India's Nuclear Restraint and the Peaceful Nuclear Explosion

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On 18 May 1974 Indira Gandhi gave the go-ahead for India's first nuclear test in Pokhran in the Rajasthan desert. This explosion was labelled by the Indian government as a 'Peaceful Nuclear Explosion' (PNE). This could have been construed as major shift in Indian foreign policy, but it was "not even acknowledged as an act of foreign policy" (Chacko 2011: 197). How should this explosion and the subsequent labelling of the explosion as 'peaceful' be understood? Does it represent a distinctively Indian approach to nuclear politics? Is it part of a distinctive Indian approach to foreign policy? Or is the labelling as 'peaceful' merely a smokescreen for the same Realist logic that has been evident in the creation of other states' nuclear arsenal. In this essay, I explore these questions firstly, through a discussion of the logic that Realist[1] scholars argue prompts states to demand, and build, nuclear devices. Subsequently, I explain how foreign policy is constructed by foreign policymakers and that these constructions cannot be separated from the existing cultural understandings that permeate the policymaker's society. On this basis, I argue that Indian foreign policy, at least in respect to its early nuclear policy, was distinctive and based on a particular Nehruvian conception of Indian identity and the role of science in modernity.

Realist Foreign Policy and Nuclear Weapons

To explain foreign policy is to explain political action. "The political sphere is primarily characterised by decision-making", in which decision-making is a process that determines the "priority of one course of action over another" (Freeden 1996: 76, 56). Foreign policy, therefore, can be envisioned as a form of action-oriented thought focused on making decisions regarding the external relations of the state. To explain foreign policy decisions, therefore, Realists suggest that we position ourselves as the statesmen and determine, "what are the rational alternatives from which a state may choose" and, "which of these rational alternatives this particular statesman is likely to choose" given the relative power of his state in light of the potential of others (Morgenthau 1967: 5). Indeed, Realists claim that all states have a self-evident 'national interest' which guides the decision of rational policymakers in the choice among 'rational alternatives'. For Realists, the sources of the 'rational alternatives' predominantly emerge from the logics and conditions found in the global environment in which states find themselves in i.e. the 'international'[2].

For Realists, world politics is akin to Hobbesian anarchy – the war of all against all – and in this environment nuclear weapons are "privileged…as the ultimate source of national security" (Abraham 1998: 15). Realists argue that an international realm devoid of over-arching authority induces functionally similar sovereign states to maximise power, "because there exists no consistent, reliable, process of reconciling the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise among similar units in a condition of anarchy"[3] (Cox 1992: 132; Waltz 1959: 238). Realists depict states as centrally concerned for their own security and relative gains; and power is understood in non-contextualised military strategic terms and located in objects such as nuclear weapons that have an effect on others (Schmidt 2007; Sterling-Folker and Shinko 2007). Given the irreducible uncertainty regarding the intentions of other states, the maximisation of power creates a 'security dilemma'[4] for all states in the international system. In this self-help environment, the only way Realists expect states to overcome (some of) the uncertainty is through the formation of balances of power; the construction of coalitions of states roughly equivalent in power to prevent any one state from becoming hegemonic (Waltz 1979). Realists "abstract from every attribute of states except their capabilities [power]", and it is the distribution of power[5] alone which differentiates one state from another. This 'reality' of world politics explained

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by the structurally induced power-accumulating imperative, is allegedly timeless; and India's decision to become a nuclear state is "neither moral nor immoral, but… merely a reasoned response" to an international system based on distrust, fear and naked self-interest (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 1981; Waltz 1959: 238)[6] Nuclear weapons are simply a necessary part of the bitter reality of world politics.

So, how does Realism explain India's history with nuclear weapons? On the Realist understanding of world politics, India's desire for nuclear weapons is not unique, because all states in the international system have a (latent) desire to acquire nuclear weapons (Abraham 1998). Indeed, this is particularly the case when a rival state develops nuclear weapons. In this situation, Realists argue that states (should) undertake policies of balancing: "strong states do what they can: they can pursue a form of internal balancing by adopting the costly, but self-sufficient, policy of developing their own nuclear weapons"; whereas "weak states do what they must: they can join a balancing alliance with a nuclear power, utilizing a promise of nuclear retaliation by that ally as a means of extended deterrence." (Sagan 1996: 57) The decision to orientate India's nuclear programme towards building the PNE, therefore, was merely a rational foreign policy response to the nuclear bomb that China, who won the Sino-Indian war of 1962, developed in 1964 (Ganguly 1999). The ten year delay between explosions, according to a Realist logic, is either a result of slow appreciation of the naivety of Nehruvian idealism[7], or a clever strategic effort to build sufficient materials for moderately-sized nuclear arsenal while not testing and seeking nuclear disarmament in an effort to dissuade counter-balancing from China (Sagan 1996). India's post-PNE nuclear restraint, on the other hand, is explained by the re-evaluation of security concerns after the signing of a robust Indo-Soviet strategic relationship in 1971 assuaged India's security concerns until the end of the Cold War[8](Ganguly 1999).

The Realist explanations of the Indian case are neither convincing nor without fundamental flaws. The retrospective search for causes does not fit well chronologically. If, as Ganguly (1999) argues, the Indo-Soviet agreement of 1971 reduced the need for India's military nuclear programme, then why test at all in 1974? Furthermore, if India intended 1974 to be an announcement to the world that India had become nuclear then why not follow up with further tests and then deployment like the extant nuclear powers (Abraham 1998). More fundamentally, the Realist assumption that issues in international politics are "ontologically prior" to our (and by 'our' I mean theorisers/global actors) understandings of them is untenable, because it is the case, "that our…dominant ways of thinking and acting in the world will be (re)produced as 'reality'"[9] (Zalewski 1996: 343, 351).

Constructing Indian Nuclear Policy

Foreign policymakers determine policy (and act) on the basis of an interpretation of the world that, in part, *constitutes* the meaningful reality of the world itself. Hence, to explain foreign policy it is necessary to go beyond an evaluation of Morgenthau's "rational alternatives", and explain the more fundamental process of how these "rational alternatives" came to be the *only* conceivable (and only rational) alternatives for the policymaker (Shaw 2004; Weldes 1999). Indeed, a full explanation of foreign policy, must explain how the, "subjects, objects, and interpretive dispositions [characteristic of world politics] were socially constructed such that certain practices were made possible" (Doty 1993: 298).

The international phenomena confronting Indian policymakers have an unquestionable 'it-ness' to them, i.e. "a being independent of [their] own volition ('[they] cannot wish them away')"; but they have no *meaningful existence* for the policymakers until the latter imbue them with meaning (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 13; Weldes 1999). The first (unconscious) foreign policy act of Indian policymakers, therefore, is to construct an interpretive framework; to conceptually construct the international system and populate it with meaningful subjects, objects and their relations. Through this discursive process international phenomena are labelled, categorized and rendered meaningful: the world becomes divided into the nuclear 'haves' and the nuclear 'have-nots', Indian nuclear explosions become 'peaceful', nuclear proliferation treaties become 'discriminatory', China and Pakistan become 'nuclear threats' and so forth (Chacko 2011). In-built to these interpretations of the world is the 'national interest' as the meanings and relations imparted by foreign policymakers determines which actors are threats and which actors need to be protected (Weldes 1999). Through their constructions of the world Indian policymakers produce the conceivable policy alternatives and provide themselves with the "monolithic certainty" of meaning that is an "unavoidable feature of the political *decision.*" (Freeden 1996: 76, 77) The representations of Indian foreign policy makers, however, do

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not burst into spontaneous existence, they emerge through 'articulation' – the "process through which meaning is produced out of [the] *extant cultural materials*" of India's 'geopolitical culture'(Ó Tuathail 2006; Weldes 1996: 284 emphasis added).

Indian foreign policy, as all foreign policy, is distinctive because of the India's unique 'geopolitical culture' – a cultural 'bank' of pre-existing interdependent webs of knowledge and understandings about the 'Indian reality' of world politics. Policymakers do not approach international politics with a "blank slate onto which meanings are written as a result of interactions among states", their appreciations of international politics are rooted in pre-existing cultural meanings and identities (Weldes 1999: 9). Historical understandings (of Self and Other, of history, of international 'roles', of values and norms, and so forth) shape contemporary constructions; history, "bears and determines us", its meaning and perceived lessons shapes present representations of the world (Foucault 1980: 114). Indeed, understandings of identity are critical as they shape what appears to be acceptable and appropriate behaviour (Das 2010). Hence, the existing identities, values and understandings that policymakers share with their broader discursive context, and bring with them when they make policy, are of fundamental importance in explaining foreign policy. Indian nuclear policy up to and after the PNE was heavily shaped by a distinctive understanding of India and its relationship with science that Nehru constructed in the early years of independent India.

The Peaceful Nuclear Explosion?

In 1974, ten years after work towards a PNE programme was sanctioned by Prime Minister Shastri, Indira Gandhi gave the go-ahead for the first nuclear test in Pokhran, Rajasthan. In their explanation of the detonation, the Indian government took great pains to emphasise its peaceful nature. In announcing the explosion, the Atomic Energy Commission emphasised that the test had been undertaken for reasons of technological development particularly in respect to mining and earth moving operations, and categorically not as a precursor to the development of nuclear weapons (Chacko 2011). Three days later, India's Minister for External Affairs declared the test to be an experiment that was "an important landmark in the development of nuclear technology for peaceful and economic uses" (Singh 1974: 147). Indeed, as negative international responses to the PNE grew, Indira Gandhi maintained that: "India is not a 'nuclear weapons' country, as we do not have any bombs and we do not intend to use nuclear knowledge or nuclear power for any other that peaceful purposes" (1974: 7). In addition to the emphasis on the explosion as for peaceful ends, official statements emphasised the technical achievements of the explosion, namely how it was an entirely Indian effort and represented the first occasion that any country had tested its first nuclear device underground (Chacko 2011). Are these justifications to be believed or are they simply a smokescreen for power politics?

Das (2010) argues that the peaceful nuclear explosion was made possible by a discursive shift that occurred among Indian policymakers after the Sino-Indian war of 1962, and as such the PNE was a result of Realist strategic logic. Defeat in this war, she argues, shifted Indian strategic thinking away from Nehruvian *Panchsheel* (peaceful co-existence) towards more Realist thinking which enabled India's quest for nuclear power to shift from peaceful to military and the programme leading to Pokhran to be started. Indeed, she argues that Indira Gandhi was "a proponent of military nationalism in re-interpreting India's nationalist identity" and that under Gandhi's administration policymakers faced the (constructed) threats of ongoing nuclear modernization in China, active rearmament in Pakistan and anti-Indian involvement by the USA in South Asia. These insecurities fed into the felt national interest in a more militaristic nuclear agenda. (Das 2010) Without doubt, there is truth in Das's argument, but the very realisation that explaining international politics is constitutive of a reality (for the explainer) means that it is not so easy to discount the justifications after the nuclear explosion as a rhetorical smokescreen. Indeed, by looking into the attitudes of Nehru, a man of critical importance in shaping the identity of early India, it is possible to understand that there is good reason to take these justifications on face value.

Science, Atomic Energy and Indian Identity

Abraham (Abraham 1998: 26) states that, "the postcolonial vision of India, summarised by [Partha] Chatterjee as the 'discourse of development' was crucially dependent for its articulation on the idea of science". Nationalist thought sought to reconcile the two seemingly opposed categories of 'tradition' and 'modernity' while remaining 'Indian'[10]

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(Abraham 1998). Despite some reticence regarding the damaging effects of science, Nehru concluded that science was necessary for the creation of a modern India so long as it could be tamed by a 'scientific temper' (Chacko 2011). Hence, when the Atomic Energy Bill arose in the Constituent Assembly in 1948, Nehru's support for it lay not in the militaristic and *realpolitik* desire for future nuclear weapons, but rather the belief that atomic energy was essential for the development of a modern India (Das 2010). Indeed, Nehru positioned atomic energy as the harbinger of new era of human civilization, and India's backwardness as a result of India's inability to harness the defining technology of the previous era:

we are on the verge … of a tremendous development in some direction of the human race. Consider the past few hundred years of human history: the world developed a new source of power, the steam engine … India with all her virtues did not develop that power. It became a backward country because of that … Now we are facing the atomic age; we are on the verge of it. And this is something infinitely … powerful. (Constituent Assembly of India 1948: 3334)

India's defining and looming colonial past, therefore, is positioned as something that could have and can be overcome through the appropriation of modern science. The pursuit of the atom, therefore, becomes necessary for the development of India. Not pursuing nuclear energy becomes almost literally unthinkable for Indian policymakers, as it is through atomic energy that independent India can become a modern state (Abraham 1998)

Hence, it makes more sense to envision the PNE as demonstrating India's technological and scientific ability rather than a demonstration of military might. Indeed, this seems not only to explain why no military personnel were informed of the test before its occurrence, but also Indira Gandhi's decree to some opposing nuclear scientists that, "the experiment should be carried out on schedule for the simple reason that India required such a demonstration" (Chacko 2011: 198). It appears, therefore, that the government justifications after the detonation can be taken at face value. Further evidence for the peaceful orientation of India's nuclear programme is provided by India's persistent moves for global abolition of nuclear weapons.

'Scientific Temper' and Global Disarmament

In a speech in 1956, Nehru noted that nuclear technology 'can bring complete ruin upon the world or contribute to progress. It depends on how it is used. But more important, is ultimately the kind of human beings who will use it' (Nehru 1984). India's moral and cultural traditions, argues Nehru, make Indians the 'right people' because these traditions can provide Indian's with the "real temper of science". The "scientific temper points out the way along which man should travel", and "the west is still far from having developed the real temper of science. It has still to bring the spirit and the flesh into creative harmony". Whereas Indians have the potential for the "real temper of science" because "the essential basis of Indian thought for ages past, though not its later manifestations, fits in with the scientific temper and approach, as well as with internationalism" (Nehru 1946: 512-515). India is thus represented as having a modern, scientific world view that is anchored in India's moral and cultural traditions i.e. its identity. This representation of an India that can master technology, without being mastered by technology ascribes India (and its policymakers) with a moral authority and an 'enlightened' approach to nuclear armaments. Indeed, I think it is out of this understanding that India's track record of campaigning for global nuclear disarmament can be seen, even after the detonation of the PNE.

Despite a gradual escalation in the efforts of the Science establishment to direct the nuclear programme towards military development, the campaigning for nuclear disarmament continued after the PNE. Abraham (1998: 164-165) argues that the failure of policymakers to de-contest the meaning the PNE to one oriented around 'development', 'peace' and 'technical achievement' shifted India's nuclear establishment and political leadership, "from a mythic space of non-alignment and peaceful coexistence into an every-day realm of naturalised fear, threat, danger and insecurity." Although the nuclear establishment did consciously push the nuclear programme towards military development[11] this shift was more difficult for policymakers who continued to be influenced by Nehruvian thought and the tension between modernity and Indian identity (Abraham 1998; Chacko 2011). Indeed, the political go-ahead for more tests did not prove forthcoming. In the early 1980s Indira Gandhi reneged on her decision to conduct a test, as did Rao in 1995. Furthermore, Rajiv Gandhi actively sought global nuclear disarmament through an action plan presented to the UN General Assembly in 1988, which included binding commitments for the eradication of weapons

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by 2010[12] (Ganguly 1999).

In 1996, however, India chose not to sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) which offered a potential realisation of Nehru's vision of a global agreement to end nuclear testing (Chacko 2011). India's chief negotiator Arundhati Ghose claimed this decision was based on India's "approach towards nuclear disarmament, its perception of a potential threat from the existence of nuclear weapons, its strategic circumstances and, above all, the unanimous rejection by the Indian Parliament of what was seen as an unequal, dangerous and coercive treaty" (Ghose 1997: 239). Although she mentions 'strategic circumstances' thus indicating a realist logic, the manner in which the rejection of an unequal, dangerous and coercive treaty is privileged is largely in line with India's identity as a country with a commitment to a non-colonial global order and non-nuclear apartheid. Hence, despite some movements towards the accumulation of nuclear weapons Indian thinking on nuclear weapons remained based in its identity which repudiated the violence and the dehumanising effects of modernity (Chacko 2011).

Conclusion

What does India's early nuclear history tell us about Indian foreign policy? Firstly, it demonstrates that Realism which does not envision any distinctiveness in foreign policy other than between Realist foreign policy and 'bad' foreign policy, cannot satisfactorily explain India's early nuclear programme. Indeed, India's nuclear trajectory, therefore, does not match the Realist logic that characterised many of original nuclear powers. Secondly, it appears that India *has* followed a uniquely Indian path towards nuclear development. By accepting the constructed-ness of foreign policy, it is possible to find explanations for India's nuclear policy in the dominant understandings of Indian identity, science and modernity constructed primarily by Nehru. The degree to which nuclear policy – namely the ambivalence to become a country with nuclear weapons despite the capability – matched the uniquely Indian prevailing understandings in the Indian 'geopolitical culture' makes a justifiable claim for the distinctiveness of Indian foreign policy. However, this is not to make the claim that there is an unchanged essence to Indian identity or Indian foreign policy. Identities and understandings are not fixed; they are fluid and always contested. Indeed, it appears that it was the promotion of another representation of Indian to prominence that enabled the Pokhram II tests in 1998 (Chacko 2011; Das 2010)

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[1]There is no single tradition of political realism, but rather a knot of historically constituted tensions, contradictions and evasions" (Walker 1993: 106). Realism has, however, come to indicate "a series of propositions underlying a distinctive approach to the study of international politics." (Rosenberg 1994: 9) Nonetheless, I admittedly do not do justice to the richness of Realism in this essay.

[2] Realists maintain that IR has sharply defined borders, i.e. IR theorists study 'the international' – a fictitiously distinct constructed object of study exhibiting a unique logic and unique causal forces, insulated and independent from 'the economy' and 'the domestic' (Bell 2002; Rosenberg 1994).

[3] Realists disagree as to whether the motivation driving states to accumulate power is due to a natural 'will to power' representative of the *animus dominandi* nature of man (classical Realists) or a structurally induced motivation in response to the unavoidable fear and uncertainty[3] of an anarchic realm (structural Realists) (Schmidt 2007; Weber 2005). However, it is reasonable to assume that any state has a fundamental and unchangeable interest in survival, security and maintaining sovereignty and Realists would deem power as the only guarantor of this interest (Schmidt 2007).

[4] "…Security measures taken by one actor are perceived by others as threatening; the others take steps to protect themselves; these steps are then interpreted by the first actor as confirming its initial hypothesis that the others are dangerous; and so on in a spiral of illusory fears and "unnecessary" defences". (Snyder 1997: 17).

[5] "[W]ar-winning ability" is "the standard by which states are…ranked" and differentiated (Baldwin 2002: 183; Schmidt 2007).

[6] Besides, as Carr argues: "politics are not…a function of ethics, but ethics of politics…morality is the product of

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power."(2001: 82)

[7] After all, Realism is also has a prescriptive dimension, it only describes world politics if actors are being rational utility maximisers. Hence, poor policy can exist i.e. Realists do not preclude, "Balinese marching into Dutch machine guns or the Polish cavalry charging German tanks" but rather determine that such action is poor policy (Wendt 1999: 113).

[8] Ganguly (1999: 159) argues that, although "often overlooked in Western strategic analyses of India's security", the signing of a twenty-year treaty of "peace, friendship, and cooperation" with the Soviet Union in August 1971 greatly assuaged India's fears of China. This was because Article 9 of the treaty was "virtually a Soviet security guarantee". (ibid)

[9] Laclau & Mouffe, (1985: 108) explain how things are only 'real' in discourse: "An earthquake of the falling of a brick is an event that exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God' depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive conditions of emergence."

[10] Nehru's writings reflect this concern. Talking about 'Mother India', he wrote, now as "India puts on her new garment, as she must, for the old is torn and tattered, she will have it cut in this fashion, so as to make it conform both to present conditions and her old thought" (Nehru 1980: 432). However, "Though her attire may change, she will continue as of old, and her store of wisdom will help her to hold on to what is true and beautiful and good in this harsh, vindictive, and grasping world" (Nehru 1946: 563).

[11] A trend Abraham (1998) traces from the late 1950s/early 1960s after the completion of India's first nuclear reactors.

[12] Indeed, Rajiv Gandhi described nuclear weapons as, "the ultimate expression of the philosophy of terrorism holding humanity hostage to the presumed security needs of a few" (Government of India 1988: 282).

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