

## Charting its own path

Some anniversaries are celebrated with enthusiasm while others are merely observed. The muted response to the 20th anniversary of India's nuclear weapons tests this past month puts this milestone firmly in the second category. It is a far cry from the triumphalism that overtook India 20 years ago. And yet, in crossing the rubicon (a phrase from that era) India took a gamble with the international nuclear regime that, despite the turbulent reception, has largely paid off. Even if India today is not quite at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)-sanctioned top table of the original five nuclear weapons states (NWS), it is not in the company either of the other two self-declared nuclear weapons powers, Pakistan and North Korea. Therein lies the rub.

Today India occupies a special position as a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology, to quote from the 2005 Joint Statement announcing the India-U.S. nuclear deal. This status is a product and a reflection of the steady attempt by New Delhi to shift attention away from its nuclear weapons and towards its civil nuclear technology. India could not act like just another nuclear weapons power. That route to the top table closed when the NPT was negotiated. India has therefore had to make different choices from the original five. By the time the NPT was negotiated, the world had witnessed 925 tests by the NWS, including 96 by the U.S. in 1962 alone. New Delhi declared a moratorium on testing after the two series of tests on May 11 and 13.

India published a draft nuclear doctrine within five years of testing. The U.S. first published its Nuclear Posture Review in 1994. None of the other NWS has an explicitly published doctrine, though enough can be gleaned from U.K. White Papers and official French and Chinese pronouncements. Even though debate on doctrine has since stalled, the point remains that India hoped transparency would help legitimise its nuclear choices and carve out a path to the nuclear top table.

Pokhran II, twenty years later

Reality, however, did not pan out that way. Each pronouncement on deterrence only strengthened the link between India and Pakistan. From being accused of precipitating Pakistan's 1998 tests, to not appreciating the potential for a nuclear exchange, India learned that its international interlocutors were unable to view nuclear possession by the two South Asian neighbours with any degree of equanimity. Never mind that the then Prime Minister, A.B. Vajpayee, had mentioned two nuclear neighbours, not one, in explaining the reasons for the test. Nuclear weapons bound India ever closer to Pakistan; worse, they gave Pakistan the ability to invite international attention to the bilateral relationship by playing on extra-regional fears of tensions escalating to a nuclear level. Witness the anxiety generated by Kargil and the 2001/2002 deployment. By the Mumbai attacks in 2008, India had shifted attention away from weapons to the civil nuclear side of things. That it kept the response to Mumbai firmly in the diplomatic sphere despite Pakistan's attempts to raise the bogey of Indian troop deployments speaks to the realisation that India's nuclear weapons could be used against India by those outside its borders.

This might explain India's muted presence in current discussions on deterrence. The U.S., Russia and China are modernising their nuclear assets; the U.S. and Russia are also developing weapons with calibrated yields. Pakistan claims to have developed tactical nuclear weapons. India has stayed away from these discussions. Its position, as declared in 2003, states that India will respond to WMD use against it with a strike designed to cause unacceptable damage.

In contrast, India has been very vocal about joining the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the informal groupings that control trade in nuclear and dual-use technology. Along with the Wassenaar Arrangement and the Australia Group, they

control trade in sensitive materials and technology; together, they provide ballast for the nuclear regime underpinned by the NPT.

And here we come to perhaps the main reason for India's nuclear behaviour. India has a troubled relationship with the NPT. Though deciding against accession in 1968, India supports the Treaty and has benefitted from the stability it has provided by limiting the spread of nuclear weapons. And yet, India is the prize sought by several NPT adherents who wish to bring it into the fold as a non-nuclear weapons state. By the terms of the NPT, India cannot be a 'nuclear have' as the Treaty only recognises those states that conducted a nuclear test before 1968 to be NWS. So the only way to fully legitimise India's (legal) nuclear choices is to make the NPT irrelevant to India, while not undermining the Treaty. Joining the NSG and MTCR would help as the informal guidelines for membership require accession to the NPT. India has most of what it needs from the NSG from the 2008 waiver, certainly for the current desultory progress in nuclear power production. Membership would not significantly affect power production, and yet accession remains so totemic as to overshadow the fact that we have actually joined the MTCR, Wassenaar Arrangement and Australia Group in 2016, 2017 and 2018, respectively.

India's choosing to clear its path to that seat using civil nuclear rather than weapons development is a purely pragmatic decision. Deciding to test in May 1998 at Pokhran was probably the last truly sovereign decision that it made in this field. Now declared, what India chooses to do with its nukes is — legitimately — a global concern. This may explain why May 11 is now National Technology Day and a rising India is protecting its economy by shifting attention away from the Bomb.

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