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25th anniversary of Pokhran-II: India's journey to become a nuclear power

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Context: India successfully conducted three nuclear bomb test explosions at the testing site in Pokhran on May 11, 1998. While these tests caused an international outcry at the time, they cemented India's status as a nuclear power.

About Pokhran II Test

On May 11, 1998, India conducted three nuclear bomb test explosions at the Indian Army's Pokhran Test Range. Two days later, on May 13, two more bombs were tested.

Codenamed Operation Shakti (literally, "strength"), these tests would display India's capability to build fission and thermonuclear weapons with yields up to 200 kilotons, helping India enter the highly guarded club of countries with capability to deploy nuclear weapons.

However, Pokhran-II, as the series of tests is more popularly known, was also the culmination of a long journey that began back in the 1940s-50s – a journey replete with difficulties, with failure lurking at every corner

Foundation of India's nuclear programme

India's nuclear programme can be traced to the work of physicist Homi J Bhabha. In 1945, after Bhabha's successful lobbying of India's biggest industrial family, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research was opened in Bombay. TIFR was India's first research institution dedicated to the study of nuclear physics.

Post independence, Bhabha repeatedly met and convinced Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru about the importance of nuclear energy and the need for India to allocate resources for its development. Thus, in 1954, the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) was founded, with Bhabha as director.

While Nehru publicly opposed nuclear weapons, privately, he had given Bhabha a free hand to lay foundations for both civilian and military uses of nuclear technology. Under him, the DAE operated with autonomy and away from significant public scrutiny.

The rationale behind nuclear programme

A pivotal moment in India's nuclear journey came after it suffered a crushing defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian War and China's subsequent nuclear bomb test at Lop Nor in 1964.

Concerned about India's sovereignty and the looming might of an unfriendly China, the mood in the political establishment towards nuclear weapons was slowly shifting.

While new Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri first tried to attain nuclear guarantees from established nuclear weapons states, when such guarantees did not emerge, a different route had to be taken.

Things were further accelerated, when in 1965, India went to war with Pakistan once again, with China openly supporting Pakistan this time. Effectively, India was surrounded by two unfriendly nations, and needed to take steps

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towards building self-sufficiency.

However, the path towards obtaining nuclear weapons would not be easy.

The “discriminatory” NPT

By the 1960s, discourse around nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation had shifted to the mainstream as the Cold War arms pushed the US and the USSR to great extremes.

After China successfully tested its own bomb, there was increasing international consensus among the big powers regarding the need for a non-proliferation treaty.

In 1968, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) came into existence. The treaty defines nuclear-weapon states as those that have built and tested a nuclear explosive device before January 1, 1967 – the US, Russia (formerly USSR), the UK, France and China – and effectively disallows any other state from acquiring nuclear weapons.

While the treaty has been signed by almost every country in the world, India is one of the few non-signatories.

As per foreign policy researcher Sumit Ganguly, “The government of India refused to accede to the terms of the treaty because it failed to address India’s misgivings; specifically, the continued nuclear abstinence of the non-nuclear states was not linked to explicit reciprocal obligations by the nuclear weapons states.”

Pokhran-I and its aftermath

By the 1970s, India was capable of conducting a nuclear bomb test. Bhaba’s successor at the DAE, Vikram Sarabhai, had worked to significantly broaden India’s nuclear technology and now the question was more of political will, especially in context of a global order extremely wary of nuclear proliferation.

Indira Gandhi took over the country’s reins from Shastri after his sudden death in 1966. Once considered a puppet in the hands of senior Congress leadership, she would soon show her mettle, leading India through another testing war against Pakistan in 1971 and winning an overwhelming mandate in the following elections

On May 18, 1974, with support from Indira, India carried out its first nuclear test at the Pokhran test site. Pokhran-I, codenamed Operation Smiling Buddha, would be billed as a “peaceful nuclear explosion”, with “few military implications”.

However, the world was not willing to buy India’s version of the story. There was near-universal condemnation and countries like the US and Canada imposed significant international sanctions on India. These sanctions would be a major setback for India’s nuclear journey, and majorly decelerate its progress.

The period between the two tests

Beyond international sanctions, India’s nuclear journey was also hobbled by domestic political instability.

The Emergency of 1975 and Prime Minister Morarji Desai’s opposition to nuclear weapons brought the programme to a grinding halt.

However, clamour for developing nuclear weapons picked up once again in the 1980s, as reports on Pakistan’s rapidly progressing nuclear capabilities emerged.

In 1983, the Defence Research and Development Organisation’s (DRDO) funding was increased and Dr APJ Abdul Kalam was put in charge of India’s missile programme.

That year, India also developed capabilities to reprocess plutonium to weapons grade. Furthermore, throughout the decade, India exponentially increased its plutonium stockpiles.

Early 1990s brought with them increased pressure to quickly develop nuclear weapons. With the fall of the USSR in 1991, India lost one of its biggest military allies, since the time Indira Gandhi had signed a 20-year security pact with it in 1971.

Furthermore, the US continued to provide military aid to Pakistan despite its own misgivings with its nuclear weapons programme. Finally, discussions regarding a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) were also underway in the UN (it would be finalised in 1996, India did not sign it).

For India, it felt like its window of opportunity was fast closing. Thus, in 1995, then Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao permitted the preparations for carrying out a nuclear test in December 1995. However, logistical and political reasons pushed back the tests further.

Pokhran-II: projecting India's strength

After a few years of domestic turmoil when the political will to conduct nuclear testing was wanting, in 1998, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the BJP came to power under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. One of the key promises in its manifesto was to “induct nuclear weapons” into India's arsenal.

In March 1998, Pakistan launched the Ghauri missile – built with assistance from China. Two months later, India responded with Operation Shakti.

While the 1974 tests were ostensibly done for peaceful purposes, the 1998 tests were the culmination of India's nuclear weaponisation process. Consequently, the Indian Government declared itself as a state possessing nuclear weapons following Pokhran-II.

Conclusion

While the tests in 1998 also invited sanctions from some countries (like the US), the condemnation was far from universal like in 1974. In context of India's fast-growing economy and market potential, India was able to stand its ground and thus cement its status as a dominant nation state.