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Indian Nuclear Policies in the 1980s (U)

An Intelligence Assessment

DECLASSIFIED UNDER AUTHORITY OF THE INTERAGENCY SECURITY CLASSIFICATION APPEALS PANEL, E.O. 13526, SECTION 5.3(b)(3)

ISCAP APPEAL NO. 2012-062, document no. 1
DECLASSIFICATION DATE: May 6, 2019

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September 1981

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An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 10 September 1981
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

The author of this assessment is [redacted]
Office of Political Analysis. Comments and queries
are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief,
Political-Military Branch, International Issues
Division, OPA, on [redacted] (U)

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This report has been coordinated with the Office of
Scientific and Weapons Research, the Office of
Economic Research, the National Intelligence Officer
for Near East-South Asia, and the Special
Assistant for Nuclear Proliferation Intelligence. (U)

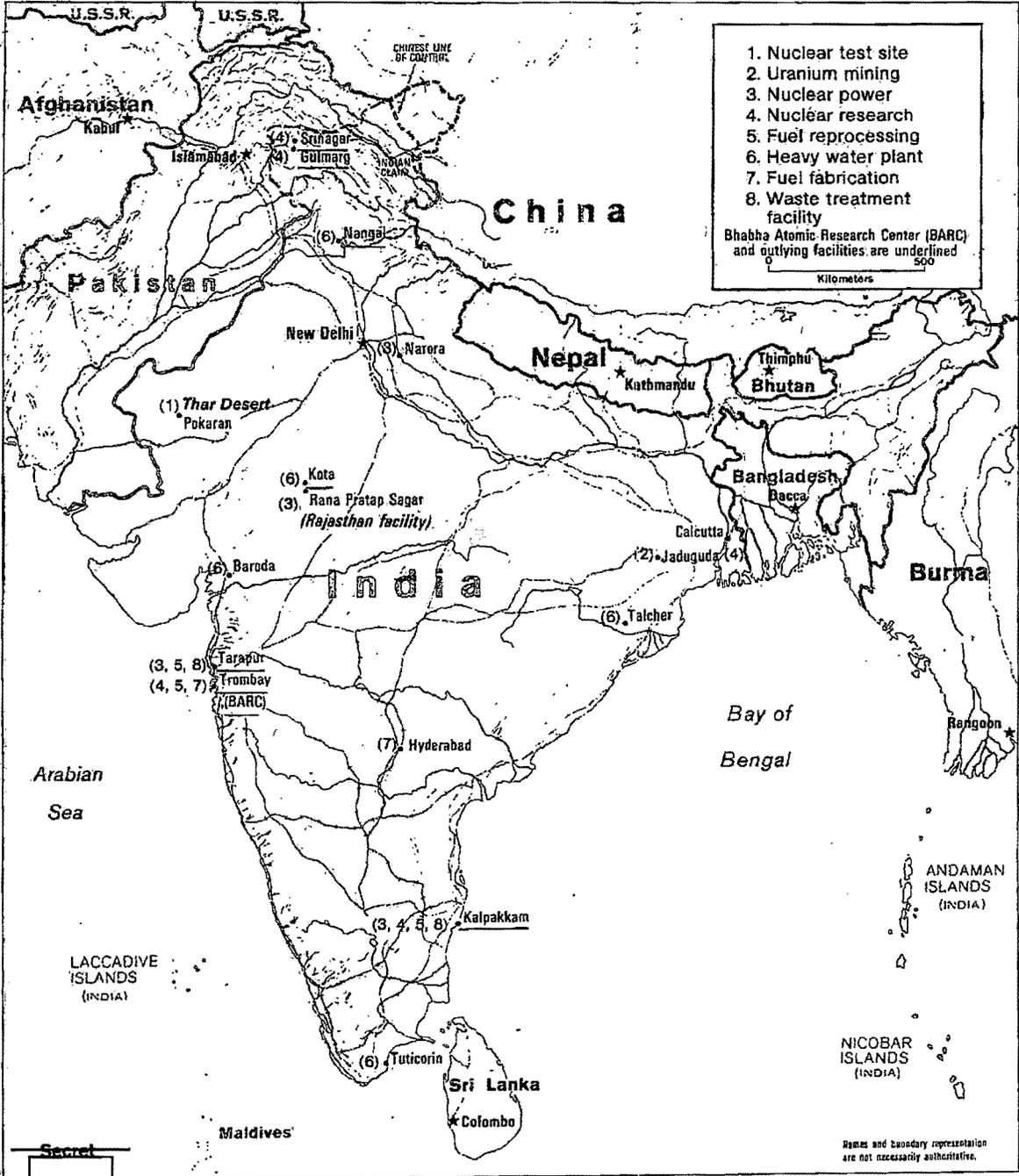
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Nuclear Facilities in India



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Indian Nuclear Policies in the 1980s (U)

Key Judgments

India would prefer not to begin a nuclear weapons program in the 1980s but may be forced to revise its policy by nuclear developments in Pakistan.

New Delhi's assessments of Islamabad's nuclear effort will be a major factor in Prime Minister Gandhi's decisions on Indian nuclear policy in the 1980s.

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New Delhi probably would not authorize another Indian nuclear test prior to one by Pakistan; it wants to ensure that Islamabad suffers the full weight of negative international reaction.

Uncertainty over Pakistan's nuclear intentions and capabilities could lead India to initiate a peaceful nuclear explosion program, carefully paced to match sporadic Pakistani tests until the nature of the Pakistani program became clearer. A rapid series of Pakistani tests, however, would compel New Delhi to develop nuclear weapons and touch off a nuclear arms race between the two.

Fear of international economic and political reprisals will continue to be a strong deterrent against an Indian attack on Pakistan's nuclear facilities. Such facilities, however, probably would become targets in the event of a general war with Pakistan.

China—not Pakistan—is perceived as the major long-term threat to Indian security. This perception has propelled New Delhi to reject the Non-Proliferation Treaty and full-scope safeguards in order to retain the nuclear weapons option.

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India's technology for a credible delivery system as part of a nuclear deterrent against China is not as advanced as its nuclear accomplishments. This technology gap reinforces New Delhi's desire to avoid overt nuclear weapons development before the late 1980s.

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Indian Nuclear Policies in the 1980s

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Assessing the Dangers

India, having exploded its first nuclear device in 1974, is reappraising its nuclear policy to cope with the security and foreign policy implications of a potential Pakistani nuclear test.

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This upsets previous Indian calculations of when it might have to exercise its nuclear weapons option and markedly complicates India's efforts to balance its major foreign policy objectives, mainly to retain:

- Recognition as a major power not aligned with the superpowers.
- Military power sufficient to protect its borders from Pakistan and China.
- Leadership of the subcontinent.
- The reputation as a major proponent of nuclear disarmament.

Since the 1962 border war with China and the Chinese nuclear test two years later, New Delhi has considered Beijing a more serious long-term threat to Indian national security than Pakistan. India avoided nuclear safeguards and treaty commitments whenever possible to preserve its option for future nuclear weapons development. The delayed nature of the Chinese nuclear threat also allowed New Delhi to defer a nuclear weapons development program until it developed the technology for intermediate range missiles. India could have such means of delivery by the mid-to-late 1980s if the political decision were made to militarize the missile program.

China's "opening" to the West in recent years led to an Indian reevaluation of when Beijing might become a more serious security challenge. New Delhi has taken careful note not only of China's difficulty in prosecuting the 1979 war with Vietnam but also its

pressing need for modernizing its economy and military. Indian policymakers believe the latter effort will result in a further delay before China can bring pressure to bear on India. New Delhi, however, now faces a decision on whether to pursue the weapons option because of developments in Pakistan.

The prospect of two nuclear-armed neighbors appears to have induced India to consider proceeding more quickly on weapons research and development than previously planned. A decision to accelerate weapons research—and, especially, to conduct nuclear tests—would create a number of problems. An Indian program undertaken to match the Pakistani effort would threaten its relations with the United States and other nuclear suppliers, possibly provoke China and set back current efforts to improve relations, and damage India's image within the nonaligned movement (NAM). (U)

Nonetheless, the Indian Government cannot allow a Pakistani test to go unchallenged because that would threaten India's regional supremacy and international prestige. New Delhi, therefore, seeks a policy that is sufficiently responsive to the Pakistani threat yet does not appear to be driven by Pakistani actions. Even though a reactive posture might satisfy the security expectations of the Indian electorate, it would tarnish the image India wishes to project abroad as a regional power and an emerging world power capable of influencing events in the Indian Ocean area. (U)

New Delhi wants a nuclear policy that will permit its security planners sufficient flexibility to repond to whatever Pakistan does. Whether Pakistan will decide not to test, explode one device, or conduct a series of tests to refine weapons design are among the variables that India has to evaluate. (U)

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The option of destroying Pakistani facilities will probably never go beyond the contingency planning stage. India relies upon the Persian Gulf for about 60 percent of its imported oil. The possibility of a boycott by the oil producers in the area in protest against an attack on a fellow Muslim state is a risk New Delhi is not likely to take. There is no doubt, however, that in case of general hostilities with Pakistan, New Delhi would strike at the Pakistani nuclear facilities. □

Short-Term Policy Response

New Delhi is confident that it can match and exceed all Pakistani technical accomplishments. The logical first step, and one that appears to give the greatest flexibility and independence to Indian foreign and nuclear policy, is construction of a permanent test site. Whether the political decision is made to conduct another test before or after a Pakistani demonstration, the early completion of a test facility will telescope the time it will take India to proceed with testing. □

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Indian officials have stated in private discussions with US officials that it is related to a peaceful nuclear explosives (PNE) program. During discussions in mid-April in Washington, Indian officials were careful to assure their US counterparts that no decision to test a PNE device had been made but they would not discount the possibility that such a decision might be made in the future. □

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India steadfastly argues that peaceful nuclear explosions have useful applications and a considerable body of technical literature in Indian journals maintains the thesis that PNE technology is a useful tool for Indian economic development. Thus, New Delhi will use this emphasis on peaceful nuclear explosions as an explanation for its nuclear policy at least until Pakistani intentions become clearer. (u)

India can thus be expected in this and other ways to portray its actions as an "open and peaceful" undertaking in contrast to Pakistan's "covert" weapons program. New Delhi will also attempt to portray the civilian control of its nuclear program as further evidence of its peaceful nature and to attribute sinister motives to Pakistan's military-controlled effort. □

If New Delhi does not revise its assessment of the timing of the Pakistani test, India will probably announce the construction or completion of the "Pokaran PNE Test Facility" some time within the next year, describing it as simply an addition to its domestic nuclear installations. The announcement might be accompanied by press briefings, site tours, and other publicity for the productive uses of PNE technology. Such a campaign, detailing the benefits but vague on a timetable for testing, would provide the mechanism for a flexible response to the Pakistani program. □

If the Pakistani nuclear effort turned out to be protracted and designed more for domestic political gains than as a credible deterrent to India's conventional military superiority, New Delhi could suspend its program or even conduct a peaceful nuclear explosion for some legitimate mining or engineering project. India might go so far as to invite foreign observers to promote further the image of the program's peaceful intent. Were the Pakistanis to appear to be pursuing a weapons stockpile, however, India would have an excuse to adjust from a "peaceful" to a weapons program, placing the onus squarely on Islamabad. □

India's efforts toward rapprochement with China probably would not be jeopardized as long as the "peaceful nature" of the program was maintained.

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Moreover, there is a strong possibility that Beijing would not view a limited Indian stockpile of fission weapons designed to counter Pakistan as a threat, so long as India lacked an effective long-range delivery system.

Nuclear Relations With the United States

The impasse with the United States over the supply of enriched uranium for the Tarapur reactors confronts the Indian Government with a policy dilemma which Prime Minister Gandhi will probably try to resolve within the next six months. New Delhi would like relations with Washington to improve and specifically wants US supplies of nuclear fuel to continue. Since there is little likelihood that the US Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act of 1978 will be amended to permit further shipments of fuel, however, India would prefer an amicable termination of the bilateral contract.

The Indian Government believes that plutonium obtained by reprocessing spent fuel from Tarapur must be available as a substitute before current stocks of US-supplied fuel are exhausted. Prime Minister Gandhi realizes that serious regional political and economic dislocations could ensue if replacement fuel is not ready in time and the Tarapur reactors have to be shut down. Nevertheless, she will not start reprocessing the spent Tarapur fuel before the Indo-US contract is officially terminated.

When the agreement is eventually scrapped, India can be expected publicly to contrast the unwillingness of the US Government to amend its legislation to continue supplying fuel for Tarapur with efforts to modify the Symington Amendment to permit the renewed sale of arms to Pakistan. New Delhi might press the argument that Washington's nuclear policies in South Asia are designed to penalize India and favor Pakistan. It would probably also assert that US nonproliferation objectives are "expendable" whenever they conflict with the pursuit of "narrow" superpower interests.

India may be willing to risk a further souring of relations with the United States as a result of such a propaganda attack, but it will be careful not to

undermine the international nonproliferation system by revoking all its safeguards commitments at Tarapur when the US fuel supply agreement is terminated. India does not want the opprobrium of being the first nation to cancel a nuclear safeguards arrangement. To avoid the appearance of yielding to US pressure, India has quietly and unilaterally renegotiated a new safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to cover the reprocessing of spent Tarapur fuel. It has no reason to abrogate the safeguards applicable to Tarapur since any plutonium extracted from high burn-up fuel would not be well suited for weapons, yet could be used as a substitute fuel in the Tarapur reactors.

Any resumption of nuclear testing by India will not only damage bilateral nuclear relations with the United States but also with most other nuclear suppliers. As long as India claimed it was perfecting its PNE technology, however, New Delhi could probably rely on the Soviets to continue to supply critical items. All such transactions with Moscow would involve the appropriate safeguards but it is unlikely that the Soviets would press for full-scope safeguards. In pursuit of its vital national interests, India seems prepared to accept the economic dislocation, delay, and increased costs that would result from a cutoff of nuclear equipment and material from the West. After the 1974 test, for example, India accepted the resultant setbacks to its nuclear program rather than sacrifice its freedom of action. (U)

Nuclear Relations in International Forums

Regardless of the future course of Indo-US relations in the nuclear field, India can be expected to continue its longstanding effort in various international forums to question the existing safeguards regime, supplier guidelines, and other nonproliferation initiatives, especially after Pakistan conducts its initial test. Superpower "connivance" and supplier "greed" will be targeted by India as being behind the "selective proliferation" of not only Pakistan, but also Israel and South Africa. Such posturing will serve to mask or justify India's moves to pace its own nuclear weapons program with whatever Pakistan does.

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New Delhi is likely to distort its IAEA safeguards agreements to serve its own interests. It will cite the "failure" of safeguards to prevent development of a Pakistani bomb to justify its continued resistance to safeguards coverage over subsequent additions to the Indian nuclear inventory. India also will continue to point out the contradiction between what it believes is the primary mandate of the IAEA to promote the diffusion of nuclear technology and the efforts of supplier states to use the IAEA as a means to impose stringent safeguards and technology denial to promote nonproliferation objectives. □

India will seek forums other than the IAEA to deal with the issue of nonproliferation so as not to dilute that organization's primary role to transfer technology. The framework of the consensus resolution adopted at the First UN Special Session on Disarmament (SSOD) in 1978 may allow India to pursue its favorite themes at later sessions. In the SSOD any treatment of nonproliferation objectives can be expected to be expanded by India and its supporters in the Group of 77, the developing countries' UN caucus, to cover vertical proliferation among the nuclear weapons states and horizontal proliferation among the nonnuclear weapons states. For years India has been citing the passage of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by the superpowers and reduction of existing arsenals as called for in Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a precondition for making the treaty less "discriminatory" and therefore worthy of joining. □

As a nonsignatory to the NPT, India can only function in the wings of such gatherings as the NPT Review Conference. Prior to last year's review conference in Geneva, India was successful in persuading several NPT signatories from the Third World—most notably Mexico and Peru—to voice dissatisfaction with lack of movement by the superpowers on Article VI and to raise the prospect of withdrawing from the treaty if positive action is not taken. (u)

India can be expected to use the Group of 77 to sustain pressure on the superpowers to adhere to provisions of the NPT, to enhance India's credentials as seeking disarmament, and to deflect criticism of

India's growing nuclear capability. A likely Indian rejoinder to such criticism would be that it, as a member of the nuclear "club," has acquired the requisite credentials to force others to address seriously proposals on disarmament. □

India will make every effort to continue participation in the Nuclear Coordinating Group of the NAM, which seeks to promote the unrestricted transfer of nuclear technology to developing nations. As India attempts to develop a nuclear export market in the Third World, it will probably require compliance with safeguards. To avoid possible criticism of its own policy, however, India will not insist on full-scope safeguards as a precondition of supply. (u)

Other Nuclear Considerations

New Delhi still needs some updated technology and material for the smooth functioning of its nuclear effort and does not want to foreclose these channels by violating existing safeguards commitments. Nonetheless, if Pakistan embarked on an accelerated nuclear weapons program, India would probably interpret its safeguards obligations in a manner designed to maximize its weapons production potential. □

India has managed to create a nuclear fuel cycle consisting of two almost parallel self-contained loops, however, and facilities in only one of these loops are under safeguards. Several key facilities can be alternated between safeguarded and unsafeguarded operation depending on the status of the material being used. For example, spent fuel from the safeguarded power reactors at Tarapur and Kota reprocessed at the Tarapur plant will remain subject to IAEA inspection and verification. Plutonium separated from unsafeguarded spent fuel at the Tarapur reprocessing plant, however, would be considered outside of safeguards and beyond accountability to the IAEA. □

For the moment, only the small Cirrus research reactor is capable of producing plutonium free from safeguards for use in a PNE program. By 1982 or 1983, when the larger R-5 research reactor and another indigenously built civil power reactor come on stream,

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India will have the potential for producing at least 100 kilograms of unsafeguarded plutonium, a good portion of which would be weapons-quality material.

If Pakistan embarked on an accelerated weapons program that India could not match by existing stockpiles of unsafeguarded weapons-grade material and available production, New Delhi probably would judge that it could not afford to wait for new, unsafeguarded reactors to come on line. It would then have to consider removing one or more power reactors from safeguards. This step would certainly be one of last resort because it would risk the termination of existing bilateral supply and technology relationships. None are viewed as critical, however, and India seems fully prepared to accept the political difficulties and economic dislocations it might incur in order to protect its most vital security interests.

If such an action were taken, the most likely candidate would be the second Rajasthan Atomic Power Plant (RAPP II) at Kota. India accepted IAEA safeguards on this facility only because continued shortfalls in domestic heavy water production delayed the commissioning of this reactor, and safeguarded heavy water from the USSR was necessary to get it into operation. To remove this facility from safeguards, India could argue that by substituting domestically produced heavy water for the Soviet-supplied material, safeguards would no longer apply. Spent fuel and Soviet heavy water would be stored separately, subject to IAEA inspection and verification. This "substitution" option will only be possible when the problem-ridden domestic heavy water industry becomes capable of meeting all demands placed upon it.

Outlook

India is likely to remain reluctant to start a nuclear weapons production program any time soon. With the China threat seen as receding further into the future and an overwhelming conventional military superiority sufficient to maintain New Delhi's predominant position in South Asia, India would prefer not to be forced into a nuclear arms race with Pakistan in the early 1980s. Having to match and exceed a Pakistani

nuclear threat is perceived as an unwanted escalation in dealing with what is clearly a militarily inferior adversary.

If India were convinced that Pakistan would stop short of detonating a nuclear device, New Delhi would willingly defer resumption of nuclear testing. Evidence that Islamabad was shelving its testing program so as not to jeopardize the resumption of its arms relationship with the United States might be sufficient for the Indians to postpone PNE activities and to leave the Rajasthan test site idle.

An Indian decision not to renew testing would remain in effect only as long as New Delhi was certain that Pakistan was not assembling a clandestine weapons stockpile. Pakistani restraint over crossing the nuclear threshold, at least until the mid-1980s, would allow India to defer overt nuclear weapons development while perfecting its delivery technology. Later in the decade India would again assess the need to pursue the nuclear weapons option in light of Pakistani developments but, more importantly, in the context of its security relationship with China.

In the interim, and until Islamabad's intentions become clearer, New Delhi will complete its test site, allocate manpower for a test program, and be poised to match whatever Pakistan does. Any intelligence that generated Indian uncertainty over whether Pakistan would settle for one demonstration device or continue with a number of tests could well lead to a series of reciprocal tests and a nuclear arms race on the subcontinent.

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