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## India : the bitter fruits of grandiose ambition

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## **INDIA: THE BITTER FRUITS OF GRANDIOSE AMBITION**

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*Hyderabad March 7: India today joined the exclusive club of eight nations by successfully launching an indigenously built torpedo ...*

*The Hindu March 8 2003*

*Strength is being what you are. You are a nobody if you don't know that. It is in this sense that Hindus must be strong.*

Swami Dayananda Saraswathi, Chennai, June 2000

India is of course a very large country in terms of both its geographical area and its population. It is the home of one of the great civilisations of the world. It is absolutely paramount amongst the countries of the South Asian region, south of the great Himalayan mountain ranges. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that India's political elites should always have envisaged that their country should be a major world power. This was clearly the intention of Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first prime minister, who was a towering figure both within India and internationally throughout the later 1940s and the 1950s. Recognising that national economic development and national security are intimately intertwined, and acknowledging India's economic weakness, Nehru's strategy was to establish an independent role for the country as a principal actor in the Non-Aligned Movement that eschewed military alliances. It was a strategy that, for a time, successfully made weakness into a strength and India had a significant voice in international affairs. But the policy of non-alignment was wrecked by India's border war

with China in 1962 when due to diplomatic and military ineptitude India met a crushing defeat and Nehru's personal prestige suffered enormous damage. Thereafter India rather turned inward, its foreign policy concerned mainly with the country's standing in the South Asian region which generally became something of a backwater in international affairs. India's potential as a major power was contained by shifting relationships between the United States, China and Pakistan, which were rather ineffectively balanced by India's relations with the USSR.

This situation changed radically in May 1998 when India exploded several nuclear devices at the Pokhran test site in the deserts of Rajasthan in the west of the country , and these were followed by a similar series of tests on the part of Pakistan. In the estimation of some security specialists the border between India and Pakistan is now the most dangerous potential nuclear flash-point in the world. Given this, and its significance in regard to international terrorism - in view of events and actions both in Pakistan and in the disputed territory of Kashmir - South Asia is clearly a backwater no more. But has India's move from being a potential nuclear weapons state to an actual one marked a shift in the standing of the country in international affairs? As an NWS is India now well on the way to becoming - if it is not already - a major power, constituting an independent pole in the international system? These are the questions addressed in this paper. I consider first aspects of India's political culture and the context of the nuclear tests of 1998. I then turn to matters of domestic politics and consider the internal cohesion and the economic development of the country as necessary conditions of the status of a major power, before coming back directly to my two key questions. As the title of this essay suggests I conclude that India's domestic politics and the constraints on the economic development of the country are likely to restrict her geo-political ambitions for a considerable time to come, and incline to the view that India's nuclearisation has resulted in greater dependence upon the United States rather than having enhanced her freedom of manoeuvre in international affairs<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A somewhat different, more bullish view of India's quest for major power status, is found in the recent work of Baldev Raj Nayar and T V Paul, *India in the World Order*, 2003.

## Political Culture, Domestic Politics and the Bomb

India's political elites have always been deeply concerned about their country's standing in the world and this is reflected now in the kind of obsessive preoccupation with league tables, such as we see in the small announcement, quoted at the head of this essay, about India's 'having joined the exclusive club of eight nations' capable of producing their own torpedoes. A more benign manifestation of the same sentiments is in relation to cricket – and India's early disappointments in the World Cup in February 2003 were greeted with intense outrage, reflected in the burning in the streets of effigies of Saurav Ganguly, the captain. Of course the 'exclusive club' to which the elites most aspire for their country – apart from leadership in world cricket - is that of the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council. The ruling elites have a very strong sense that India is a big and important country that deserves to have a decisive voice in the affairs of the world, and that it has been and continues to be denied that voice. Thus it was that the successful testing of nuclear devices in May 1998 was at first greeted with immense enthusiasm - summed up in the newspaper headlines that proclaimed 'Explosion of Self-Esteem' and 'Megatonnes of Prestige'. The Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee boasted in a magazine interview soon afterwards that 'India is now a nuclear weapon state ...(T)he tests ...have given India *shakti* [power], they have given strength, they have given India self-confidence'<sup>2</sup>. The hollowness of the boast was exposed, however, even before it was made, in the fact that Vajpayee had felt bound to explain the reasons for the tests not to the Indian people, but in a letter to the President of the United States, sent immediately the first test was made. Vajpayee gave the reasons as being due to 'the deteriorating security environment, especially the nuclear environment, faced by India for some years past', and he went on to refer to the threats posed to India by China and Pakistan<sup>3</sup>. He made no reference at all to the unequal nuclear order and the failure of the P-5 countries to disarm – the grounds of principle for India's long standing resistance to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and then the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty – and he now

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<sup>2</sup> The interview was in *India Today*, May 25 1998. Cited by N Ram 1999, p 2

<sup>3</sup> See N Ram 1999, p 5

offered ‘cooperation’ with the United States on nuclear disarmament. The ‘bitter fruits of grandiose ambition’ that I refer to in my title are the consequences of India’s bid for major power status, which have been greatly increased dependence on the United States and increased involvement of the United States in what had always been considered to be ‘India’s business’, such as the long-running dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir.

There should not have been as much surprise as there was in the international community over the Indian tests in 1998, for two reasons. First, in spite of the strong opposition of Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, to nuclear weapons (he was the first world leader to propose a total ban on nuclear weapons) the Indian position was marked by ambiguity from the first. Policy towards the development of an atomic energy programme was debated in the Legislative Assembly that met between 1946 and 1949 to draw up the Constitution. There was little doubt but that the country had to have a nuclear programme. It had in Homi Bhabha a scientist of high stature who was an ardent advocate of such a programme, and atomic energy was seen (not only in India) as a great symbol of modernity, intimately bound up both with national development (the distinctive task of the post-colonial state) and with national security. Nehru spoke eloquently on the need for atomic energy for India’s development whilst seeking to delink it from military purposes. Yet other delegates were not convinced and in the end Nehru had to concede ‘I do not know how you are to distinguish between the two [peaceful and military] uses of atomic energy’, and he wound up, weakly, by saying ‘I do hope that our outlook in regard to this atomic energy is going to be a peaceful one’<sup>4</sup>. Abraham points out that there was actually an ambiguity in Nehru’s own position for, if he had been so determined to steer India away from nuclear weapons why was he so concerned, from the start, that the nuclear programme had to be surrounded in secrecy?<sup>5</sup> In short, right from the time of Independence India has entertained the possibility of developing nuclear weapons, and this has been an objective earnestly sought by many senior scientists – in a context in which science has enjoyed high prestige, and the scientists have been able to exercise considerable influence on policy. The current Indian

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Itty Abraham 1998, p 49. Abraham’s book is the major source on this aspect of the history of India’s nuclear programme. But see the critical comments on his work by Bidwai and Vanaik 1999, p 235.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham 1998, chapter 2

President Abdul Kalam is the scientist who is proclaimed now as the ‘father’ of India’s bomb.

But the second and more important reason why nobody should have been surprised by India’s bomb was that the development of the bomb had always been the avowed policy of Vajpayee’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), now the dominant party in the ruling coalition, as well as of its earlier avatar the Jana Sangh. The BJP is the political party within the ‘club’ of organisations, the Sangh Parivar, that is associated with the cause of Hindu cultural nationalism which has its roots in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The Hindu nationalists – then and now - have conceived of the nation in cultural terms, as an organic and homogenous whole which is threatened by “foreigners” (notably Muslims and the British before Independence, latterly Muslims and communists and most recently Christians, too). This conception addresses the sense of threat or of loss, and the fear of disorder which people experience in the context of social and political change, by offering to re-establish control through re-establishing the whole that is the nation. Fear is turned outwards, onto the demonised “Other” which threatens the nation as it has been culturally imagined. The Sangh Parivar includes the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (the RSS), the most remarkable ‘grass-roots’ organisation to which India has given rise, and which provides training and organisation to many thousands of volunteers across the country; and the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP), which is an organisation of Hindu religious teachers and leaders, as well as youth and women’s organisations. The ideological father of modern Hindu nationalism, Veer Savarkar, long ago raised the rallying cry that Indians should ‘Hinduise all politics and militarise all Hindudom’, and later, in an address, he exhorted high-school students to bring the ‘secret and science of the atom bomb to India and to make it a mighty nation’. India’s nuclear tests were thus long foretold, and the BJP had never really made any secret of its militaristic intentions<sup>6</sup>.

This now brings me to the second of the two quotations with which I began the essay, because the ideas expressed by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, who is only one amongst a good many religious teachers who expound what can be described as ‘modern

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<sup>6</sup> Taken from Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss 2000, Preface.

Hinduism', drawing its inspiration from late nineteenth century religious teachers like Vivekananda, resonate both with many middle class Indians, and with aspects, at least, of the Hindu nationalism of the BJP and the other organisations of the Sangh Parivar. Dayananda is a religious man and many of those who listen to his teaching are also sincerely religious, even though they may also be attracted by the connections that teachers like Dayananda make between great Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and plans for self-improvement or 'programmes for modern living'. But many of them also follow him in believing both that Hinduism is reasonably seen as the superior, or transcending tradition amongst the great religions, and also that it is only by 'being what you are' that individuals or nations can really be strong. I have heard these ideas expressed very earnestly by successful businessmen with higher degrees and MBAs from the most prestigious American universities, who are in some senses at the cutting edge of 'globalisation' as they aim to create globally competitive businesses. The message of Hindu nationalism is the same: in order to take its rightful place amongst the nations of the world India must be truly 'herself', which is 'Hindu'. Success in the globalising world means, in significant ways, going back to 'tradition'.

These, then, are critically important ideas within India's political culture and that swirl around amongst the Indian elites. India is a great nation, not only in terms of the numbers of its people, and should have a great voice in the world. That it may not have that voice is a source both of some anger and of anxiety, too, and Hindu nationalism appeals to many middle class people because it seems to offer a way of achieving that position to which they aspire. This is one reason why it is upper caste and upper/middle class people who provide the core of the electoral support that the BJP has won in the 1990s<sup>7</sup>. Other reasons are that the party has seemed to offer security against the advances made by lower castes, and stability and order<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> This core of BJP support is attested in careful political surveys carried out by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, in Delhi. See Heath 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, who has written an exhaustive history of the rise of the BJP in Indian politics, comments that for many in the middle classes 'religious factors apparently played a minor role compared to their opposition to the reservations policy [affirmative action policies that assisted lower castes] and commitment to a more disciplined (or even authoritarian) form of politics and the clean image of the BJP' (quoted by Corbridge and Harriss 2000, p 125). I have raised in the text some doubts concerning Jaffrelot's dismissal here of the significance of religious factors.

What are the implications of the ascendancy of the BJP in Indian politics?. The first point to make is that its ascendancy is severely qualified, and that it owes its pole position within government to skilful coalition management rather than to its command over the popular vote. In the last general election in 1999 the main opposition party, the Congress (I), though it secured fewer seats than in any previous election actually increased its share of the popular vote (to 28.5 per cent) whilst the vote share of the BJP fell by almost two per cent (to 23.7 per cent). Latterly Congress has had much more authority in state government than has the BJP; and the BJP's recent (December 2002) sweeping victory in retaining office in the state of Gujarat was achieved – it is reasonable to believe – only by fanning the fires of ethnic violence between Hindus and Muslims in the state that had been ignited earlier in the year and subsequently tended by blatant interventions of the police and of other parts of the state apparatus. Fears of many that the 'Gujarat wave' will be replicated elsewhere in the country were at least partly assuaged by the BJP's failure to retain office in the state of Himachal Pradesh in February 2003. And there is very little indication thus far that the BJP will be able to supplant deeply entrenched regional parties in several major states, or decisively to defeat the competing claims elsewhere of a new generation of popular, lower caste political leaders.

If consolidation of 'internal unity' is one condition for access to 'the directive level' in a future multi-polar world<sup>9</sup> then the current state of India's domestic politics does not bode well for the future status of the country. The BJP has not only failed to contain but rather has intensified ethnic tensions. It came to power in part by playing the card that Hindus are a kind of endangered majority in the country, because of the way in which the state has historically 'favoured' the minority communities, especially the Muslims. 'True' secularism, the party and the Parivar have argued, cannot tolerate such 'special treatment'. The party and the rest of the Parivar also won support through the spectacular political theatre that they encouraged surrounding the claims of Hindus that an old mosque in the city of Ayodhya stood on the site of an earlier Hindu temple, itself at the birthplace of Lord Ram, portrayed as a masculine, warrior-like manifestation of the

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<sup>9</sup> Quotations from the background paper on 'New International Stratification' by Helio Jaguaribe.



Hindu god Vishnu The BJP has certainly connived in the appalling communal violence of Gujarat in the last year. Further, its long standing opposition to article 370 of the Constitution that guarantees a special status for the contested state of Kashmir, does not promise well for the settlement of that dispute when, in the opinion of most informed commentators, such a settlement almost certainly requires the concession of greater, not lesser autonomy to Kashmiris.

In short, in spite of the ambitions and the claims of Hindu nationalism, which appeal to a large fraction of India's elites, there seems little reason to believe that it will become hegemonic, or that the BJP will be able secure that internal unity which is probably necessary for the country to become a great(er) power<sup>10</sup>. The story of India's economy leads me to similar conclusion.

### **The Mis-adventures of the Indian Economy**

It is widely accepted that even if economic clout does not necessarily and automatically translate into geo-political power, in the words of one of India's leading commentators on international relations '(s)ustaining economic prosperity which clearly requires sustaining political stability ...(is) crucial to the future consolidation of India's status among the major states of the world. Whatever effectivity India's foreign policy can hope to have is tied to the fulfilment of this ambition' (Vanaik 1995, p 65). How close is India to realising the ambition?

The newly Independent India was dedicated from the first to the pursuit of national economic development. In Nehru's memorable words in the first debate of the Legislative Assembly 'The first task of this Assembly is to free India through a new

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<sup>10</sup> Given that their analysis is in general different from mine, and more bullish about India's prospects, I want to quote at length from the recent work of Baldev Raj Nayar and T V Paul. They write: "...there is a contradiction between the principal stated goal of most of the major political parties to make India a global economic and military power, and the actual behaviour of many of them, especially the BJP, in setting groups against other groups on the basis of community, religion and caste in the pursuit of their narrow political, especially electoral interests. What such parties seem to forget is that the secular, democratic fabric of India is a source of immense strength ...Focusing excessively on debilitating internal issues – such as building temples on contested sites and suppressing minority rights – is likely to take India away from its central goals of speedily achieving internal cohesion, prosperity and international status" (2003, p.263).

constitution, to feed the starving people, and to clothe the naked masses, and to give to every Indian the fullest opportunity to develop himself according to his capacity'<sup>11</sup>. The pursuit of national development was the defining characteristic of the post-colonial state, and India sought to establish its independence through this means using the instrument of economic planning. In many ways it succeeded. As has been pointed out by several writers India's version of the Import Substitution Strategy of Industrialisation (ISI) was distinctive because, especially under the Second Five Year Plan (1956-61), the aim was to establish capital and intermediate goods industries, not principally consumer goods industries (as happened, for example, with ISI in Latin America). The industrial structure of the country was indeed transformed remarkably quickly, as India developed a machine-making capacity, and the rates of growth of the industrial economy were high by any standards. But the approach was marked by 'export pessimism' and, perhaps more significantly, by a heavy reliance upon public investment. When this faltered in the 1960s, because of failures of domestic resource mobilisation, the whole effort of planned economic development entered into what contemporaries described as 'crisis', and India endured the ignominy of having to go cap in hand to the United States, in particular, for assistance<sup>12</sup>.

There followed, after the middle of the 1960s, a long period of what was described as 'the Hindu rate of growth', of three to four per cent per annum. Government expenditure was constrained by concerns about inflation and the balance of payments and increasingly absorbed by subsidies (for export promotion, for the public procurement and distribution of foodgrains, and later for fertilisers) and transfer payments (to some of the states, in particular, partly to cover the huge losses of state agencies such as their electricity boards). The declining trend of investment in the public sector had repercussions on the rate of capital formation also in the private sector, with immediate effects on a range of basic and capital goods industries. The pressures towards unproductive expenditure were driven by the demands of the competing fractions of the dominant class, or what Pranab Bardhan refers to as the dominant 'proprietary classes'<sup>13</sup>: the industrial capitalists, the

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Corbridge and Harriss 2000, p 20

<sup>12</sup> The story is most brilliantly told by Francine Frankel 1978.

<sup>13</sup> Bardhan 1988 and 1998.

‘rich farmers’, and the class of white-collar workers and public sector professionals (whose property is in their office). None individually is substantially more powerful than the others and they are locked together in relations of competitive interdependence, with the result that ‘The Indian public economy has become an elaborate network of patronage and subsidies. The heterogeneous proprietary classes fight and bargain for their share of the spoils of the system’ (Bardhan 1988, p 219).

The economy seemed to recover remarkably well in the 1980s, however, and the rate of growth of manufacturing output went up to almost 9 per cent between 1985 and 1990, substantially as a result of increased government spending. But this involved increased reliance on external commercial borrowing to finance fiscal deficits, which rose to around ten per cent of GDP by 1990-91, by which time debt-service accounted for about one-third of the value of exports. India’s increased reliance, therefore, on short term borrowing, in the global context of the increasing dominance in the 1980s of US finance capital, made the country increasingly vulnerable to ‘crises of confidence’. Just such a crisis occurred in 1991, in the aftermath of the Gulf War when a combination of higher petroleum prices and the withdrawal of funds on the part especially of Non-Resident Indians led to the downgrading of India’s credit rating and that to further flight of capital. At one point India had foreign exchange reserves sufficient to cover just two weeks of imports. This short-term liquidity crisis provided the occasion for the major shift in policy that had long been sought by domestic and international critics of India’s state-directed economic regime. The first budget of the newly-elected Congress government of 1991 famously initiated India’s ‘economic reforms’, or what was elsewhere known as stabilisation and structural adjustment. There followed de-regulation of the industrial economy, liberalisation, the intention and increasingly the reality of the privatisation of public sector units, and competition between India’s states to secure foreign direct investment<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> The story is told in detail by Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2002; and the theme of the competition between states explored by Rudolph and Rudolph 2001

What have been the consequences of these reforms? Have they in fact secured for India that sustained growth of economic prosperity that Vanaik argued is essential for the country's geo-political ambitions? There is of course still much debate about these questions, but there is no doubt that 'by the turn of the decade [of the 1990s] there was no area of economic activity in which GDP growth had not decelerated' (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2002, p 43 ), to levels much lower than those of the 1980s, while at the same time the fiscal deficit has remained high. It is currently running at about 11 per cent of GDP. Efforts to reduce the deficit have involved attempts to reduce public expenditure, and these have in practice resulted in reduced capital investment as it has proved so difficult to cut the bill for subsidies and for such purposes as the payment of public employees' wages and salaries (raised in 1997 by the Fifth Pay Commission). The condition of the finances of all the major states is desperate, and most of them have virtually ceased to invest at all. As public investment has declined, so private investment has stagnated, and foreign direct investment has not so far been forthcoming to drive the infrastructural development which is generally considered to be necessary in order for Indian industry to become globally competitive (it still isn't, even after more than a decade of liberalisation) and thus for sustained economic growth. The agricultural economy is also experiencing a crisis, as the rate of growth of output has declined (to below the rate of growth of the rural population in five major states that together account for half the population of the country<sup>15</sup>) and yet huge stocks of foodgrains have accumulated in government warehouses. The rural economy, too, requires capital investment rather than the huge sums that are being spent on subsidising prices in response to the demands of politically powerful richer farmers. The point is, as Bhaduri and Nayyar have eloquently argued (1996), that public expenditure is not wrong *in itself*. Whether it is 'wrong' or not depends on what it is used for. In the Indian case the compromise of class power that Bardhan has pointed to means that public expenditure continues to be absorbed by largely unproductive purposes, and the means for achieving sustained growth are continually undercut. There is little reason for believing, therefore, that the economic conditions that are essential for the realisation of India's geo-political ambitions have been secured<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> See Sen 2002

<sup>16</sup> The editorial comments on the Indian economy of the *Financial Times* of 27 February 2003 may be compared with this account: " (the) domestic economy is under increasingly severe strain from the impact

## **Foreign and Defence Policy: from ambiguous peripherality to subordinate engagement**

India's foreign policy and her international relations have been played out mainly with reference to Pakistan, with which India has been locked in enmity from the foundation of the two independent nation states; with China, with which India's political elites feel their country to be in competition – though it is very doubtful as to whether India figures nearly as much in the imaginations of China's leaders - and with reference to the United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union, and now Russia. After independence, and throughout the period of Nehru's leadership Indian foreign policy was directed by the principles of non-alignment and by India's leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, and defence policy by the position of abstinence with regard to nuclear weapons. The latter was tested in the early 1960s when the United States sought, secretly, to encourage and assist India in developing nuclear weapons, and to pip China to the post by being the first Asian country to acquire nuclear weapons capability. This, it was felt, would have an enormous propaganda effect in favour of democracy over communism. But Nehru stood firm<sup>17</sup>.

Indian policy began to shift, however, after the trauma of the China War of 1962, which was a shocking defeat for the Indian army and a major shock for the Indian political elites' sense of the significance of India in the world. It also very largely put paid to the ideals of non-alignment, and though India did not try immediately to emulate the Chinese in exploding a nuclear device (which Homi Bhabha believed could be done within eighteen months of the Chinese tests of 1964), her policy shifted from that of 'abstinence' on nuclear weapons to one of 'no nuclear weapons now' (which is significantly different). And in fact preparations began, from this time, for testing a device with the

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of the government's mounting fiscal deficit. At almost 11 per cent of gross domestic product, the public sector deficit is worryingly high. Of even great concern is the quality of India's deficit spending. Roughly three-quarters of all government outlay is eaten up by public consumption, notably civil service salaries, interest payments on public debt and administrative costs. Almost all of what remains goes to the military or is squandered on subsidies supposedly for the poor but in practice captured by middle-class lobbies. This leaves precious little to invest in assets that would generate economic growth and higher tax revenues for the future".

<sup>17</sup> On this see the account given by Bidwai and Vanaik 1999, pps

idea of securing the country against the Chinese threat. The test did not come about, however, until 1974, when India undertook what was described as a ‘peaceful’ nuclear explosion. Indian foreign policy in this period was devoted largely to the country’s status as the dominant power in South Asia, and to maintaining distant but not unfriendly relations with the United States (which remained an influential economic partner) whilst relying heavily on the USSR for defence procurement. In the context of the Cold War the South Asian region was rather peripheral, not presenting the threat to bi-polarity that China was starting to offer, nor the threats to stability – and to oil reserves - that were posed by conflicts in South West Asia or South East Asia. The South Asian region was, on the whole, a backwater in international affairs.

In the 1970s and 1980s India pursued a more or less deliberate policy of ambiguity with regard to nuclear weapons. Especially after the ‘peaceful’ explosion of 1974 India was clearly a ‘Nuclear Threshold State’, and the country used this status as a point of leverage for protesting against what was represented as the ‘Discriminatory Global Nuclear Bargain’<sup>18</sup>. Having at first been an active supporter of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, India then refused to sign it in 1968, on the grounds that it confirmed the dominance of the P-5 and did not push them to disarm, thus perpetuating the relative weakness of the Non-Nuclear Weapons States. It was, in other words, discriminatory. As a state which, it was well known, had the capacity to develop nuclear weapons, but had chosen not actually to do so, India was in a strong moral position for criticising these arrangements.

Meanwhile, from the early 1960s, Pakistan too had started a nuclear programme, and the issue of whether or not Pakistan had a weapons capability began to be significant in the 1970s. Yet India refused on no fewer than seven occasions between 1983 and 1993 to take up offers from Pakistan for creating a nuclear weapons free zone in South Asia. The reason given for India’s rejection of these overtures was that for India disarmament had to be global and multi-lateral. But it is clear that the Indian leadership and the military establishment would not surrender the possibility of the development of nuclear weapons

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<sup>18</sup> This shorthand is N Ram’s (1999, Chapter 1).

capability. Through the 1980s India relied significantly on the United States to exercise pressure on Pakistan (as it did through the Pressler Amendment to the United States Trade Act, which restricted sales of military equipment by the United States to Pakistan); and India and the United States started to engage in talks on the nuclear question. In 1993 India co-sponsored the CTBT with the US.

By this time another big shift had take place in Indian foreign policy. The failure of the Indian army to secure a peaceful settlement of the war between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, and the collapse of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord in 1988 was a blow to India's status as the dominant regional power. This, and the unravelling shortly afterwards of the Soviet Union and the effective end of the Cold War, prompted major re-thinking of India's positions, leading the political elites fundamentally to shift their position in regard to the United States. One manifestation of this has been quite unprecedented military cooperation with the US. In the 1990s, too, the new economic policies have helped to draw India closer to the United States (which is the most significant source of foreign investment).

In this context the decision of the Indian government in 1998 to undertake the nuclear tests may seem surprising. But by this time, as I pointed out earlier, Hindu nationalism was in the ascendant amongst many members, probably a majority, of India's elites, and the Bharatiya Janata Party had come to power. Not only did the BJP stand for the long-held policy amongst the Hindu nationalist organisations of nuclear weaponisation as the means of asserting the independence and the power of the country, but also it took office at a moment when the pressures from both military and civilian lobbies and think-tanks had become very strong. Indeed, the then Congress government had prepared tests in 1995, only to have to cancel them because of US pressure. The increased voice of the pro-weapons lobby was a result, in large measure, of the debates over the CTBT which India had at first sponsored but then drew back from, for the same reasons that it had drawn back earlier from the NNPT: that the CTBT enshrined the 'Discriminatory Global Nuclear Bargain' and formalised the disparity between India and China. The CTBT was in fact taken in 1996 to the UN General Assembly, against Indian opposition, in a legally

questionable move, which greatly raised the temperature in India. The argument that it was entirely perverse not to sign up to the CTBT but then also not to acquire nuclear weapons became almost overwhelming. And it corresponded, anyway, with the long established agenda of the Hindu nationalists.

The arguments put by Prime Minister Vajpayee in his letter to President Clinton, and by other apologists of India's nuclear policy, justifying nuclear weaponisation as being a response to the threats to India posed by Pakistan and by China, hold little water. Most of those who have observed India and Pakistan closely argue that Pakistan's nuclear programme has been largely (even entirely) responsive (to India's). The notion that there has been an *alliance* against India between China and Pakistan is overestimating the character of their relationship. In 1995 the Chinese stated quite clearly that they were perfectly prepared to sell to India anything which they had supplied to Pakistan. In the following year Jiang Zemin shocked his hosts in Islamabad by declaring that Kashmir was a dispute that had to be resolved by India and Pakistan, and there is little reason for believing that China posed any direct threats to India in 1998<sup>19</sup>. No, the reasons for India's tests in 1998 have to do primarily with the shifts in India's domestic politics, and the eagerness of the Hindu nationalist leadership for India to demonstrate her 'shakti', calculating also that this would help to enhance their support amongst the Indian people (which in fact it did not, and has not so far).

The shift from 'ambiguity' and the modest leverage that India could exercise by virtue of being a 'Nuclear Threshold State' has had the effect of changing the status of South Asia in international affairs. From being 'peripheral', or a backwater of only modest geo-political or 'security' significance, South Asia has come to be identified as perhaps the most serious potential nuclear flash-point in the world. Outsiders and South Asians alike had reason to be alarmed when India and Pakistan fought a war in the Kargil region of Ladakh in 1999 and when their armies confronted each other at a state of high alert in the summer of 2002. It is well known that, so far, the use of nuclear weapons in South Asia is not bound within the sorts of institutional structures that were established between the

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<sup>19</sup> All these arguments are discussed in detail by Bidwai and Vanaik 1999, and by Ram 1999.



United States and the USSR at the height of the Cold War. In the early weeks of 2003 as the prospect of war with Iraq, and the justification for it, were hotly debated quite a number of writers commented that not only North Korea but also South Asia posed much more serious threats to peace and stability than Saddam Hussain's Iraq.

So South Asia, and India in particular, are 'important' as they have not been before. But does this mean that India exercises greater influence in the world, and that there is a real possibility that India will secure access to 'the directive level' in global affairs? As an NWS is India becoming, or has she become, a major power constituting an independent pole in an emerging multi-polar international system, after a brief moment of absolute American dominance? I have argued that India's domestic politics and the continuing limitations of her economic development appear likely to constrain this possibility for a considerable time to come<sup>20</sup>. Meanwhile, the effects of Pokhran 1998 have been to make the China threat a self-fulfilling prophecy, enhancing the extent to which China perceives India as a threatening neighbour rather than as a distant neither-friend-nor-enemy, when India is in fact in a very weak position in military terms vis-a-vis China; they have been to nuclearise and so to internationalise the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir; and in general they have been to draw the United States into Indian affairs as never before. It was, for example, a thinly-veiled secret that Vajpayee's dramatic bus-ride to Lahore to meet Nawaz Shariff early in 1999, followed from intensive rounds of negotiation by the US Assistant-Secretary of State Strobe Talbott. The US pursued parallel bilateral dialogues with both India and Pakistan to secure the capping of their nuclear weapons programmes and their accession to the CTBT, and it has consistently refused to reward India with recognition as a nuclear weapons state or with recognition as the pre-eminent regional power. India, meanwhile, has shown itself ever ready to fall into line with the United States, as it did over the US National Missile Defence System in 2001, and is it did – though very awkwardly - when the Vajpayee government prevaricated over the war with Iraq, saying that India was taking a 'middle path' in view of its friendship with both Iraq and the United States. Only when the war was in its third

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<sup>20</sup> Note that Nayar and Paul – see notes 1 and 10 – do not seriously diverge from this position of mine, though they are much more optimistic about India's economic prospects than I think there is reason to be. See Nayar and Paul, 2003, pps 260-63.

week did the Indian parliament pass a motion criticising American action in Iraq, and then only in Hindi because this provided a way of by-passing a bitter dispute over whether to use the word 'deplore', or the word 'condemn' in a motion phrased in English.

There is another view of these developments, expressed lucidly by Nayar and Paul (2003), which is that they show that India is engaging in international power politics more assertively than she has before. Even these writers concede, however, that 'India has yet to liberate itself from being excessively preoccupied with South Asia' (*ibid*, p.264) and that 'Engaging strategically with the global balance of power would require a different mindset than that which India has been accustomed to' (*ibid*, p.204). Still, they think that there are indications that the Indian leadership is beginning to break away from the past approach of staying out of power politics, and that there is a new pattern of shifting balances of power emerging globally that will provide opportunities for India. India should be able, for notable example, to play off the rivalries of the United States and China. For the present, however - and given the constraints imposed by domestic politics and by the economy, this situation seems likely to persist - India leans towards the United States (as Nayar and Paul somewhat reluctantly seem to recognise: *ibid*, p.265). I argue, therefore, that the geo-political ambitions of India's political elites, now as in the past, are constrained by India's limited capacities, and that their outcome in India's current nuclear policy is bearing only the bitter fruit of dependence.

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