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ABSTRACT

Although contemporary Indian strategic thought is described in terms of various schools, most scholars agree that prior to the end of the Cold War there prevailed a so-called Nehruvian consensus on India's strategic objectives. This consensus was allegedly idealist, emphasizing autonomy, peaceful co-existence, and Third World anti-imperialist leadership. We argue that this characterization ignores numerous alternative views on Indian strategy that thrived in elite debates outside the uppermost echelons of power. Many of these views were grounded in pragmatism, or a flexible approach to considerations of power and material interest that eschewed dogmatic thinking, be it high moralism or offensive bluster. Through a case study of India's response to China's emerging nuclear program following the latter's first nuclear test in 1964, we highlight the role that pragmatism played in the national debate and the way it shaped the strategic options considered by the elite at the time.

Introduction

This study challenges the standard presumption of strategic consensus in post-independence India, a consensus that is said to have shifted over time from idealism to pragmatism,[1] and in a narrower sense from non-alignment to "multi-alignment."[2] Although scholars often divide contemporary Indian strategic thought into schools or streams, earlier periods are said to be characterized by a unified sense of India's objectives and the most suitable means for their attainment.[3] This perspective is shaped by a sense of Jawaharlal Nehru's overwhelming importance in the early years after independence, particularly in the domain of foreign affairs.[4] Kanti Bajpai ascribes the term "Nehruvian" to a coherent and influential set of beliefs that arguably still underpins much of Indian strategic thinking.[5]

Recent research has shown that far from a national consensus, there was in fact considerable disagreement on the appropriate external strategy for India to pursue immediately after independence.[6] To enforce the notion of a Nehruvian consensus in Indian strategic thinking risks eliding a range of

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alternative views and their respective lineages, some of which are thriving in contemporary India.[7] Equally, it perpetrates the mistaken notion that Indian strategic thought somehow turned pragmatic after the end of the Cold War.[8] Although Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi are sometimes seen as inaugurating the "shift away from idealism,"[9] there is little discussion of the diversity of views that persisted throughout the Nehru era and after.

In this study, we argue that far from being uniformly idealist, strategic thought among Indian elites – typically individuals outside government but with intellectual access to or intellectual influence in the uppermost echelons of power – contained significant strands of pragmatism well before the watershed moment of 1991. We provide a detailed case study of Indian responses to China's nuclear program in the 1960s to show – contrary to existing accounts – that instead of being mired in debates over principle and morality, Indian elites adopted pragmatic positions on how best to respond to the Chinese threat. Arguments for and against an Indian nuclear bomb were rooted in considerations of power and material interest, as well as the tactical value of nuclear weapons on the Himalayan front. This case study shows that the so-called Nehruvian consensus on Indian strategy was less a product of ideational agreement among Indian elites and more the result of the institutional power of the prime minister's office in matters of foreign policy and the political dominance of the Congress Party.

Pragmatism and Indian strategic thought

A number of factors have contributed to the mistaken notion that India's strategic thought prior to 1991 was broadly idealist. First, most scholarly treatments of India's grand strategy – the overarching logic driving a country's foreign policies – tend to conflate thought and action. This conflation overlooks the domestic and international-level variables that influence the translation of strategic thought (or preferences for certain courses of action) into action. For example, India's official unwillingness to play the Cold War game is often viewed as an instance of idealist thinking on Nehru's part,[10] ignoring the fact that for Nehru, "non-alignment embodied pragmatism as much as principle" and much of his moralizing around the concept was designed to craft a "distinguishing persona" for India abroad as well as "a new identity" at home.[11] Second, the literature's focus on grand strategy overlooks the compulsions of strategy within specific domains or geographies. Nehru's grand strategic preferences for anti-colonialism, Third World solidarity, and liberal internationalism did not translate well into the strategy he devised for India's relations with neighboring Himalayan kingdoms, for example. Third, and finally, the course of action chosen by a country in any situation represents constrained optimization both with regard to structural variables

(domestic and international) *and* competing strategic preferences within the elite.[12] Given this, it does not make sense to directly infer strategic thought from action or to assume the Indian elite held uniform preferences of one type or another.

Our focus on strategic thought as opposed to actual policies allows us to unearth the elite preferences that illuminate a state's *strategy* in a particular domain (as opposed to explaining its foreign policies).[13] Doing so helps us resolve the tension between the professed idealism of Indian leaders and their often pragmatic policies in the external realm. These policies were not only shaped by structural pressures but were also forged in an ideational milieu that was, in fact, quite pragmatic. Our goal, however, is not to show how policy was made but to show that pragmatism was in the mainstream of Indian strategic thought well before the end of the Cold War.

Indian strategic thought has so far been studied in terms of schools of thought. A number of different intellectual groups have been identified: Nehruvians, neoliberals, hyperrealists, Hindu nationalists, moralists, strategists, and realists.[14] This literature, while helpful, has led to the conceptual proliferation of schools without much work on larger themes that cut across them.[15] Nonetheless, there is broad agreement among scholars – as previously noted – that Indian strategic thought was largely idealist prior to 1991 and pragmatic thereafter. Manjari Miller and Kate Sullivan de Estrada have challenged this notion, arguing that states "do not suddenly adopt realist assumptions."[16] Instead, they argue that Indian leaders have always engaged in *procedural* pragmatism, or "the creative deployment of ideas to serve distinctive political ends."[17] Thus, depending on the political and historical context, leaders chose to be idealist or pragmatic (or some mix of both). This approach still begs the question of how political ends are determined, particularly in the realm of foreign policy, which in India is typically insulated from the pressures of domestic politics and public opinion.[18] In other words, where do strategic preferences come from if not from substantive ideas held by elites?

We take a different approach, arguing instead that Indian strategic thought has always contained significant strands of what Miller and Sullivan de Estrada call *substantive* pragmatism, or "a focus on power and material interests."[19] Although they equate this with "realist assumptions about the desirability and necessity of acquiring material power," we do not hold that pragmatism and realism are substantively identical. Realism connotes a view of the world rooted in conflict where states are the central actors and their goals revolve around survival and securing the national interest, which is typically equated with the state's interest and understood as the need for material power.[20] Pragmatism by contrast connotes a flexible approach to considerations of power and material interest without any additional assumptions about the nature of

inter-state relations, the international system, or individual psychology. Under this view, acquiring material capabilities is important not due to an underlying commitment to *realpolitik* or *raison d'etat* but only in proportion to the concrete threats a state faces. A pragmatic strategy recognizes that rather than consistently striving to attain material power, the national interest may require backing down in a crisis or trading off some amount of capability for security. It also does not deny the importance of moral objectives; rather, it recognizes that they may be worth pursuing under favorable conditions, even as it acknowledges that conditions are rarely favorable. It eschews dogmatic thinking, be it high moralism or offensive bluster.

Like realist assumptions, pragmatic assumptions are also "ideas held by influential individuals or groups."[21] We show that these ideas have been prominent in Indian strategic discourse since independence and are not the result of some gradual change over time or sudden shift at the end of the Cold War. We define this substantive pragmatism as a way of thinking that prioritizes the demands and constraints of power and material interests over other considerations such as hegemony, morality, or status in world politics.

Departures from the Nehruvian consensus

Although the majority view in the literature is that India became a pragmatic actor in 1991, pragmatic thinking at the grand strategic level among Indian elites was evident for decades prior. Rahul Sagar and Ankit Panda have shown how numerous participants in the Constituent Assembly Debates of 1947–50 challenged Nehru's conception of Indian grand strategy.[22] India's defeat in the 1962 war against China played a critical role in bringing this type of thinking back into the mainstream. Observers found India's defense preparedness wanting, and the government agreed. One scholar noted:

> Military power was not at all well-developed in India [before the Sino-Indian War] and like agriculture it needed modernisation. Since the massive Chinese aggression on 20th Oct., 1962, this power has received full attention and defence resources are being strengthened through international assistance.[23]

Another observed, "Due recognition has to be given to the fact that diplomacy not backed by requisite amount of force is ineffective and also that the force which does not further the end of diplomacy is useless."[24] Toward the end of the 1960s, an eminent scholar of Indian foreign policy echoed this view: "Diplomacy and influence are no substitute for real economic and military strength. On the contrary, the strength and influence of diplomacy is largely a reflection of the latter."[25] The post-1962 period was thus one of churn the resurfacing of old ideas hitherto overshadowed by Nehru's

predominance – that placed far greater emphasis on building up India's hard power resources. Nonetheless, some who wrote in this vein were unwilling to abandon the principled stances India had taken in international affairs.[26] Rather, they called for building up of deterrent military capability while pursuing non-alignment as envisioned by Nehru.

The victory against Pakistan in the Bangladesh War of 1971 vindicated the ideas of those who emphasized military power. Two influential scholars retrospectively summed up the zeitgeist:

> The attention given by the Government of India after 1962 to the strengthening of India's defence forces is ample evidence of the realisation that an adequate foreign and defence policy must be based on greater military power than the Government of India originally thought it necessary. That India was able to inflict a crushing defeat on Pakistan in the fourteen-days war of December 1971 is further proof to the increased weight which the Government of India is now giving to military force in maintaining the territorial integrity of the State.[27]

More broadly, Indira Gandhi's first tenure as prime minister from 1966–77 is often viewed as the period in which India inched away from idealism in its foreign policy. Although India's official policy and statements retained a commitment to principles such as anti-imperialism and Third World solidarity, Indira is said to have "sought to sustain two competing visions of world order," one rooted in principle and the other based on an increasing appreciation of power.[28] Looking back after just over three decades since independence, an outside observer noted that India had essentially reinterpreted non-alignment over time to allow for "military assistance, equal proximity rather than equal distance from the superpowers, virtual military alliance, and disavowing the moral superiority of Indian policy."[29]

Taken together, these elements of Indian grand strategy constituted a substantial departure from Nehru's professed ideals, yet the standard view of Indian foreign policy maintains that the so-called Nehruvian consensus essentially held until the end of the Cold War (some argue that it prevailed until Narendra Modi was elected prime minister in 2014).[30] According to C. Raja Mohan, "[f]ifty years after independence, India now wanted to become a normal nation—placing considerations of *realpolitik* and national security above its until recently dominant focus on liberal internationalism, morality and normative approaches to international politics."[31] The case study below shows that the former considerations were present well before this historical juncture not just in India's grand strategy but also within specific domains such as nuclear strategy.

Nuclear weapons debate of the 1960s

We select our case from a relatively under-studied period in the history of Indian foreign policy. While much has been written about the Nehru period, considerably less attention is paid to the Shastri and early Indira periods. The common perception of these years, is that due to domestic political instability, both leaders chose a business-as-usual approach to foreign policy with minor shifts away from the so-called Nehruvian consensus. According to David Malone, the period was one of "intermittent realism."[32] To the extent that Indian strategic thought was responsive to global currents, the 1960s were a time of significant pushes and pulls both toward and away from idealism. The era was shaped by the decolonization of dozens of countries in Asia and Africa over the preceding decade, the birth of the Non-Aligned Movement, and the rise of Afro-Asian solidarity. Equally, it was marked by the emergence of the Sino-Soviet split, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Sino-Indian War, the Vietnam War, China's acquisition of nuclear weapons, and Pakistan's attack on India. External events thus provided sufficient fuel for both idealist and pragmatic preferences to find voice in debates within India, providing a rich empirical source for our purposes.

To highlight the prevalence of pragmatism among Indian elites, we select the case of China going nuclear in 1964 and its emerging nuclear program in the rest of the decade. We examine discussions of the nuclear question in academic journals and periodicals as well as political party manifestos and speeches at party meetings – all typical sites of elite intellectual exchange. The Chinese nuclear threat can be thought of as a relatively easy case for our claim, in that it centers on an event that was likely to arouse considerations of power and material interest in Indian minds. The fact that the literature on India's nuclear history does not take this view is the central puzzle to which we address ourselves in the following section.

India's nuclear non-response

On October 16, 1964, China exploded its first nuclear device at a testing site in Lop Nor in the south-eastern region of Xinjiang province. The reaction in New Delhi was almost immediate: "China blasted its way into the world's nuclear club today," read a front-page headline in *The Times of India*.[33] Needless to say, Indian leaders – still recovering from the shock of the Sino-Indian War just two years prior – were alarmed. "China has been trying to build itself up as a mighty war machine," said Shastri, "The atom bomb is the latest type of weapon which cuts across the general desire of humanity to live in peace."[34] Although Nehru had maintained a position of nuclear disavowal while leaving the door open to a future weapons capability, the Chinese nuclear test created significant domestic pressure on Indian leaders to begin a

weapons development program.[35] The pressure appears to have originated and operated largely at the elite level. A 1963 study comparing public opinion before and after the Sino-Indian War – between the summer of 1962 and early 1963 – had found that although there was a 21 percentage-point increase in fears of Chinese aggression among the public, when asked about their national hopes Indians both before and after the war prioritized an improved standard of living, technical advances, and full employment well ahead of being "militarily strong."[36] More to the point, not a single respondent in the two samples of 2,366 and 2,014 respectively chose "nuclear war" among the most concerning problems facing India.[37] Although these surveys were conducted before China's first nuclear test, they provide a reasonable sense of the largely elite-driven debates over the potential Chinese nuclear threat in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian War.

Despite the political pressure from both outside and within his own party, Shastri was resolute in his refusal of the nuclear option. At most, he was willing to concede Homi J. Bhabha's request to begin theoretical work on the use of nuclear explosions for peaceful purposes, which to Shastri meant digging tunnels and leveling mountains for construction.[38] Even though he thus allegedly "opened the door to the bomb," Shastri was not fully aware of the decision's implications: George Perkovich argues that Shastri was swayed by Bhabha and the desire to mollify those in his own party who were clamoring for the bomb.[39] In this sense, India's official response was fundamentally ambiguous and "[the] fact that it was not informed by a systematic analysis of the military security challenge posed by China violated Western theoretical models of nuclear decision making…."[40] Perkovich, in his authoritative study of India's path to nuclear weapons, also points out the "normative aversion" that Indian leaders had toward nuclear weapons, which allegedly shaped India's nuclear trajectory and at least in part explains the reluctance by both Shastri and Indira to go nuclear after 1964.[41] According to Perkovich, "India's singular idealism in international affairs…remained a real factor in the definition of national interest."[42]

This argument naturally raises the question of whose views represent "India," especially when it is clear that there was significant political support *for* the bomb. As the prime minister, Shastri's decision carried the day. However, there were numerous pragmatic voices in the nuclear debate in India at the time; a normative aversion to nuclear weapons was far from being the modal attitude of the Indian elite. A closer look at this debate reveals that not only did Indian elites make systematic evaluations of the Chinese military challenge, but it was precisely these evaluations that convinced them that going nuclear would ill serve India's material interests.

There are two alternative explanations for India's nuclear non-decision in the 1960s that must be addressed before we proceed. First, it is often argued that India was technologically incapable of producing a nuclear device at this time: it

possessed neither sufficient quantities of plutonium nor scientists sufficiently skilled in the technical aspects of bomb design.[43] However, the evidence on this count is mixed. India's Canadian-built reactor CIRUS began producing plutonium in October 1963 and its reprocessing plant at Trombay came online in June 1964, suggesting that India would have had sufficient plutonium for a nuclear explosion by mid-1965.[44] In February 1964, the US State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) estimated that India was "four to six months" away from being able to produce weapons-grade plutonium.[45] While this estimate was undoubtedly exaggerated, the Indian civilian leadership's own impression in March 1965 was that India was among a small group of countries for whom it would take five years or less to build a nuclear bomb.[46] There is no doubt that technological progress on this front during the 1960s was slow, yet technological progress itself is a function of political decision-making and there is no evidence to date of a political decision during this period for India to go nuclear.[47] More importantly, only the very top of India's civilian leadership – the prime minister, his/her principal secretary, the head of the scientific bureaucracy, and a small handful of others – were aware of India's capabilities or lack thereof. Hence, debates among the wider elite assumed either that India had the capability to produce at least one fission device (see the following section) or that, as Yogesh Joshi puts it, "if the decision [were] taken…gaps in capability can always be filled."[48]

A second explanation for India's non-response is the institutional and leadership disruption resulting from the deaths of Nehru in May 1964 and Shastri and Bhabha (separately) in January 1966.[49] While these deaths did result in discontinuities, the fact remains that Indian prime ministers successively decided to abjure nuclear weapons in the 1960s. As in the case of technological progress, there was no latent political desire for weapons that was stymied by the deaths of key figures. Even on the technical side, Bhabha's successor Vikram Sarabhai rolled back the theoretical work on the subterranean nuclear explosion program (SNEP) in favor of investing in India's nascent space program.[50]

If moral aversion or technological/institutional incapacity were the primary causes of the lack of an Indian initiative to build the bomb in the 1960s, this was not evident in the bulk of the Indian debate on the nuclear question. Instead, various arguments were made both for and against the bomb in the 1960s based on pragmatic analyses of India's security situation. A number of scholars such as Raj Krishna, B. Ramesh Babu, A. P. Rana, Sisir Gupta, and Subramanian Swamy (then an assistant professor of economics at Harvard); retired military personnel such as P. S. Gyani; journalists such as G. S. Bhargava, and politicians from both the Right and Left argued for a soberer assessment of the value of nuclear weapons to Indian security, if not outright nuclear acquisition. On the other side were Shastri and Indira themselves, in

addition to former government officials and military personnel such as H. M. Patel, R. K. Nehru, and D. Som Dutt; and journalists such as Romesh Thapar.

Anti-bomb arguments

Those who argued against the bomb did so primarily on grounds of the financial cost that a full-fledged deterrent would entail.[51] Shastri insisted that India "cannot afford to spend millions and millions over nuclear arms when there is poverty and unemployment all around us."[52] Others argued that deterring China was not a matter of building and testing one nuclear device but would instead require a large nuclear arsenal and reliable delivery mechanisms that could target Chinese cities. As R. K. Nehru noted,

> [The] explosion of a few bombs does not make a country a nuclear power. The country must build an arsenal of nuclear weapons and an effective delivery system. It took the UK, with its highly developed industrial base, 13 years to attain its present position of what has been described as "comparatively modest nuclear strength."[53]

Romesh Thapar concurred:

> The concept that all that needs to be done is to explode a single nuclear device is absurd. This call for a costly demonstration is assiduously projected in the knowledge that it calms the frustration of those who would "match" China's abilities. But the truth remains that one bomb must lead to many more.[54]

In 1968, by the time China had conducted seven nuclear tests including its first thermonuclear device as well as its first nuclear ballistic missile, Indira Gandhi echoed the cost argument:

> The choice before us involves not only the question of making a few atom bombs but of engaging in an arms race with sophisticated nuclear warheads and an effective missile delivery system. I do not think that such a course would strengthen national security. On the other hand, it may well endanger our internal security by imposing a very heavy economic burden which would be in addition to the present expenditure on defence.[55]

Those against the bomb also questioned the credibility of the Chinese nuclear threat, both in terms of the role of nuclear weapons in Chinese military strategy as well as the cost *to China* of maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent. Early in 1965, Shastri argued in a press conference, "The atom bomb is not going to fall on India tomorrow and, therefore, we need not consider this matter."[56] He went on to add: "There is a greater danger of [the Chinese] using the conventional army and conventional weapons in attacking India. In fact, it is much more important than the use of atom bomb by China."[57] Later in the year, he maintained this position: "[It] will take some

time for China to develop the deterrent capacity, and to my mind the explosion just at present is with a view to creating a political impression."[58] R. K. Nehru echoed this view, arguing that it was "difficult to imagine" that India and China would have "enough industrial strength to develop modern missiles in the near future."[59] D. Som Dutt, a retired Major General and the first director (from 1966–68) of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), assessed the unreasonable demands that even tactical nuclear weapons – advocated by some at the time – would place on Indian strategy in a potential border conflict with China:

> On balance, it is difficult to avoid reaching the conclusion that the use of nuclear weapons in the Himalayas in a tactical role would not be infallible, and to be really effective the sphere of action would have to be widened, with the unavoidable result that escalation would take place.[60]

Finally, based on considerations of cost and utility, anti-bomb advocates argued that given the very real security threat India faced from China, India should seriously consider the option of a nuclear guarantee from the great powers. H. M. Patel, a top-ranking retired civil servant in the national security bureaucracy who later become a Cabinet minister under the Janata government, argued that it would be "extravagant folly to go in for manufacturing nuclear weapons which we can ill afford without thoroughly exploring the possibilities of the nuclear umbrella."[61] Patel argued that this course of action would require India to come to an "arrangement" with the West (not the Soviets, whom he found unreliable) and, thus, abandon non-alignment.[62] On this point he differed with R. K. Nehru, who argued that in order to preserve non-alignment, India ought to pursue an informal guarantee from the great powers, which would be "good enough."[63]

In sum, most of those who argued against the bomb did not do so on any idealistic or principled grounds. Rather, their arguments were focused on the concrete threat from China, which was deemed to be a conventional and land-based one from across the Himalayas. They also evinced a keen awareness of the limits of nuclear weapons in grand strategy, especially given their exorbitant cost for a country as poor as India. And finally, they all advocated building up India's conventional military power in order to deter or repel future Chinese aggression. Taken together, the anti-bomb advocates made their case on pragmatic grounds.

Pro-bomb arguments

Pro-bomb arguments mainly invoked India's national security needs as the basis for countering anti-bomb arguments, in particular critiquing the latter's focus on costs and great-power security guarantees. The economist Raj Krishna laid out India's options: do nothing, align with one or more great

powers, or develop an independent deterrent.[64] Doing nothing would be too dangerous, and developing a full-fledged independent deterrent ("a large stockpile, long-range supersonic heavy bombers, IRBM's, ICBM's, interceptory and second-strike capacity, naval power etc.") was "absolutely beyond our capacity."[65] Alignment too was infeasible, for strategic reasons:

> [The] naval, air and nuclear power of America is by itself no answer to subversion or guerilla warfare; no answer to an infantry push by the Chinese; no answer to a limited use of tactical atomic weapons by the Chinese artillery; no answer to scare raids (without bombing); and no answer to blackmail or demoralisation of the defendants based on the mere threat that the Chinese can deliver atomic devices over short distances. But these precisely are the contingencies which the Chinese are likely to create in the immediate and intermediate future. They will not create contingencies in which U.S. power is a relevant deterrent….[66]

The only option left to India was to develop – with superpower assistance – a "small stockpile and an aircraft delivery system" coupled with tactical nuclear weapons to counter China's own tactical weapons.[67]

Separately, Krishna addressed himself to groups like "the Quakers, the Pugwashists, some Christian Church groups, Gandhites,…Buddhists,…and unilateral disarmamentists everywhere [who] emphasise the absolute immorality of possessing nuclear weapons."[68] He argued that such groups tend to be "valuational monists," privileging only one value (non-violence) over others.[69] Such a position was untenable so long as some countries possessed nuclear weapons, because these countries were now a threat to all other nations. In this manner, he put forward a quintessentially pragmatic argument:

> In a situation of nuclear oligopoly, no choice which is available to the non-nuclear nations is unconditionally good. Every alternative has some evil in it. There is evil in possessing the bomb; and there is evil in not possessing it. The problem is to choose the less evil course of policy in a historically unique situation on the basis of the most ruthlessly honest and responsible political reflection on the consequences of each alternative course.[70]

In yet another article, Krishna argued that a foreign policy of non-alignment in fact *required* that India have "sufficient defensive military power, including limited nuclear capability" in order to "be genuinely independent and a source of influence in her own right."[71] In this he was in agreement with A. P. Rana, who argued that contrary to the claims of those Indians who abhorred balance-of-power politics and nuclear weapons, it was precisely the existence of nuclear weapons that created "civilizing possibilities" in the "balancing process" that allowed India to be non-aligned.[72] In other words, according to Rana, "Non-alignment owes its effectiveness to…the "unthinkability" of an all-out war," which had brought non-military means of influence and balancing to the fore in world politics.[73] He concluded that in the

absence of nuclear weapons in the hands of the great powers, Nehru himself would have had no influence in world politics.[74]

Other pro-bomb advocates pushed back against the notion that a nuclear deterrent would be too costly for India. Sisir Gupta argued that cost should not be a consideration when important matters of "power and prestige" were at hand[75]:

> It is doubtful if the economists [who argue that the bomb is too costly for India] would ever consider the United States good enough economically to waste money on space ventures so long as Harlem and Mississippi are there. Likewise, how could the Soviet Union develop her luniks and sputniks when so many and so much of fundamental economic problems are yet to be tackled in that country.[76]

Subramanian Swamy juxtaposed the cost of an Indian nuclear deterrent with that of the nuclear threat from China, the likelihood of which he estimated as high:

> We can be faced with a serious Chinese nuclear threat. A conventional war started by China may go disastrously for her. And, to bring the conventional fighting to a stop, the Chinese may be tempted to issue a nuclear threat. This is not unusual as many anti-bomb lobbyists in India make it out to be.[77]

Swamy thus arrived at two conclusions. First, "fighting an unprepared war has a higher opportunity cost than fighting a war for which defence planning has been done."[78] Second, "the spill-overs, or external economies, afforded by advance weapons systems is always more profound and structural than conventional weapon systems."[79] In a foreword to a book on India and nuclear weapons, he wrote, "To me it is inevitable that India produce nuclear weapons, and generally strengthen her defence. The logic of cost is quite pedestrian, for it is neither costly nor is it logic."[80] In a rejoinder to Swamy, two economists criticized his assumptions and cost calculations, which were based on Bhabha's widely cited but considerably under-estimated figure of Rs. 18 crore (Rs. 180 million, or approximately US$ 24 million at the time) for 100 nuclear bombs.[81] But even they differed not on the end result but the means of getting there, offering an alternative course of action: "postpone a final decision about any nuclear weapons system for a few years and concentrate all efforts on increasing industrial capacity…. Once an adequate level of industrial activity is reached, the option to become a full-fledged nuclear power can be considered."[82]

P. S. Gyani, a former Lieutenant General, arrived at a similar conclusion based on an assessment of the utility of nuclear weapons in the Himalayan theater:

> [Nuclear] weapons and nuclear strikes are militarily not necessary [for China]. China has an extremely high capability in para-military operations, in guerrilla

> warfare, and in spreading insurgency and subversion. She has the necessary numbers, in man-power, to put into the field; the Himalayan terrain is ideally suited for her method of warfare. On our side, we certainly, I am sure, are not thinking of 'nuclear retaliation,' in the event China starts pinching our outlying posts. In the Himalayas, we have to fight on a man-to-man basis.[83]

He concluded from this assessment that India should "give the highest priority to conventional weapons" while continuing to "improve our technological ability to manufacture the [*sic*] nuclear weapons and the delivery system."[84]

Others focused less on cost and military strategy and more on the infeasibility of a security guarantee from the great powers. In the days after China's nuclear test, President Johnson had assured states that did not seek to follow suit "strong support against some threat of nuclear blackmail."[85] Many Indian elites saw this as an empty promise, not for ideological reasons but out of a simple understanding of credible commitment problems, US self-interest, and its past behavior. Raj Krishna noted, "It is easy to see that the nuclear nations will find it extremely difficult to give the kind of guarantee India needs. The lines which we may consider inviolable may not be regarded as such by the nuclear nations."[86] Evincing a keen understanding of great-power politics, Sisir Gupta argued that "the major problem posed by the Chinese bomb in the capitals of the world is not what will happen to India but what is to be done with China…India will be accommodated only to the extent that the broad policy towards China leaves room for such accommodation."[87] In a similar vein, P. S. Gyani noted, "We must not take it for granted that for all time and under every condition, anyone or more of the guaranteeing powers would go to the extreme of an outright nuclear war for our sake, unless the threat to the guaranteeing power is equally great."[88] The scholar A. D. Moddie highlighted the unreliability of nuclear guarantees by pointing to Southeast Asia, where "[even] in far deeper and more protracted involvement in Viet Nam [*sic*], the US has hesitated so far to use nuclear weapons."[89]

By 1966, as talk of a guarantee was going nowhere and China tested its first nuclear ballistic missile, G. S. Bhargava noted that "the simplest and most popular answer" that India could give China would be to make the bomb. Referring to a visit by the British Foreign Secretary to New Delhi, he warned that "the latest Chinese test may again stampede India into falling for the bait of a so-called joint guarantee."[90] In 1968, after the superpowers tabled the first draft of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the Eighteen Nation Committee on Disarmament (of which India was a member), B. Ramesh Babu argued:

> The most important challenge facing us is that of ensuring our long-term security… In our strategy to meet this type of challenge it is important we do not

> foreclose our nuclear option… Let us hope that we shall be spared the massive diversion of our limited resources [involved in producing the bomb]… But we cannot eschew for ever our freedom of action in response to the current phase of the agreement between the Big Two on non-proliferation, especially when China is not yet a party to [the NPT], [and] when a credible guarantee against nuclear blackmail is neither feasible nor available…[91]

Separately, Babu argued that even if a guarantee were forthcoming informally, "this community of interest between us and the super powers may not last for ever," because they may at some point reach an "understanding" with China (a prescient statement in light of the subsequent Sino-US rapprochement).[92] In this manner, the infeasibility of a guarantee – the credibility of which was in any case called into question by a sophisticated understanding of superpower interests and lessons drawn from proxy wars elsewhere – became grounds for arguing in favor of producing the bomb. As Krishna observed, "If a credible guarantee cannot be negotiated, or if the price demanded for it is found by India to be excessive, India will have no alternative but to make nuclear weapons and at least have a limited, tactical, catalytic capability, whatever be the cost."[93]

The positions of political parties also varied significantly on the nuclear issue in the 1960s (though their official statements were often clothed in normative rhetoric and hence less evidently in the pragmatic vein). The Jan Sangh, which had initially supported nuclear disarmament,[94] became pro-bomb after the Sino-Indian War in the belief that India needed to be self-reliant in matters of defense. In January 1965 – three months after China's first nuclear test – Bachhraj Vyas, president of the Jan Sangh, stated in a speech: "We believe in peace and we are and shall remain opposed to the use of nuclear weapons in war. But we have to make the bomb to put a check on the vicious attitude of war-mongering and vile-threatening [*sic*] China."[95] The 1966 election manifesto of the Hindu Mahasabha similarly advocated that "our Government should seriously take in hands [*sic*] the manufacture of Nuclear weapons for the defence purpose [*sic*] without being bullied by our enemies."[96] By contrast, among the election manifestos for the 1967 election, the Congress Party did not even mention the challenges of defense and security in relation to China and Pakistan, while the Swatantra Party and the Communist Party of India remained resolutely anti-bomb on ideological grounds.[97] The Jan Sangh manifesto advocated the "manufacture of nuclear weapons and missiles."[98] The divisions among the Left on this issue were unexpected. The Praja Socialist Party manifesto for the same election echoed the Jan Sangh view, arguing that

> …India must try, for self-sufficiency in every branch of weaponry, nuclear as well as conventional. The controversy – "Atom for peace or for war" – is irrelevant in the present context. What is needed at present is harnessing the atom both for

> peaceful developments as well as for the manufacture of nuclear weapons as a deterrent to the aggressors who threaten our freedom and sovereignty.[99]

In 1966, Makineni Basavapunnaiah, politburo member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), rebutting claims that his party opposed India's acquisition of nuclear weapons due to its pro-China leanings, stated:

> It is for the Government of India to judge the merits and demerits and take a decision in the matter. If in wisdom it decides that the manufacture of atomic bombs is feasible, and also thinks that the production of these weapons and their possession would help us in strengthening our defence and in solving our border dispute with China it is free to take such a decision.[100]

Pro-bomb advocates, therefore, relied as much as if not more than the anti-bomb advocates on pragmatic assessments to argue in favor of India acquiring nuclear weapons. They focused on concrete assessments of the Chinese threat in the Himalayas and the cost of manufacturing nuclear weapons. They understood the limits of power in a nuclear world and the limited ability and incentives of the superpowers to provide any sort of security guarantees against the potential of Chinese nuclear blackmail. Finally – and most obviously – they did not view nuclear weapons as immoral or politically unusable. Rather, they employed sophisticated arguments regarding the role of deterrence, balancing, and mutually assured destruction in the pursuit of national security.

Ultimately, in the ideational milieu created by the nuclear weapons debate of the 1960s, India's leadership chose not to respond to China's growing nuclear program with one of their own. Instead, they pursued non-military approaches to address the threat, such as diplomacy and security guarantees from the superpowers.[101] Nonetheless, contrary to the conventional wisdom, pragmatism was in abundant evidence among Indian elites on the nuclear question during this period. They did not display anything resembling a "normative aversion" to nuclear weapons, and were forthright about discussing nuclear strategy and tactics, especially in the context of the military challenge posed by China.

The above debates taken together raise a potential methodological obstacle in the way of identifying the "true" or "real" preferences of Indian elites: it is entirely possible that the pragmatic arguments put forward by them mask underlying normative commitments regarding nuclear weapons. For example, a person making a public argument against nuclear weapons may deem it more efficacious to couch it in technical or pragmatic terms than as a normative claim.[102] While it is certainly possible that some Indian elites deployed pragmatism tactically in domestic debates, three considerations mitigate the methodological challenge. First, if pragmatism was a rhetorical tactic, then those deploying it had to have believed that it would be successful in convincing at least some of their interlocutors. This implies the existence

of a not insignificant portion of the Indian elite who were known to be receptive to the pragmatic worldview, which supports our overall argument. Second, there is no reason why a pragmatic argument should be considered more efficacious than a normative one were it indeed the case that there was widespread moral aversion to nuclear weapons. Arguably, a normative argument ought to have been *preferable* to one that publicly admitted India's deep weakness in the nuclear domain. Finally, the sources we have examined – mostly published documents in the nature of articles in journals and periodicals, as well as election manifestos and internal party speeches – add credibility to our findings. Journal articles are precisely where we would expect to find reasoned analytical debate as opposed to political posturing. That these sources evidence a wealth of articles is itself supportive of our overall argument. That we find similar (if less sophisticated) arguments in election manifestos and party speeches is a bonus, since one would expect such documents to employ normative rather than pragmatic arguments.

Conclusion

With the exception of the Prime Ministers Shastri and Indira Gandhi, the voices of the Indian elite that come through in the above case originated largely outside the uppermost echelons of power. In this sense, they show that far from a Nehruvian consensus on Indian strategy before the end of the Cold War, there were numerous alternative views in circulation that can collectively be labelled pragmatism. The elites who espoused these views focused on concrete threats and objectives, they were attuned to the limitations of power, and they were not shy about advocating the build-up of military power and the use of force. They roundly rejected moralizing and pacifist arguments against the bomb and focused squarely on questions of India's power (relative to China), tactical advantage, and overall material capabilities and interest.

Future research on this subject could expand upon the empirical scope of this article to look at other cases. For example, our preliminary research on a second case – that of Indian reactions to US involvement in Vietnam – supports the claims of this article. There, too, aside from the official anti-imperialist and anti-interventionist line against the US, elite debates contained a clear strain of pragmatism that either viewed China as the greater threat in Vietnam and hence hoped for a US victory,[103] or viewed the entire war effort as a costly mistake for US grand strategy.[104] Some even went to the extent of advocating closer ties with the US despite major differences between Delhi and Washington throughout the 1960s over arms sales to Pakistan, Johnson's "short-tether" emergency food aid policy, the evolving contours of the NPT, and Indira's partial turn toward Moscow later in the decade.[105]

A focus on elite debates on Indian strategy during the Cold War can disabuse us of the conventional wisdom that pragmatic grand strategic thinking in modern India is the result of an exogenous shock, be it the invasion of Kashmir and subsequent experience at the United Nations in 1947–48, the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the Bangladesh War of 1971, or the end of the Cold War and the balance of payments crisis of 1991. Each of these moments is variously championed as *the* moment at which India woke up to the dictates of power and material interest.[106] In fact, pragmatism has been an important part of Indian strategic thought all along. Although it was crowded out at times by other views, ignoring its role leads to distorted understandings of the past, present, and future of Indian grand strategy.

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Notes

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