



INDIA'S NUCLEAR TESTS AND US RESPONSES: THE PERCEPTION GAP AND ITS IMPACT

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INTRODUCTION

India's nuclear tests of May 11 and 13, 1998 revealed in dramatic fashion the tremendous gulf between the U.S. and India on perceptions of Indian security and strategic posture. The reactions in the U.S. suggest that the increasing convergence of relations in the economic sphere since India's economic liberalisation programme began in 1991, have not been sufficient to bridge the gap between the two states on nuclear and security issues.

A perceptual gap between Indians and Americans is evident at both the popular and more informed levels. Whereas an attitude of more or less "business as usual" returned in India soon after India's and Pakistan's tests, American sentiment tended to suggest that the world would never be the same again.

In this paper, an attempt is made to try and systematically analyse the nature of U.S. responses to India, even as the reactions are unfolding. Despite the seemingly strong and united American reaction in the first few weeks,

there are differences of nuance as well as substance which are emerging more clearly now, but indeed have always existed.

The main of the paper is to identify and elaborate these variations in American thinking, or what may be termed "schools of thought." In addition to presenting these schools of thought, their relative importance in the U.S. will be taken up. The paper will then turn to a discussion of U.S. policy options and their likelihood. Finally, the conclusion will take a look at India's post testing "balance sheet" and identify some critical areas which need greater attention by the country.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSES

The most immediate reactions in the U.S. may be viewed as largely psychological, rather than well conceived formulations with the long term in mind. For the sake of simplicity, these may be captured by four "scripts," each characterised by a psychological component of sorts.

- 1. Political Embarrassment: The Indian tests came as a political embarrassment of the highest order for President Bill Clinton. It could be seen as an utter failure of his carefully cultivated non-proliferation diplomacy, with the second series of tests amounting to a nearly intolerable political position for Clinton personally. Clinton's reaction was clearly coloured by this political, but personal aspect.
- 2. Deception and Betrayal: In this second script, India is portrayed as deliberately misleading high U.S. officials regarding the intent to conduct tests, particularly in light of high level visits in April by Bill Richardson (U.S. Ambassador to the U.N.) and Karl Inderfurth (Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia). This alleged political deception was seen as culminating in the technical deception exemplified by the American intelligence failure to detect the tests. The lesson which seems to have been drawn by the U.S. was that India cannot be trusted.
- 3. Affront: This script implies a certain arrogance which amounts to the question, "how dare India try and gatecrash

onto the high table of international politics?" This script may well be the most important.

4. *Patronising*: This view suggests that nuclear weapons are far too important and dangerous for developing countries such as India and Pakistan to handle. This is related not only to motivated reasons, but also no doubt to the strongly held belief that while the current nuclear weapons states have in place a rational, coherent and controllable techno-political culture and system, India and Pakistan have chaotic, ad hoc and uncontrollable systems.

The above psychological responses are presented only as a first cut. On closer examination, American reactions in reality go beyond this rather uniform picture, and it is important to discover and understand the more complex landscape.

U.S. SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

The different schools of thought in the U.S. relevant to regional and international security, generally falls into the broad frameworks of liberalism and realism, with a smattering of other less defined approaches. In the following discussion, eight such schools of thought are identified for the current purpose.

Neoliberal Fence Sitters

Absolutist Neoliberals

Enlightened Liberal Internationalists

Liberal Free Traders

Regional Neorealists

Universal Neorealists

Euro Neorealists

Conservative Ideologues

These categories are not meant to be definitive, and represent only the author's attempt to be illustrative. They are also not necessarily always mutually exclusive.

A. The Neoliberal School

The contemporary liberals, or neoliberals, may be distinguished from their earlier classical liberal counterparts

by the former's confidence in international law, institutions, and multilateralism in comparison with the latter. In the post world war two era, this has become almost an article of faith with neoliberals. They tend to view the international system as essentially a harmonious one, if not an entirely equal one.

Economic concerns are given priority over military; principle is placed above power, at least in rhetoric. Most members of such a group are likely to be amenable to international intervention for human rights principles (defined within the liberal individualist conception).

In this broad framework, it is however possible to discover a number of important differentiations:

1. Neoliberal Fence Sitters

This group would comprise many American experts on India. They were genuinely attracted to India's democratic traditions and India's normative disarmament goals. These experts no doubt prided themselves on a large number of high level contacts in India. While U.S. interests

were likely to have been at the center of their thinking, they saw themselves as "friends of India."

In the post testing period, this group has lost its voice and has yet to regain it. There are practically no edit page articles or media appearances, and they seem to be keeping a low profile. As India experts whose expertise "failed" them, it is not surprising if they have been marginalised in the current policy process.

2. Absolutist Neoliberals

The noted American social historian, Louis Hartz, characterised American liberalism as "absolutist," in the sense that it was a totalising and conformist ideology in the U.S. context, which it then wished to superimpose on the rest of the world. This notion may be useful in understanding the contemporary American group which seems to adhere to this school of thought, i.e., the nuclear nonproliferation experts.

These experts tend to be people with a mission--strongly held views and fairly unrelenting. Their views on disarmament do have a resonance with the long held Indian stand on disarmament, as opposed to simple horizontal nuclear nonproliferation. However, in the current international situation, they are more likely to "settle" for major reductions in the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals masquerading as disarmament. In other words, zero might end up being a nonzero number for the nuclear weapon states whereas for others, zero would have to equal zero. The Indian refusal to entertain such views has been a continual source of conflict.

The members of this group are not really experts on India per se, although in this case, India often tends to be viewed as a single issue country. The nuclear scenarios which are charted tend to have a similar thread to them, whether the country in question is India or Iran. From India's point of view, the thinking of this group is one of the most problematic.

3. Enlightened Neoliberal Internationalists

This group tends to believe in strong multilateral international action by the U.S., but are clearly anti-hegemonists. They may be termed "independent friends of the developing world" and are critics of what they see as American double standards vis a vis others, whether in the economic, social or political realms. As such, they hold a mirror to themselves while looking at others internationally.

They support engagement, rather than punishment in situations where American interests are being, or perceived to be, challenged. For example, they do not support U.S. policies of isolating Cuba or Iran. This group is small and scattered in the media, think tanks and academia.

4. Liberal Free Traders

This group consists of strong economic liberals and free marketeers, most specifically the multinational and transnational business interests in the U.S. The overwhelming majority of American businesses are

national and involved in domestic production. However, they are generally smaller and spread out and neither care much about international politics, nor like it. The multinationals on the other hand although much fewer, are larger and clearly more organised, with greater access to the power elite. Their perspective tends to be more global than parochial given their current and as importantly, potential, business interests.

These transnational banks and multinational corporations have been working behind the scenes since the Indian tests to soften the American economic sanctions, although they soft peddle their efforts in public. Their efforts at lobbying have been reported rather fully in newspapers such as the the *Wall Street Journal*, which has tended to present more points of views on the situation in the subcontinent, than stalwarts like the *New York Times*.

B. Neorealists

The second major school of thought is the contemporary rendition of classical realism, or neorealism, which has been the reigning paradigm in the study of

international relations. In this framework, all states in the international system are seen to be driven by security needs in a world of "self help," characterised by anarchy. The proposition is that power is the ultimate arbiter in international relations and it is foolish and futile to think otherwise. Indeed, power is generally equated with principle.

It is the structure of the international system which determines state behaviour. Therefore, the nature of leadership, type of political system, belief systems and ideology, or other socio-cultural factors are not the important variables to consider. It is suggested that under similar strategic circumstances, different kinds of states will act in similar fashion in their security and foreign policies. What is good for one state is presumed to be good for another--countries would indeed be expected to emulate "successful" or "winning" strategies pursued by others. Balance of power would be one such important behaviour. As for nuclear weapons, the neorealists tend to believe in deterrence as a workable doctrine.

Within the neorealist school, at least three variations may be identified, with particular implications for the way in which the Indian tests would be viewed.

1. Regional Neorealists

The analysts who fall into this category are generally trained in international politics, but also often have a geographic or regional specialisation, such as the Middle East or South Asia. As such, they provide a counterpoint to the India experts who may have expertise on the region, but generally are not theoretically oriented.

Looking through the lens of neorealist theory to understand a region, such experts prima facie tend to be more sympathetic regarding the relevance of deterrence in the developing world. In the case of India, an understanding of the nature of its history and political system would seem to have only augmented this theoretical disposition, unlike say, the Middle East for a variety of reasons. This group is small and largely located in think tanks.

2. Universal Neorealists

This group is almost entirely theoretically inclined and are the strongest exponents of an unreconstructed realism. In their view, nuclear weapons have kept the long peace between the U.S. and Russia and will lead to greater stability in relations between India and Pakistan as well. There is no differentiation made between the west, the north and others in this regard. They would go to the extent of suggesting that in the case of nuclear weapons, the more countries possessing them, the better for international order.

There are a number of eminent scholars espousing this view today. Almost all are in academic institutions, with some in the top universities in the U.S.

3. Euro Neorealists

For this group, the point of departure on deterrence is a hold over from the cold war. The central axis is implicitly or explicitly the U.S.-Russian relationship, with

others particularly the developing countries seen as the "periphery" literally and figuratively. In other words, the periphery is taken to lie outside the "paradigm" as well, mostly by assumption.

Under such thinking, an important revision occurs vis a vis others outside the west/north. While deterrence has clearly worked in the "Europeanised" (by lineage or ascription) world, this assurance is not extended to others including the subcontinent. In other words, deterrence works, but only for sure in the current nuclear club.

This group is almost entirely policy oriented and comprises many important sections of the American national security establishment.

C. Conservative Ideologues

The final school relevant to American thinking on India's tests is essentially the conservative ideologues of the Republican party's right wing. This section of the Republican party is characterised by strong and persisting anti-communism and narrow parochialism internationally. Influenced to an extent by old style American isolationism and inwardness stemming largely from the midwest, this group resists multilateralism as represented by the United Nations, World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Their preference would be for American unilateralism on the international scene and argue for a "go it alone" policy if necessary to promote their interventionist anti-communist agenda in such countries as China and Cuba.

This group is much more domestically focused and in the case of nuclear testing on the subcontinent, their thinking is more derivative of their interest in attacking Bill Clinton.

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Having characterised the various strands of thinking in the U.S., it is necessary to consider the question regarding their relative importance.

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Who Matters?

The question of who matters in the U.S. in this instance may be speculated upon without necessarily judging the merits of one group or the other as such. The real question is who has access to the American power elite on these issues. It would appear that for a number of reasons, the Euro Neorealists (as I have termed them) and the Liberal Free Traders are the most important groups, along with Regional Neorealists and the Conservative Ideologues to a lesser degree. The others are less important or even marginal at this point.

The India experts from the Neoliberal camp were mostly on the fringe of the power elite before the Indian tests, reflecting in part the low level of importance accorded to South Asia historically by American security policymakers. The Indian tests and the perceived "failure" of the experts to anticipate them has only accentuated this marginality.

The strong nuclear non-proliferation experts whom I have dubbed Absolutist Neoliberals are currently very much in the limelight, especially in American media. However, their reach into the corridors of power in the U.S. is rather limited. This is due to the fact that underlying the nonproliferation agenda is a disarmament agenda which is not popular in the American security establishment. The Absolutist Neoliberals have been in the forefront of efforts at deep cuts in the U.S.-Russian arsenals, with the declared intention of pressurising these states toward total abolition of nuclear weaponry. They are critics of the U.S. government and as such, are for the most part, outside critical power circles. At the moment however, their arguments seem to be capturing the "popular" and "political" imagination.

The third group which finds little resonance with American officialdom is the Enlightened Neoliberal Internationalists. It has no real domestic constituency and are often viewed as naive, especially for example, when dialogue is urged over confrontation in cases such as the North Korean nuclear wrangle with the U.S.

The final group which carry very little weight among the policy elite is the Universal Neorealists. While their critics find it difficult to challenge the logical consistency and force of their argument, they do not accept it or take it seriously.

Among the remaining four, the critical one in U.S. strategic policymaking is the Euro Neorealist group. Its members occupy the epicentre of elite decisionmaking. They tend to be from the best universities and are on the staff at key organisations such as the National Security Council, and policy planning divisions at the Defence department.

In this group are also those who have always held power in U.S. strategic policymaking, i.e., those with experience and interest in U.S.-Russian relations, NATO and international security. In short, they display a Eurocentric and "westernised" bias and training. They tend to have no expertise on the subcontinent or other developing country regions, but the implicit assumption is that policy for those areas may still be made without any qualms.

Clearly, they would not privilege such expertise in a reverse fashion.

The other group which is important in its own right, but also has strong links to Euro Neorealists is the Liberal Free Traders, particularly the captains of industry and finance. However, given the kind of revolving door relationships found between government and big business, strong Liberal Free Traders are also located in sections of the Commerce Department, Treasury Department and even the State Department.

This cannot however be characterised by a simple "military-industrial" complex, but rather what might be termed a more sophisticated "financial-strategic network." In some ways, these two groups together continue to be responsible for America's post world war two *economic statecraft*, guided by a strong belief in the necessity for U.S. military supremacy to safeguard this interest.

Another group with some current impact is the Conservative Ideologues, located mostly in the Republican

Party. Given that the Republicans are in a majority in the U.S. Congress, they have come to occupy critical positions on key Congressional Committees, reflecting the system whereby the majority party holds the senior most post of chairmanship of committees. From this vantage point, members of this group are in a position to create political difficulties for Clinton, which is their main objective.

Their interest and apparent understanding of India's position is secondary and stems entirely from a virulent anti-Chinese stance. If India is taken in isolation, their views are likely to be quite different. It should be noted that the earlier attack led by this group against Clinton's policy on most favoured nation status for China and its human rights policy ultimately failed. Clinton will try and keep this group at bay and the more "respectable" he can present China as, the less powerful will be the Republican critique.

The final group with some possible impact is the Regional Neorealists with interest or experience in the subcontinent. While they do not form a critical mass, they may have some access into the world inhabited by the neorealists policy elite.

Given the various shades of U.S. thinking described above, it would suggest that a variety of policy options toward India may be considered as well. The next section suggests a number of alternatives open to the U.S. and the likelihood of their implementation.

These options are summarised as:

Casting India as a "Rogue State"

Diplomatic Pressure and Isolation

Economic Punishment

A Minimum Modus Vivendi

1. Casting India as a "Rogue State"

This is the most extreme option possible. But so called rogue states have been defined in the U.S. as dangerous, unpredictable and autocratic. Indeed, the focus has been on the leadership of such countries--the rogues are individuals with an identifiable face, not states. Examples would be Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Qaddafi in Libya, Fidel Castro in Cuba, and Ayotallah Khomeini in Iran. Clearly, this is not possible in India's or Pakistan's case for that matter.

However, the initial U.S. public emphasis after India's tests on the nature of the Bharatiya Janata Party and its "Hindu nationalists" in charge of India's nuclear capability had some of this flavour. In the end, any extreme image of India cannot be sustained.

2. Diplomatic Pressure and Isolation

The nature of the international system is such that it is difficult for a community of nations to act together and most are reluctant to pass such strong judgements over another country's security requirements. Besides, Bill Clinton has a serious dilemma facing him. In his second presidential term, a major accomplishment in foreign policy was to be the cementing of the global nuclear nonproliferation regime, which began with his successful

indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in May 1995 and hopes for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

American presidents tend to be seriously concerned about the kind of legacy they leave behind on the international stage and Clinton would not want to go down in history as the one who presided over the death of the post word war two nonproliferation regime. Currently, that regime lies shaken, with India and Pakistan having challenged its underlying presumption that it was based on a stable, acceptable international order. If there is excessive pressure on the diplomatic front, this would raise the stakes, but if the Clinton administration cannot produce any results, its stature would decline further.

3. Economic Punishment

The option of economic sanctions currently at work suffers from some of the same drawbacks mentioned above, in addition to the historical evidence that sanctions rarely work without several unique conditions which do not

obtain in the Indian case. Furthermore, even though the economic sanctions have been applied, President Clinton is still caught in a dilemma. The problem is that there is no real answer to the question: what is the objective of the sanctions? Immediately after the Indian tests, the sanctions could have been seen as a deterrent to stop Pakistan from following suit. At the moment, both India and Pakistan have already tested and both have become de facto open nuclear weapon states. This then begs the question regarding the objective of U.S. sanctions at this point in time.

Once again, Clinton is unlikely to be able to deliver anything concrete as a successful result of the sanctions. This will leave him in a difficult position, especially vis a vis the U.S. Congress which is the body with the authority to repeal the sanctions. It will also leave the President in an increasingly precarious position with important business interests over time.

4. A Minimum Modus Vivendi

Ultimately, a minimally acceptable and face saving modus vivendi may emerge. This will require a significant amount of diplomatic finessing, allowing both states to claim some measure of success for their respective agendas. This search for a modus vivendi is unlikely to be open ended, since the September 1999 CTBT review conference is an important date. In the medium run, if not in the short run, some kind of modus vivendi is likely to be acceptable to most sections of U.S. opinion, except the most ardent nuclear nonproliferation exponents.

The next section turns to the Indian side briefly in an attempt to construct a post testing balance sheet of sorts. The main objective here is to raise some important questions and issues for further debate and consideration.

India's Post Testing Balance Sheet?

One of India's biggest losses would seem to have been in relations with China. Two decades of steady

progress in defusing tensions has nearly disappeared. Whether it is believed that China and India are destined to be competitors in the future or not, the current Chinese reaction may have been blunted much more, thus making India's situation much smoother during this important period of transition in India's history. In Asia, relations with Japan have also suffered a serious setback.

Another significantly negative effect in the aftermath of tests is the renewed equation of India and Pakistan. In the past, India perceived one of its biggest problems to be the outside tendency to view it in the same light as Pakistan. India's reference point of China in strategic and other terms has not been easily accepted by others. Now with the tests by both India and Pakistan, the subcontinental equation may have become further solidified.

India may also have lost some of its rather unique moral stature in the international arena with its nuclear tests. This is in part due to India's own past penchant for presenting international arguments in an ethical framework with strong moral overtones.

Having crossed the nuclear Rubicon, India now can no longer comfortably live in the world of nuclear ambiguity. In order to make the danger of a nuclear race from becoming a reality, much greater level of attention will have to be given to strategic doctrine, alternative visions, as well as regional diplomacy. For example, what would a notion of minimum deterrence constitute for India?

In terms of gains made, an important one is the increased data and confidence regarding the Indian nuclear option. India has no access to test data from nuclear weapon states unlike the other "threshold" states of Pakistan and Israel and hence its self reliance in this area has been strengthened. This would have had a positive effect on the credibility of India's nuclear option, which may have been eroding given 24 years of holding it "open." In this connection, India may be seen as having been freed of the "normative" discourse which tended to place it in the dilemma of neither signing the nuclear treaties nor exercising the nuclear option for such a lengthy period.

Ultimately, the biggest gain may be that whether accepted as de jure or not, India's demonstrated nuclear capability has essentially ensured that the nuclear great powers will have to take into account India's de facto position and Indian viewpoints more than ever. In time, India may be co-opted into the nuclear league like France and China before it.

The Indian tests have answered some long held questions, but also raised important new ones. Whatever the answers to these may be, there can be no question on the critical need for informed, dispassionate analysis and discussion in India and the outside world.