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The Indian Government's five underground nuclear tests conducted on May 11th and 13th have provoked a storm of concerns almost unanimously prognosticating heightened threats of nuclear war. These concerns may be unwarranted.

First of all, news of India's possession of nuclear weapons capabilities is not new. It now only becomes less ambiguous--regarding likely development of warhead varieties and corresponding delivery systems. And in principle, less ambiguity on nuclear matters has been touted as strengthening security matters--for example in various "open skies" initiatives through the years of the nuclear era.

Second, India's tests of fission, low-yield, and thermonuclear devices should not have been a surprising development with the coming to power of a Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition government in March of this year. Elements of the coalition made pledges suggesting that government policy would change to reflect the open possession of nuclear capabilities. Testing would certainly be one way of doing this. Moreover, India's atomic weapons commissioner had made comments suggesting testing was likely--comments supported by activity around the Pokharan testing range that allegedly had been occurring for months. In addition, recent missile tests by the Pakistani government were likely seen as an escalatory provocation by the Indian government. Surprise is often feared in managing a world with nuclear weapons. There plainly should have been no surprise here.

Third, India has not violated the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty--a violation being grounds for significant security concerns--for India has never signed it. India had seemed to comply with an informal moratorium on nuclear testing since the 1996 signing of the treaty by 149 countries and, in fact, may not have engaged in a nuclear testing since 1974. And apparently India had been successfully coerced by the Clinton administration into not engaging in a nuclear test in December 1995. So, an equally significant Issue would be not that India has engaged in testing now, but that it hasn't more often in the past. Again, there has been no treaty violation.

Fourth, at least during the Cold War, an escalating nuclear arms race was judged by many nuclear policy experts as contributing to security--as constituting and reinforcing deterrence. The rationale was that the consequences of nuclear war becoming ever more noxious contributed to deterrence. So why should the potential consequences of a nuclear arms race and potential redeployment of nuclear and other military assets among India, Pakistan, and even China be necessarily malign? It be reasonably posited that a new balance of terror with deterrent features is being established, even in some way reinforcing the continuing deterrent processes amongst the other declared nuclear powers: the United States (US), Russia, France, United Kingdom (UK), and China.

Fifth, one of India's rationales for not complying with test bans and test ban treaties is that it refuses to be relegated to a second-tier security status behind the declared nuclear powers--one of which is a former colonial power (UK) and one of which is a contemporary political and military competitor (China)--and in confronting political and military competition from a country that at least some Indian
political and religious (and their followers) consider still part of India, viz., Pakistan. Independent Indian
governments have long possessed a burning desire to be a world power. India's recent governments
have professed--sincerely or not--to be willing to refrain from testing and even to agree to disarm once
the declared nuclear powers and other national governments known to possess nuclear weapons--viz.,
Pakistan, Israel--show the sincere intent of disarming and refraining from even computer simulated
tests. This intent is not there. The Indian tests may be considered a push towards the other nuclear
powers to truly support a nuclear-free world.

Sixth, some analysts advert to the notion that India's testing is a mortal blow to international
nonproliferation policies. Yet there is a curious lack of outrage towards China's nonproliferation
violations concerning Pakistan and Iran and the nonproliferation violations of North Korea and several
Western countries--e.g., Germany--and a Western wannabe--viz., Russia--concerning Iraq and Iran.
India's tests do not constitute an egregious nonproliferation violation.

One might conclude--especially from points four, five, and six--that concerns about India's nuclear
testing reflect more of an ethnocentric bias against it, a hypocritical sense of entitlement on the part of
other nuclear powers, and envy among non-nuclear powers. (The first two points seem to characterize
US Senator John Glenn's [D-Ohio] remarks that the tests were "a blatant slap in the face to the way the
rest of the world is going." All three points seem to characterize comments of the director of the US
Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, John Holum, that nuclear weapons development should be
proscribed for poor countries because this development takes away from resources that could best be
used for economic development. Are the economic problems of the US nonexistent so that Holum's
comments do not apply to it?) One might also conclude that there seems to be a primitive analytic
stance towards nuclear assets--globally, regionally, and locally--that less is always good (bringing more
security) and more always bad (bringing less security). And one might conclude that as "the Buddha is
smiling" has been cited as the code message transmitted to Prime Minister Indira Ghandi after India's
1974 nuclear test, the Buddha may actually be smiling on Monday's and Wednesday's tests as
contributing to international security not detracting from it.

(This seems to be the case unless the US and some of its allies succeed in radicalizing and/or
destabilizing India through economic sanctions and political isolation--as if economic and political
problems have not heightened the proliferation threat from within Russia. [This last point along with
business greed and political hypocrisy is keeping a majority of US allies from instituting significant
sanctions of their own. Will one or more of these allies emulate the US of the Cold War by selling wheat
or some other valuable commodity to India at bargain prices?])

Should there be significant concerns about the Indian tests? Yes, four especially. First, the role
of psychodynamics and psychological needs--conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational--in
impelling political and military behavior is still alive and well. For example, what to make of the Pakistani
medium range ballistic missile, the Ghauri, named after a Muslim warrior that defeated a 12th century
Hindu emperor, Prithvi--which also happens to be the name of an advanced Indian missile? What to
make of President Clinton's comments that India may have been motivated by a lack of self-esteem
because it believes it is underappreciated as a world power? And what to make of a quote of a leading
Hindu nationalist who is the most powerful politician in Bombay, Balasaheb Thackeray: "We have to
prove that we are not eunuchs."

Second, a regimen of safeguards similar to that among the declared nuclear powers--especially the US
and the former Soviet Union--needs to be instituted to decrease the probability of political conflict
becoming nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan. This need is underlined by the facts that Indian and Pakistan--unlike the US and the former Soviet Union--are geographically adjacent neighbors with a shared history of ethnic conflict and hatred. (This concern does not necessarily contradict the overall observation that the Buddha may be smiling and international security may be reinforced by the Indian nuclear tests.)

Third, there needs to be a basic rethinking of the alleged deterrent consequences of massive retaliation, mutually assured destruction, parity, and other Strangelovean faith systems to thinking the unthinkable. And as to unthinking the unthinkable, is global disarmament functionally possible? Theoretically ideal?

Fourth, if journalistic accounts are to be believed, there has been a huge shortfall among many Western intelligence entities towards predicting India's nuclear tests. This shortfall may comprise the placement of photoreconnaissance and telecommunications intercept satellites, accuracy and speed of technical data interpretation by technical and human means, interpretation of all-source data by intelligence analysts, interpretation of classified and open source data by diplomats and policy makers, and the efficiency and priorities of intelligence and policymaking systems.