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## H-Diplo | ISSF Article Review 48

**Jayita Sarkar. "The Making of a Non-Aligned Power: India's Proliferation Drift 1964-8."**  
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In the aftermath of India's five nuclear tests in May 1998, one analyst suggested that the motivations underlying its quest for nuclear weapons could be traced to ideas of national modernity and the lack of suitable scrutiny of a secretive scientific enclave. The same assessment argued that explanations that adduced material factors such as extant threats from the People's Republic of China (PRC) were simply chimerical.<sup>1</sup> Others, in a similar vein, contended that the origins of the program could be found in India's quest for status and prestige.<sup>2</sup> Both accounts, though seemingly plausible, were actually quite flawed. The first was a heavily interpretive analysis, which attributed a series of motives on the basis of ambiguous evidence to a host of key individuals who had helped shape the early stages of India's civilian nuclear program. More to the

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<sup>1</sup> Itty Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy and the Postcolonial State* (London: Zed Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

point, it mostly ignored the very compelling security threats at critical junctures that had led to the militarization of the program.

The second had similar and even worse flaws. It too mostly discounted or dismissed the emerging security threats that had led India's policymakers to gradually shed their inhibitions about acquiring nuclear weapons. However, it had a more crippling flaw: the quest for status and prestige had long been a constant in India's foreign policy. Accordingly, once the country had managed to cobble together the technical wherewithal for producing a nuclear weapon it should have carried out one or more nuclear tests.

Until recently, however, those who had made the case for a threats-based case for the acquisition of nuclear weapons had, for the most part, been forced to make the argument on the basis of inference and attribution.<sup>3</sup> Much of the history of the domestic debate about the decision to pursue nuclear weapons was shrouded in secrecy. Fortunately, with the declassification of relevant presidential archives in the United States and diplomatic documents in France and India, the case for a security-based explanation can be made with greater authority.

Jayita Sarkar's article, "The Making of a Non-Aligned Nuclear Power: India's Proliferation Drift, 1964-8," is based upon a deft utilization of these recently released materials. Her use of the term "drift" is entirely apposite given the dilatory features of Indian nuclear decision-making. Those who have argued against threat-based explanation have dwelt upon the long gap between events that directly endangered India's national security, such as the Chinese nuclear test at Lop Nor in 1964, and India's action in the nuclear-weapons arena.<sup>4</sup> Such analyses, however, have overlooked the political culture of India's institutional machinery. The decision-making apparatus is infused with a political culture that is given to caution, deliberation and debate. Sarkar's article, which is based upon the newly released material, provides a clear aperture into this decision-making arena and how it functioned in the aftermath of India's defeat in the Sino-Indian border war of 1962 and the nuclear test of 1964.

She shows how India's policymakers, especially Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, had become increasingly concerned about the security threat that the PRC posed to India in the late 1960s. Gandhi's anxieties were heightened because India had failed to obtain a nuclear guarantee from the great powers, including the Soviet Union, in the event of possible Chinese nuclear coercion. Of course, to preserve its nonaligned status it would have insisted on obtaining such a guarantee from both power blocs. With the Soviets unwilling to do so, the Johnson administration, which had tentatively toyed with the possibility, gave up on the prospect in its entirety.

As the U.S. abandoned any interest in providing extended deterrence to India, it actually sought to make the country accede to the emerging Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Given their sense of vulnerability, India's policymakers were clearly unwilling to eschew the nuclear weapons option even as they couched their public opposition to the NPT on moral grounds, insisting that it was a discriminatory treaty.

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<sup>3</sup> Sumit Ganguly, "India's Pathway to Pokhran II: The Prospects and Sources of India's Nuclear Weapons Program," *International Security* (1999): 148-177.

<sup>4</sup> Perkovich, 1999.

In the end, Sarkar shows that what further propelled India further down the nuclear path was the Chinese hydrogen bomb test in June 1967. The newly opened archives include correspondence between key Indian policymakers at the highest levels of the bureaucracy who express their growing sense of concern over the challenge that the PRC posed to India's national security and the concomitant need to acquire nuclear weapons. These include discussions between two of Mrs. Gandhi's closest advisers L.K. Jha and P.N. Haksar.

Despite this increasing perception of a nuclear threat, it still took India seven more years to conduct its first nuclear test in 1974. This delay can, in considerable measure, be attributed to the vagaries of India's decision-making structure and the limits of its scientific infrastructure. Sarkar's careful use of this new archival material shows beyond much doubt that the nuclear status of the PRC and concerns about the NPT paved the pathway to Pokhran I, India's first successful nuclear bomb test on 18 May 1974.

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