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INDIA: UNCERTAINTY OVER NUCLEAR POLICY

The euphoria that characterized the response of the Indian public to the May 18 nuclear explosion has been overtaken by uncertainty about the relationship between nuclear explosions and development needs and about the durability of India's proclaimed status as a non-weapons nuclear state. These doubts may delay the Gandhi government's decision on the future development of India's nuclear program.

Calculation of Benefits. All of India's major political parties immediately welcomed the explosion in the Rajasthan desert, and most of the press initially accepted at face value the government statements that India had no intention of developing its nuclear capability for military uses.

In addition to the putative technological and development gains, the press and public cited other advantages of the nuclear explosion:

- greater respect abroad for India's power;
- an opportunity to correct the inequities of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and to induce other states to give greater consideration to India's stand on disarmament;
- proof that India could achieve results by organizing its resources efficiently.

The press generally discounted foreign charges that the explosion was timed for Mrs. Gandhi's political benefit. It



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argued that the decision had been made three years before and that the blast would have been of greater political impact in the pre-election year of 1975.

Only one major daily condemned the explosion, but other editorialists clearly predicated their praise of the achievement on government assurances of peaceful intent. These writers contended that any effort to develop a nuclear deterrent would be a misplaced priority and a betrayal of the nation's ideals.

Skepticism About Peaceful Uses. As the initial excitement dissipated, the front-page accounts of the nuclear explosion were replaced by the customary stories about food shortages, high prices, and labor and political unrest. Increasingly, the elite sections of Indian society manifested skepticism, defensiveness, and apprehension that tempered their lingering pride over India's entry into the nuclear era. Still, few voices echoed that of the prestigious Gandhi Peace Forum, which termed the blast "a cruel joke."

One Congress MP told Embassy New Delhi that he did not take very seriously the government's claims about the exclusively peaceful purposes of the explosion, and he speculated that most of his colleagues shared his private skepticism. Military officers at the National Defense College expressed certainty that India would develop a weapons capability. An official of the Ministry of External Affairs, while acknowledging that nuclear explosions had few peaceful uses, worried that India's credibility would be eroded if no such uses were found.

K. Subrahmanyam, Director of the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, alleged that no peaceful uses were considered possible before 1990, and that there was a tacit assumption among many Indians that the government's assertions were merely a public relations stand. Therefore, he argued, the erosion of India's credibility might prove to be more harmful than a declared nuclear weapons policy.

Keeping Open the Weapons Option. Some Indian journalists argued against renouncing weapons for all time to come. The press is predicting that public pressure for weapons will depend on Peking and Islamabad. In addition, certain journalists warned that the efforts of aid donors to "punish" the Indian Government would strengthen the position of the domestic chauvinists. The right-wing Hindu revivalist party, Jana Sangh,

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charged that Mrs. Gandhi's statements were neither credible nor in keeping with the country's interests and reiterated its demand that the government develop nuclear weapons.

The focus of concern for those who urged consideration of the weapons option was Pakistan. In the context of India's gradually improving relations with that country, the explosion--in the words of a senior official--"could not have come at a worse time." One columnist argued that no responsible government in New Delhi could contemplate nuclear blackmail against Islamabad without first making sure of its ability to deal with a counterstrike from China. But another contended that India's explosion would induce Pakistan to develop its own nuclear weapons capability, and, should India adhere to its peaceful resolve, it would then be even worse off as a non-weapon nuclear power than before as a non-nuclear power. According to this argument, the government should now move to establish a credible deterrent in the expectation that a "balance of terror" on the subcontinent would make war less likely.

Costs of Future Testing. The press clearly felt that the decision to develop a weapons capability hinged not on India's undoubted ability to do so but on economic and political considerations. Some found these factors weighing against such a decision: the economic and technological resources necessary to achieve and maintain a weapons system were not available in the absence of any strategic compulsion.

On the other hand, most commentators felt that the costs of developing the technology required for the first detonation were justified in view of the potential economic and technological benefits. Predictably, the same few newspapers which initially had questioned India's nuclear program on the grounds of economic priorities were quick to defend India against foreign critics who challenged the right of a poor country to develop nuclear devices.

India and the NPT. If there was no sorrow in India about the impact of the explosion on the NPT, there was strong sentiment for a diplomatic effort to fashion a new international policy toward nuclear proliferation. Indian opinion generally rejected the contention that India had opened the floodgates of nuclear proliferation, on grounds that other non-nuclear countries would need no encouragement from India to fulfill their military ambitions.

Several commentators noted the need for international recognition of a new category of nuclear-capable, but non-

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weapons states. One argued that India could contribute to non-proliferation by forgoing--and thus de-emphasizing--the national prestige of nuclear weapons. Some foresaw an Indian diplomatic effort to shift the accent to peaceful uses of nuclear power and thus force the superpowers into serious negotiations at the Geneva disarmament conference.

Public Impact on Future Decisions. The elite sectors of public opinion clearly have moved from their initial euphoria toward reflection on the strategic uncertainties, economic burdens, and diplomatic responsibilities of nuclear status. On the basis of reactions thus far, however, the government still enjoys a consensus in favor of continued testing and further development. But a portion of this support is predicated on the continued adherence to non-military applications, and a government decision for a weapons program would meet much greater internal opposition--on moral and economic grounds--than did the "peaceful bang."

On the other hand, a small, vocal segment of the Indian public continues to advocate a weapons program, and this sentiment would increase rapidly if Pakistan were to expand its own nuclear program. Moreover, there is a significant group of politicians, officials, and journalists who have been skeptical of the government's intention or ability to forgo weapons. Despite their talk of disarmament opportunities and a special non-weapons status, many of these skeptics appear quietly resigned to a full-fledged nuclear status for India.

Domestic reaction to date also indicates that efforts by aid donors to "punish" India or retard its nuclear development would tend to strengthen public support for future nuclear tests. Conversely, if international reaction to India's nuclear testing continues to be relatively restrained, assertions of nationalistic pride eventually may give way to greater concern about India's economic priorities and ultimate strategic intentions. In this latter case, as testing continues, the government may find itself forced into a public accounting of the practical applicability--peaceful or military--of its nuclear program. While it would receive general support for further "peaceful" tests, such tests would sharpen the debate over the weapons issue and thus reduce the government's flexibility in maintaining a non-weapons option.

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