



## **India's Reactions to the Chinese Nuclear Capability, 1964-1974**

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On 16 October 1964, China tested its first nuclear device at Lop Nor. A day after, Chinese premier Chou En-lai wrote a letter to Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri explaining its decision to test a nuclear device and proposed a world summit to discuss nuclear disarmament. Shastri replied to Chou's letter on 27th November 1964. India, as Shastri argued, was dismayed by China's development of the bomb. For New Delhi, Beijing's decision had subverted the cause of nuclear disarmament. Setback to nuclear disarmament notwithstanding, Shastri was equally emphatic in pointing out that the China's proposal for a world summit on prohibition and destruction of nuclear weapons carefully avoids the question of conventional disarmament. As Shastri argued, "This particular aspect of the matter cannot be absent in any proposal from the PRC which has the largest army in the world, not including millions of armed men in Chinese militia."

This curious exchange between the two heads of states is an interesting contrast to the available literature on Indian nuclear history which concludes that India's nuclear weapons programme in the 60s and 70s was a reaction to China's acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1964. India's national security interests, as the literature argues, forced India to contemplate for itself a nuclear weapons option. What precisely were those national security interests and whether they provided India enough motivation to initiate a full-fledged nuclear weapons programme are left undiscussed? Logically, the extent of nuclear preparation should be proportional to the extent of the threat perceived. However, the current state of literature on India's drift towards a nuclear weapons option after the Chinese test falls seriously short of completing this logical loop. Even if the 1974 test could be considered as a show of India's

nuclear capability, it is indeed puzzling why it took New Delhi close to ten long years to achieve a nuclear deterrent against China if national security interests in the wake of the 1964 Lop Nor tests were so grave. These questions gain additional significance in the light of new facts which have emerged recently on the nature of 1974 nuclear tests. The 1974 PNE was devoid of any weapons capability: it remained non-weaponised and no concomitant delivery systems were being developed by India till mid-1970s. The event of May 1974 had no short to mid-term military significance.

Part of the reason for such simplistic conclusions is the fact that most of the available literature is dependent upon foreign archives and especially the American archives. How Indian decision-makers were relaying their threat perceptions to foreign countries cannot be the matrix on which internal assessments of threat could be appropriately understood. It was logical and may be necessary for India to exaggerate the threat from a nuclear China to the outside world with which it had in 1962 fought a conventional war and was squarely defeated. Moreover, Indian sources referred to in the available literature are restricted to the cacophony of the Indian parliament. Parliamentary debates are a good indicator of the public mood but can seldom be considered as true reflection of government's thinking. Over-reliance on such sources may often lead to wrong conclusions.

Instead, this paper argued that rather than posing a direct military threat, China's nuclear programme in 1960's was perceived by Indian decision-makers to be a part of China's psychological warfare and largely an issue of prestige. It would have had most impact on India's standing in the world and also the demoralizing impact on Indian masses. Militarily speaking, the national security interests of India lay in not developing a nuclear deterrent but in defending the Indian Territory in another conventional war with China and to restrict the Chinese from influencing and instigating revolutionary wars in the Indian body-politik. Between 1964 and 1974, Indian decision-makers consistently under-appreciated the military consequences of China's nuclear weapons often ascertaining that China will not use the bomb. On the other hand, they were highly conscious about China's conventional military strengths and its growing ideological influence within India. However, the perceptions of Chinese conventional military threat consistently declined between 1964 and 1974 largely on account of two developments. First, in the latter half on 1960's, there was increasing confidence among Indian decision-makers that India will be able to conventionally defend its territorial integrity vis-à-vis China, largely on account of defence build-up after the 1962 war.

Second, India's strategic environment continuously improved with the Sino-Soviet rift in late 1960's. This largely explains that even when India failed to acquire nuclear security guarantees from the superpowers by 1967 and its diplomatic initiative to halt Chinese nuclear programme came to a naught with the signing of the NPT in 1968, the nuclear weapons programme was not accelerated.

The paper was divided in three major sections. The first section discussed India's reactions to the Chinese nuclear programme between its first tests at Lop Nor in October 1964 to the signing of the NPT in 1968. Even when the Indian Prime Minister had allowed a small group of scientists to start working on the peaceful nuclear explosion project in 1965, the main thrust of India's campaign against the Chinese nuclear programme was diplomatic in nature: seeking nuclear security guarantees from the established nuclear powers and also hoping that the non-proliferation treaty would eventually arrest the Chinese nuclear cascade. The second section focusses on the period between 1969 and 1971. Though the PNE programme remained functional even when the head of the Department of Atomic Energy – Dr. Vikram Sarabhai – was principally opposed to India developing nuclear weapons, the perception among Indian decision-makers was that a real deterrent against China would emerge only if India is both conventionally and economically strengthened. In fact the Department of Atomic Energy in this period argued against a nuclear weapons programme. Moreover, the Ussuri River clashes between the Chinese and the Soviets made India feel more comfortable as the bulk of Chinese conventional forces were pinned down on the Soviet frontier. The internal turmoil within the CPC and the PLA during the Cultural Revolution also helped calm India's threat perceptions. The last section discussed the period between India's conclusive victory over Pakistan during the Bangladesh War in December 1971 and the conduct of the PNE in May 1974. The sense of euphoria which the 1971 war bestowed upon India was equally reflective in its threat assessments of China in the post-1971 period. Indian decision-makers not only believed that China would not use nuclear weapons against India but also assumed that even a conventional war is a remote possibility. Instead, New Delhi remained concerned of Pakistan's conventional rearmament by the US and its middle-eastern allies. Not without reason therefore, the Chinese instigation of India's nuclear weapons tests in 1974 remains an exaggerated claim. Nuclear China would become a security threat later when in late 1970s and early 1980s it colluded to provide Pakistan with a nuclear weapons capability. But until 1974, India's nuclear weapons programme – if it could be called such – does not appear to be merely a response to Chinese nuclear weapons capability..

*Report prepared by the speaker Yogesh Joshi, Jawaharlal Nehru University.*

### **About the Speaker**

Yogesh Joshi recently finished his PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University. He is currently working on a book manuscript on the history of India's nuclear submarine project. He has been a fellow at George Washington University, Kings College London and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC. His research has appeared in journals such as Survival, US Naval War College Review, Harvard Asia Quarterly, India Review and Comparative Strategy.

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