degrees.

Sanctions on India face three sets of difficulties: the historical record, moral equivalence and practical calculations. Sanctions have a bad reputation and a worse history as a policy instrument for effecting change. The five nuclear powers have no moral authority to impose sanctions. They maintain stockpiles in defiance of a World Court opinion on nations' legal obligation to nuclear disarmament. Also, India's tests breach no international treaty, convention or law. The Big Five preach nonproliferation but practice deterrence. Their bluff has been called.

Justifying the U.S. opening to China in 1971, Henry Kissinger remarked that a nation of 800 million people armed with nuclear weapons could not be ignored. That logic of engagement applies even more forcefully to India today. Outsiders' self-interest lies in assisting India's economic growth. The dilemma is this: A moderate response will be self-defeating. India's nuclear hawks will feel vindicated, saying that India is now being treated with respect because it has nuclear weapons,

which should therefore be openly deployed in numbers. A harsh response will be self-fulfilling. The hawks will argue that a friendless India which is the target of hostile international attention needs an arsenal of nuclear weapons to defend its interests.

Official statements from New Delhi present intriguing possibilities of resolving the dilemma. If outside pressure prevents Pakistan from nuclear testing, and if sanctions are not imposed, India may be prepared to join the nuclear club from within, to sign the test ban treaty, to observe the provisions of the nonproliferation treaty, to accept permanent membership on the UN Security Council, and to take part in arms control talks at the center table.

But don't hold your breath.

III. NAPSNet Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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