

# Behind India's Bomb

## The Politics and Strategy of Nuclear Deterrence

*Sumit Ganguly*

*India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal.*

BY ASHLEY J. TELLIS. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001, 653 pp. \$40.00.

The Indian nuclear tests of May 11 and 13, 1998, shook an unsuspecting world. Long at the forefront of the movement for universal nuclear disarmament, India had continually chastised the five declared nuclear powers (the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom) for not moving to eliminate their nuclear arsenals as called for by the 1970 nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. After demonstrating its own nuclear capacity in 1974, India had refrained from testing for more than two decades. And apparently, neither the emergence of a government in New Delhi led by the right-of-center Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) nor the Indian elites'

deep reservations about the global non-proliferation regime had disturbed this quiescence. Indian decision-makers had indicated that they would not carry out nuclear tests until they had completed a lengthy "strategic review" of security threats and how best to cope with them.

The explosions in the Rajasthan desert, therefore—in addition to prompting Pakistan to detonate a few of its own nuclear bombs two weeks later—set off corresponding explosions in capitals around the world. Foreign diplomats, academics, pundits, and policymakers quickly and sharply criticized India for bucking the trend toward nuclear restraint. The open declarations of India and Pakistan as nuclear weapons powers, many asserted, would unravel the carefully woven fabric of the nonproliferation regime by encouraging other states to

---

SUMIT GANGULY is Professor of Asian Studies and Government at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of the forthcoming *Fearful Symmetry: Explaining the Indo-Pakistani Conflict*.

## *Behind India's Bomb*

acquire nuclear weapons. They might even propel the subcontinent toward nuclear war.

The condemnations belittled New Delhi's stated reason for testing—namely, a growing threat from its powerful neighbor, China. China had not made any overt threats across the border, so what could be the problem? Foreigners instead generally ascribed the tests to what they saw as petty motivations: a desire to elevate India's international status and an attempt to bolster the BJP-led government's fortunes.

Three years on, however, little evidence has emerged to support these proffered motives. The quest for global status has been a staple of Indian foreign policy since the country's emergence as an independent state in 1947, and India's basic nuclear capability dates back more than 20 years; it is hard to link these essentially constant factors to a significant policy shift. As for the notion that the tests were designed to boost a sagging government's fortunes, informed analysts of Indian politics know that the fate of a governing coalition in New Delhi depends much more on the allocation of scarce resources such as ministerial positions than on arcane matters of national security and strategy. Even some ardent critics of the Indian nuclear weapons program now concede as much. In his new book *India: Emerging Power*, the noted South Asian security analyst Stephen P. Cohen echoes many commentators in attributing the tests to a blend of status-seeking and domestic politics, but he also acknowledges that these factors alone were not sufficient to drive India to explode five nuclear bombs.

It now appears that the real reason for the tests was indeed fear of the long-term security threat posed by China and

Pakistan, coupled with bureaucratic pressures emanating from within India's scientific-technological complex. Yet only a handful of Western analysts have recognized these motivations, and even fewer have been willing to concede the legitimacy of India's strategic concerns. In fact, until recently no systematic book-length treatment of the subject was available. Now Ashley Tellis' *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture*—carefully researched, meticulously documented, and tightly argued—ably fills this void. It is not merely a *tour d'horizon* of the likely future of the Indian nuclear weapons program, but a *tour de force* on the subject of nuclear proliferation in general.

### **DETERRENCE "LITE"**

Tellis has paid excruciating attention to detail, scouring both regional and international sources from journalism to the policy world to academia. Relying on a massive collection of evidence, he shows how growing perceptions of a security threat from China and Pakistan led Indian decision-makers toward overt weaponization and the abandonment of the country's long-held posture of nuclear ambiguity. He documents how China's security assistance to Pakistan during the 1990s, especially in the realms of nuclear weapons design and ballistic missile technology, made Pakistan a virtual strategic surrogate for China in South Asia—and how India's security establishment took note of and sought to counter this emerging threat.

Although Tellis emphasizes the critical role of external threats in precipitating the full development of India's nuclear and missile programs, he also provides a nuanced discussion of the influence of key bureaucratic constituencies. He shows

how India's atomic energy establishment, Defense Research and Development Organization, and space research program boosted and sustained both the nuclear and missile enterprises. But Tellis also delves within these institutions, demonstrating how a complex interaction among elected representatives, civilian strategists, key military officers, and the leaders of India's strategic technological enclaves drove the decision-making process.

The most important proposition that emerges from Tellis' analysis is the primacy of the political, understood broadly rather than narrowly. Key decisions resulted not from bureaucratic turf battles or complex institutions but from the preferences and choices of India's elected elites acting in concert with critical members of various military and technological entities.

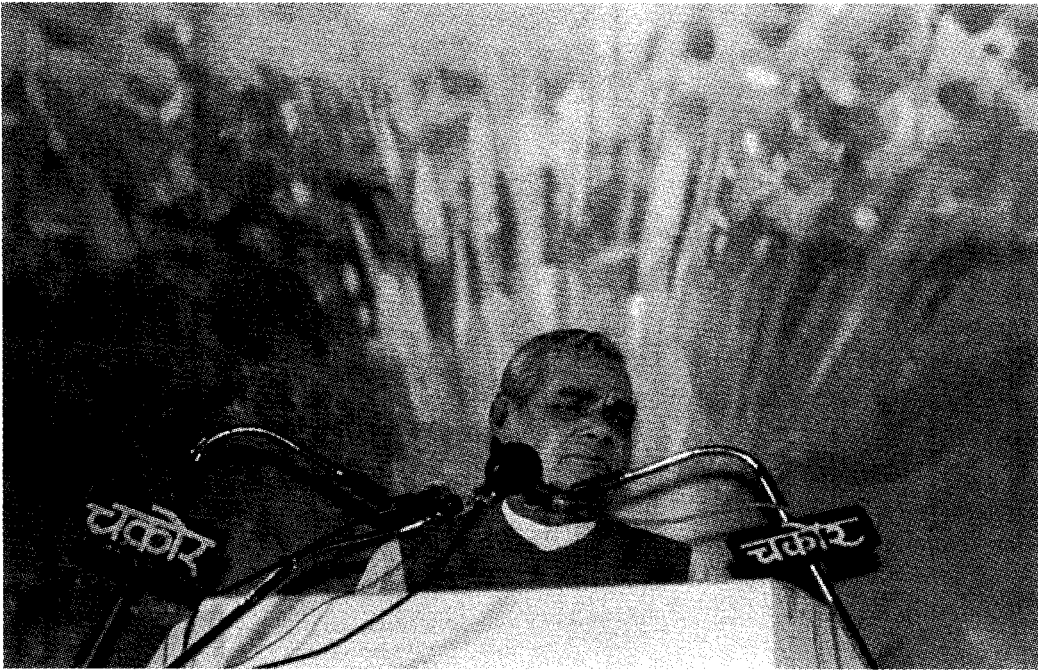
The Indian political process Tellis describes is inherently cautious, reactive, and acutely sensitive to fiscal constraints. An important consequence of these structural tendencies, Tellis argues, is that Indian decision-makers are likely to opt for a nuclear weapons program that is strictly limited in scope—in terms of the numbers of its warheads and delivery vehicles as well as operational readiness—despite considerable pressure from civilian strategic commentators. The emerging Indian arsenal is composed of weapons and delivery systems

with key subcomponents maintained under civilian custody, but [with] those assets as a whole ... not deployed in any way that enables the prompt conduct of nuclear operations. Such assets are, in fact, sequestered and covertly maintained in distributed form, with different custodians exercising strict stewardship over the components entrusted to them for safekeeping.

This "force in being," Tellis argues persuasively, comports well with the stated goals of India's draft nuclear doctrine and the country's perceived strategic needs. It eschews both "recessed deterrence" (a term coined by the Indian strategist Jasjit Singh to describe an arsenal stored in such a way as to require lengthy preparation to assemble and launch warheads), which was deemed inadequate for India's strategic requirements, and the pursuit of a "ready arsenal" (one with nuclear missiles that can be launched at a moment's notice), which would require a costly investment that could provoke adverse Pakistani and possibly even Chinese responses.

The emergent Indian nuclear doctrine, according to Tellis, emphasizes the political as opposed to the military utility of nuclear weapons. This assertion may appear banal, but the distinction is not trivial: both the doctrine and subsequent Indian statements have explicitly underscored that Indian decision-makers view the arsenal as a pure deterrent rather than as an instrument of war. In effect, then, the principal role of India's nuclear force is to protect the nation from the prospect of nuclear blackmail and coercion at the hands of China or Pakistan, and the country's policymakers appear confident that a small nuclear force capable of surviving a first strike will do the job.

The deterrent nature of India's nuclear doctrine is reflected at the operational level of policymaking, about which Tellis provides a scrupulous discussion based on what can be gleaned from open sources. India has unequivocally renounced the first use of nuclear weapons. Though it is tempting to dismiss this commitment as mere boilerplate, there is strong reason to believe that it is actually sincere. It is



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

*How I learned to love the bomb: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee speaks at a rally on the first anniversary of India's nuclear test, Mumbai, May 11, 1999*

consistent with New Delhi's declared nuclear doctrine, it permits India to announce its basically pacific intentions toward its adversaries, and it conforms to the expectations of a "force-in-being" that cannot provide rapid recourse during a crisis. The commitment to deterrence through the threat of punishment emphasizes India's lack of interest in using nuclear weapons to pursue either territorial or political expansion and its intention to use them instead simply to give pause to any would-be attacker or blackmailer.

As for targeting strategy, finally, it appears that India is developing a modified countervalue approach—putting an adversary's civilian assets at risk. This strategy involves making a virtue out of necessity, because a counterforce capability (i.e., one that targets an opponent's military forces) will be both technologically and fiscally beyond India's grasp for the foreseeable

future. Tellis aptly sums up India's strategy, therefore, as a "lite" version of the Cold War doctrine of mutual assured destruction.

#### **NUCLEAR RESPONSIBILITY**

If Tellis is correct, many of the oft-expressed fears about nuclear instability in South Asia will prove to be unfounded. A small, secure, dispersed, and highly concealed Indian nuclear force, for example, would be invulnerable to a bolt-from-the-blue strike by Pakistan. And the problems of command and control that plague larger, more complex nuclear forces are unlikely to haunt India's decision-makers for quite some time. The likelihood of a regional nuclear confrontation with Pakistan should thus remain quite small.

Nevertheless, India's overt weaponization and Pakistan's response have created a different set of dangers: the region is now subject to what the American strategic

analyst Glenn Snyder called the “stability-instability paradox.” Given the extraordinary destructiveness of nuclear weapons and the horrific consequences that would follow from their use on the subcontinent, neither side is likely to view them as effective instruments of war. Under the seemingly reassuring shadow of the nuclear umbrella, however, both sides may be tempted to make limited or temporary incursions in strategically peripheral areas. Indeed, the world witnessed the first such move in the summer of 1999, when Pakistani army troops crossed the Line of Control (the working boundary) in Kashmir and held onto territory in the frozen redoubts of Kargil for more than a month.

It is worth noting, however, that during the ensuing conflict, India showed military restraint and a scrupulous desire to keep the fighting localized, in marked contrast to its behavior in the pre-nuclear era. When Pakistan attacked Indian positions in Kashmir in 1965, for example, within one week Indian forces had counterattacked in Punjab, thereby dramatically expanding the scope and dimensions of the conflict. In 1999, by contrast, India delayed using airpower in Kargil and avoided opening up another front elsewhere along the international border, although doing so could have strained Islamabad’s limited resources. Care must of course be exercised in drawing generalizations about regional stability from one state’s behavior in a single crisis. Nevertheless, India’s restraint in Kargil may indicate that the implications of its nuclear status have not been entirely lost on its decision-makers.

A limited Indian nuclear force is also unlikely to set off panic in China. The vastly larger size and greater capabilities

of China’s ballistic missile arsenal provide it with a considerable degree of security against India; India may well be able to assuage its own fears of Chinese nuclear blackmail without generating commensurate fears in China. Indeed, recent developments in Sino-Indian relations suggest that both sides have managed to set aside the acrimony that initially followed the Indian tests. In late June 2001 the Sino-Indian Experts’ Group, a joint negotiating body, finally exchanged maps of the middle sector along the Himalayan border disputed by Beijing and New Delhi. Though progress on the border question is, like the border itself, glacial, both sides clearly have a renewed interest in avoiding conflict and steadily reducing tensions, and it is possible that the possession of explicit nuclear capabilities may have made India feel secure enough to take a more moderate negotiating stance.

#### **SECURITY COMPLEX**

The policy prescriptions Tellis offers run counter to much of the prevailing wisdom about nonproliferation. He argues forcefully that the United States should pursue a differentiated rather than a universal nonproliferation policy, one that explicitly takes into account the particular security concerns of India and Pakistan (as well as Israel). In making this argument Tellis debunks the all-too-familiar contention that the pursuit of such a differentiated policy would inevitably create a “demonstration effect” whereby the example of U.S. leniency would embolden other potential proliferators. As he writes, “while international anarchy may be seamless in theory, in practice it is usually contained within specific ‘security complexes.’ This

## *Behind India's Bomb*

implies that actions initiated by a particular state usually evoke counteractions only by those states directly threatened by these actions and not others." Even if there is an action-reaction cycle, therefore, it is likely to remain confined to particular geographic areas of historical animosity between states. India developed nuclear weapons to counter security threats from China and, secondarily, Pakistan. Pakistan, in turn, acquired its nuclear arsenal to cope with India's overwhelming conventional superiority. In other words, whatever the other Asian states do, they will do it for their own reasons, and not because they are simply emulating what their South Asian siblings have done.

Tellis also challenges the notion that U.S. acceptance of the nuclearization of India and Pakistan will inevitably shred the carefully woven fabric of the global nonproliferation regime. He contends that such an outcome is highly improbable so long as the United States and the other nuclear powers continue to enforce existing nonproliferation norms, not least because India's past behavior fully supports the principles of nonproliferation: it rebuffed Iran's mid-1980s attempts to purchase sensitive nuclear technologies and has a solid domestic framework of export controls.

What do the peculiar dynamics of regional security complexes that Tellis describes imply about the wisdom of Washington's current, seemingly unyielding stance on global nonproliferation versus a more differentiated policy? And what should U.S. policymakers do about the South Asian nuclear situation in particular, as both India and Pakistan remain under the sanctions imposed after their tests? How one answers these questions will

depend largely on the assumptions one holds about the consequences of nuclear proliferation. Thus far, U.S. policy has been based on the premise that nuclear proliferation is necessarily inimical to U.S. interests. What Tellis' book helps to make clear is that even if such a policy was appropriate to the strategic needs of the Cold War, today it is anachronistic and unsustainable. The nuclear arsenals of India and Pakistan do not fundamentally threaten U.S. security interests, nor are they likely to.

Without much fanfare or the explicit abandonment of the goal of containing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, therefore, the United States should adopt a more nuanced nonproliferation agenda—one that distinguishes between proliferators that threaten U.S. interests and commitments and those states that seek nuclear weapons largely to assuage their own regional strategic insecurities. Sanctions originally devised as a tool to coerce India and Pakistan on nuclear issues have outlived whatever usefulness they might once have had. Perversely, they have not only alienated significant sections of the Indian strategic affairs community from the United States but also contributed to India's increased self-reliance in critical military technologies. In Pakistan, meanwhile, the sanctions have led to feelings of abandonment and an erosion of American influence.

A properly calibrated U.S. policy toward South Asia would continue to promote Indo-Pakistani dialogue on Kashmir and encourage the pursuit of confidence-building and arms-control measures. It would also acknowledge India's genuine misgivings about China's capabilities and behavior in the region.

But it would abandon the Canute-like goal of rolling back South Asian nuclear programs and focus on stabilizing them instead. To this end, it would dwell less on overt Indian and Pakistani adherence to the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty than on the seepage of critical technologies from South Asia to other volatile regions. Such a policy would hardly win universal acclaim, not least because it would go against the grain of so much received wisdom in the arms control and non-proliferation community. But it would have two important advantages over the current stance: it would be correctly perceived as far less hypocritical, and it would hold far greater promise of achieving important results. ☺



**United States  
Institute of Peace**  
**Spring 2002 Solicited  
Grant Competition**

The United States Institute of Peace is accepting applications for its **Spring Solicited Grant Competition**.

Each year the Institute offers financial support for research, education, training, and the dissemination of information in the fields of international peace and conflict management.

**Topics for the Spring 2002  
Solicited Grant Competition:**

- Strategic Nonviolence
- The Middle East
- Training

The Institute encourages applications from nonprofit organizations and official public institutions. Individuals may also apply.

*For further information and application materials, please call, write, or e-mail:*

**Solicited Grants**

**United States Institute of Peace**  
1200 17th Street NW • Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20036-3011

(202) 429-3842 • Fax (202) 833-1018  
TTY (202) 457-1719

e-mail: [grant\\_program@usip.org](mailto:grant_program@usip.org)

Starting October 30th, application materials may be downloaded from our website:

[www.usip.org/grants.html](http://www.usip.org/grants.html)

The deadline for *receipt* of Spring 2002 Solicited Grant applications is March 1.

Award announcements will be made in late September 2002.