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The Nixon Administration and the Indian Nuclear Program, 1972-1974

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U.S. Post-Mortem on 1974 Indian Test Criticized Intelligence Community Performance for "Waffling Judgments" and Not Following Up Leads

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For more information contact:
William Burr – 202/994-7000 or nsarchiv@gwu.edu

Washington, D.C., December 5, 2011 – India's "peaceful nuclear explosion" on 18 May 1974 caught the United States by surprise in part because the intelligence community had not been looking for signs that a test was in the works. According to a recently declassified Intelligence Community Staff post-mortem posted today by the National Security Archive and the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project, Nixon administration policymakers had given a relatively low priority to the Indian program and there was "no sense of urgency" to determine whether New Delhi was preparing to test a nuclear device. Intelligence "production" (analysis and reporting) on the topic "fell off" during the 20 months before the test, the analysis concluded.[i]

In early 1972, however—two years before the test—the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) had predicted that India could make preparations for an underground test without detection by U.S. intelligence. Published for the first time today, the INR report warned that the U.S. government had given a "relatively modest priority to … relevant intelligence collection activities" which meant that a "concerted effort by India to conceal such preparations … may well succeed."

The post-mortem [see document 21], the INR report [see document 2] and other new materials illustrate how intelligence priorities generally reflect the interests and priorities of top policymakers. The Nixon White House was focused on the Vietnam War and grand strategy toward Beijing and Moscow; intelligence on nuclear proliferation was a low priority. Compare, for example, the India case with that of Iraq during 2002-2003, when White House

concerns encouraged—some say even compelled—intelligence producers to cherry pick raw information to demonstrate the development of WMD by the Saddam Hussein regime.

INR prepared its India report at a time when secret sources were telling U.S. intelligence that New Delhi was about to test a nuclear device. The "small spate" of reports about a test had such "congruity, apparent reliability, and seeming credibility" that they prompted a review of India's nuclear intentions by INR and other government offices. In the end, government officials could not decide whether India had made a decision to test although a subsequent lead suggested otherwise.

According to the intelligence community's post-mortem, obtained through a mandatory review appeal to the Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel (ISCAP), one of the problems was that intelligence producers were not communicating with each other, so the "other guy" assumed that someone else was "primarily responsible for producing hard evidence of Indian intentions." The analysis was especially critical of an August 1972 Special National Intelligence Estimate for its "waffling judgments" on Indian nuclear intentions.

Other declassified documents reproduced here from 1972 through 1974 illustrate the range of thinking on this sensitive topic:

An INR report in February 1972 concluded that it could not "rule out a test" in the near future and it was "entirely possible that one or more nuclear devices have actually been fabricated and assembled." All the same, "it our judgment that a decision to authorize a test is unlikely in the next few months and may well be deferred for several years."

During March and April 1972, Canadian and British intelligence concluded that they had no evidence that India had made a decision to test a nuclear device. Nevertheless, the Canadians believed that New Delhi could produce a device in less than a year.

In June 1972, Japanese diplomat Ryohei Murata argued that the "Indians have decided to go ahead with a nuclear test" and that the Thar Desert in Rajasthan would be the test site. While basically correct, Murata's estimate was discounted because it did not represent an official Foreign Ministry view.

Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 31-72 published in August 1972 also held that the Indians could produce a device "within a few days to a year of a decision to do so," but concluded that the chances that India had made a decision to test were "roughly even."

In 1973, the Atomic Energy Commission's scientific representative in India told the U.S. consul in Bombay (Mumbai) that several "indications" suggested that India "may well have decided" to test a nuclear device.

Five months before the test, the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi reported that the probability of an "early test" was at a "lower level than previous years."

The rumors that India was going to test emerged in the wake of the South Asian crisis, when the Nixon White House tilted toward Pakistan, India's archrival. Relations between New Delhi and Washington were already cool during the Nixon administration which treated India as a relatively low priority. Henry Kissinger's secret trip to China underlined India's low priority by suggesting that if New Delhi ever faced a crisis with Beijing it could not count on Washington for help. Relations became truly frosty during the balance of 1971 when New Delhi signed a friendship treaty with Moscow and India and Pakistan went to war. Later

Nixon and Kissinger wanted to improve the relationship, but India's nuclear intentions were not on their agenda. That India had refused to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty was a non-issue for Nixon and Kissinger, who had little use for the NPT and treated nuclear proliferation as less than secondary. While the State Department cautioned India against nuclear tests in late 1970 [see document 6], concern did not rise to the top of policy hill.[2]

Whatever impact the events of 1971 may have had on India's decision to test a nuclear device that decision was soon to be made. According to George Perkovich, an authority on the Indian nuclear program at theCarnegie Endowment for International Peace, "it may be conjectured that support in principle for developing a nuclear explosive device was solidified by late 1971, that concentrated work on building the vital components began in spring 1972, and that formal prime ministerial approval to make final preparations for a PNE occurred in September 1972."[3] In this context, the reports collected by U.S. intelligence in late 1971 and early 1972 about a possible test may have been good examples of the old chestnut that "where there's smoke, there's fire."

Yet, the analysts who wrote SNIE 31-72 decided that the smoke had no significance because they saw only a 50-50 chance that New Delhi had made a decision to test (even though New Delhi was closing in on a decision).

Trombay, the site of India's first atomic reactor (Aspara), the CIRUS reactor provided by Canada, and a plutonium reprocessing facility, as photographed by a KH-7/GAMBIT satellite during February 1966. Provided under lax safeguards, the CIRUS reactor produced the spent fuel that India converted into plutonium for the May 1974 test (the heavy water needed to run the reactor was provided by the United States, also under weak safeguards).

Raja Rammana, director of the Bhabha Atomic Research Center at Trombay, played a key role in the production, development, and testing of the May 1974 Indian "peaceful nuclear explosion." In the Spring of 1973, John Pinajian, the Atomic Energy Commission's representative in India, became suspicious that India was preparing for a nuclear test in part because Rammana rebuffed his requests for access to BARC so he could conduct an experiment which had been approved by the Indian Atomic Energy Commission (seedocument 17A)

The Elephant in the Room: The Soviet Union and the Indian Nuclear Program

For more information on India and the Cold War superpowers, see an extraordinary collection of Hungarian Foreign Ministry documents, edited and translated by Balazs Szalontai, with a substantive "Working Paper," recently published by the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project.

Drawing on archival material from the 1960s through the 1980s, "The Elephant in the Room" provides significant insight into the Soviet Union's nuclear relations with India. While Moscow was carefully to sell only safeguarded nuclear technology to New Delhi, the priority of maintaining good relations with India sometimes put nonproliferation goals in the backseat.

For example, before the May 1974 "peaceful nuclear explosion" the Soviets had tried to discourage the Indians from testing–confirming what has been previously suspected–but once the latter had tested the Soviets did not criticize them. When Canada stopped providing reactor fuel and equipment as a penalty for the test (which Canadian technology had facilitated), the Soviets stepped in to fill the gap.

Moreover, when Soviet-Pakistan relations deteriorated after the invasion of Pakistan, Moscow's anger was so intense that it gave the "green light" to Indian military planning for a strike against Pakistani nuclear facilities. The documents also suggest that it was not until the mid-1980s, when U.S.-Soviet and Sino-Soviet détente were on the upswing, that the Soviets became concerned about India as a nuclear proliferation problem.

Documents

Document 1: “Various recent intelligence reports”

State Department cable 3088 to Embassy New Delhi, 6 January 1972, Secret

Source: U.S. National Archives, Record Group 59, Subject-Numeric Files 1970-1973 [hereinafter RG 59, SN 70-73] Def 12-1 India

For years, the U.S. intelligence establishment had been monitoring India’s nuclear program for signs of a decision to produce nuclear weapons, but in late 1971 and early 1972 it had to consider the possibility that a nuclear test was impending. Recently collected intelligence about an imminent test led the State Department to send a query to the U.S. Embassy in India for its assessment.

Document 2: “A Concerted Effort by India to Conceal Preparations May Well Succeed”

State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research Intelligence Note, “India to Go Nuclear?” 14 January 1972, Secret

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, Def 18-8 India

Before the Embassy sent a full response, a team of analysts at the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research produced their evaluation of varied report about India’s nuclear intentions: that it would test a device that month, sometime in 1972, or that the government was undertaking a program to test a “peaceful nuclear explosive.” According to INR, India had the capability to produce some 20-30 weapons, and it could easily test a device in an underground site, such as an abandoned mine, that would be hard to discover. Indeed, because the U.S. government had given a “relatively modest priority to … relevant intelligence collection activities” a “concerted effort by India to conceal such preparations … may well succeed.” What would motivate India to test, the analysts opined, were domestic political pressures and concerns about China and Pakistan. Nevertheless, the INR analysts saw a test as having more importance as a demonstration of “scientific and technological prowess”; the strategic significance would be “negligible” because India was “years away” from developing a “credible” deterrence against China “its only prospective enemy with a nuclear capability.”

Document 3: “Straws” Suggesting an Underground Test

U.S. Embassy Airgram A-20 to State Department, “India’s Nuclear Intentions,” 21 January 1972, Secret, Excised copy

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, Def 18-8 India

In its response to the Department’s query, the Embassy identified a number of reasons that made it unlikely that India would a test a nuclear device in the coming weeks, but saw “straws” suggesting an underground test “sometime in future.” For example, the Government of India had publicly acknowledged ongoing work on the problem of safe underground testing . Moreover, India might have an interest in making its nuclear capabilities known to “enemies.” Whatever the Indians decided, external pressure would have no impact on a highly nationalist state and society: “we see nothing US or international community can presently do to influence GOI policy directions in atomic field.”

One of the sources mentioned, apparently a CIA asset (the reference is excised), had a

connection with the Prime Minister's secretariat. This may be the same informant, future Prime Minister Moraji Desai, who provided information to the CIA about Prime Minister Gandhi's intentions during the recent South Asian crisis and whose cover was subsequently blown through press leaks published by Jack Anderson. He later told the CIA to "go to hell."[4]

Document 4: "Increased Status of a Nuclear Power"

Memorandum from Ray Cline, Director, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, to Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms, enclosing "Possibility of an Indian Nuclear Test," 23 February 1972, Secret

Source: U.S. State Department, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976 Volume E–7, Documents on South Asia, 1969–1972, Document 228

At the request of Undersecretary of State John Irwin, INR prepared an assessment which included a detailed review of Indian's nuclear facilities and their capacity to produce weapons-grade plutonium as well as capabilities to deliver nuclear weapons to target. While India had signed agreements with Canada and the United States that nuclear reactors were to be used for peaceful purposes, the Indians were likely to claim that an explosive device for "peaceful" purposes was consistent with the agreements. Whether the Indians were going to test in the near future was in doubt. INR could not "rule out" one in the near future. Further, the "strongest incentive [to test] may well be the desire for the increased status of a nuclear power." All the same, "it our judgment that a decision to authorize a test is unlikely in the next few months and may well be deferred for several years." Weighing against a test were the financial and diplomatic costs, for example, "India's full awareness that assistance from the US and other countries (possibly including the USSR) would be jeopardized."

Document 5: Trudeau's Warning

U.S. Embassy Canada cable 391 to State Department, "India's Nuclear Intentions," 7 March 1972, Secret

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, AE 1 India

With Canada's role as the supplier of the CANDU reactor, senior Canadian officials had close working relationships with their Indian counterpart. Lauren Gray, the chairman of Canada's Atomic Energy Board, had recently visited India and U.S. embassy officials interviewed him closely on his thinking about Indian nuclear developments. Having spoken with Homi Nusserwanji Sethna, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, and other officials, Gray believed that Sethna opposed a test and that as long as Sethna and Indira Gandhi were in office "there was no chance" that India would test a nuclear device, which would take three to four years to prepare. Gray was mistaken, but was correct to declare that if a decision to test was made, Sethna would "undoubtedly" head the project. The embassy's science attaché, Miller N. Hudson, met with other officials with the AECB who had a different take on Indian capabilities; based on their assessment of Indian's ability to produce weapons grade plutonium, they argued that it would take no more than a year to produce a device.

The Canadians pointed out that about 18 months earlier there had been a "blackout" of statistical information on plutonium production. That led Canadian Prime Minister Pierre-Eliot

Trudeau followed by other officials to “directly” warn the “Indians that Canadian plutonium should not be used for any kind of nuclear device.”

Document 6: Unlikely to Test in the “Near Future”

State Department cable 40378 to U.S. Embassy Ottawa, “Indian Nuclear Intentions,” 9 March 1972, Secret

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, AE 1 India

State Department officers were also consulting with their counterparts at the Canadian embassy in Washington. During a discussion with the embassy counselor, country desk director David Schneider opined that Indian was unlikely to test a device in the “near future” but he wanted Ottawa’s prognosis. Schneider was also interested in whether the Soviets, with their close relationship with India, might be able to use their influence to “deter” a test. If India tested, the U.S. could respond with a “strong statement,” but whether “punitive” measures would be taken would depend on whether the test “violated existing agreements.” In October 1970, the State Department had cautioned the Indians that a “peaceful nuclear explosion” was indistinguishable from a weapons test and that the test of a nuclear device would be incompatible with U.S.-Indian nuclear assistance agreements. That the State Department issued this warning provides a telling contrast with Canada, which treated its admonition as a head of state issue.

Document 7: No Technical or Fiscal Obstacle to a Test

U.S. Embassy Canada cable 430 to State Department, “India’s Nuclear Intentions on South Asia Situation,” 14 March 1972, Secret

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, AE 1 India

Elaborating on his earlier cable and responding to the general issues raised by the Department’s 9 March message, science attaché Hudson questioned Gray’s evaluation of Sethna, suggesting that by combining “guile” and “technical proficiency,” the latter could easily have “easily misled” the Canadian. Based on consultations with a variety of Canadian insiders with knowledge of and experience with the Indian nuclear program, the Embassy saw no technical or fiscal barriers to an Indian test. Moreover, any pressure on India not to test would increase the “likelihood” of that happening.

Document 8: “Leaving Their Options Open”

State Department cable 50634 to U.S. Embassy Canada, “Indian Nuclear Intentions,” 24 March 1972, Secret

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, AE 1 India

Further discussions with the Canadian embassy counselor disclosed Ottawa’s view that it had no evidence of Indian intentions to test a nuclear weapon or a PNE. The Indians were “leaving their options open.” If they decided to test, however, it would be “impossible” for them to move forward “without revealing some indication of their intentions.”

Document 9: British See No Evidence of a Decision

State Department cable 59655 to U.S. Embassy United Kingdom, “Indian Nuclear Intentions, 7 April 1972, Secret

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, AE 1 India

The British Government was taking the same view as the Canadians, seeing no evidence that the Indians had made a decision to test, although they had the “capability.”

Document 10: “Apparent Reliability and Seeming Credibility”

State Department cable 69551 to U.S. Embassy United Kingdom, “Indian Nuclear Intentions, 22 April 1972, Secret

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, AE 1 India

The Canadian embassy had asked the State Department for information on the intelligence reports from earlier in the year that an Indian nuclear test was “imminent.” The State Department denied the request, but informed the Canadians that the reports were so numerous and their “congruity, apparent reliability, and seeming credibility” so striking that it had become necessary to update official thinking about Indian intentions.

Documents 11A-C: “The Indians Have Decided to Go Ahead”

A. State Department cable 113523 to U.S. Embassy India, “Japanese Views Regarding Indian Nuclear Plans,” 23 June 1972, Secret

B. U.S. Mission Geneva cable 2755 to State Department, “Japanese-Pakistani Conversations Regarding Indian Nuclear Plans,” 26 June 1972, Secret

C. U.S. Embassy Tokyo cable 67912 to State Department, “Japanese View Regarding Indian Nuclear Plans,” 27 June 1972, Secret

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, AE 1 India

This group of telegrams discloses that one Japanese diplomat made a good guess about what was happening in India, but also illuminates the problem of verifying intelligence information. In response to a request from the State Department, Ryohei Murata[5], an official at the n officer from the Japanese embassy, reported that the Japanese government believed that for prestige reasons and as a “warning” to others, the “Indians have decided to go ahead with a nuclear test” which could occur at “any time;” The Thar Desert in Rajasthan would be the test site. Murata was correct on the latter point and close to correct on the decision: only weeks before the Indian AEC had begun work on building the components for a test device.[6] The cables that followed this report, however, raised doubts about Murata’s assessment.

Document 12: Request for a NSSM

Henry Kissinger to President Nixon, “Proposed NSSM on the Implications of an Indian Nuclear Test,” n.d., with cover memorandum from Richard T. Kennedy, 4 July 1972, Secret

Source: Nixon Presidential Library, National Security Council Institutional Files, box H-192, NSSM-156 [1 of 2]

Months after the initial flurry of intelligence reports, national security assistant Henry Kissinger asked President Nixon to approve a national security study memorandum [NSSM] on the implications of an Indian nuclear test for U.S. interests. The next day, 5 July 1972, Kissinger sent the agencies a request for a study which became NSSM 156.

Document 13: No Evidence of a Decision

U.S. Embassy India cable 9293 to State Department, "Indian Nuclear Intentions," 26 July 1972, Secret

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73 Def 1 India

In an update of its thinking about the possibility of a test, the Embassy acknowledged that India had the "technical know-how and possibly materials to develop [a] simple nuclear device within period of months after GOI decision to do so." Nevertheless, it saw no evidence that a decision had been made to test a device. Moreover, capabilities to deliver nuclear weapons were limited, with no plans in sight to "develop [a] missile launch system."

Document 14: "Roughly Even"

Special National Intelligence Estimate 31-72, "Indian Nuclear Developments and their Likely Implications,"3 August 1972, Secret

Source: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976 Volume E–7, Documents on South Asia, 1969–1972, Document 298

Prepared as part of the NSSM 156 policy review, the 1974 post-mortem criticized this SNIE as "marred by waffled judgments." The SNIE concluded that the chances of India making a decision to test were "roughly even," but the post-mortem analysis [see document 21] argued that based on its own findings, the conclusion ought to have been 60-40 in favor of a decision to test. In its analysis of the pros and cons of testing, the SNIE found that the "strongest factors impelling India to set off a test are: the "belief that it would build up [its] international prestige; demonstrate India's importance as an Asian power; overawe its immediate South Asian neighbors; and bring enhanced popularity and public support to the regime which achieved it." The drafters further noted that a test would be "extremely popular at home, where national pride is riding high" and that supporters of a test believed that it would make the world see India as "one of the world's principal powers." The arguments against a test included adverse reactions from foreign governments that provided economic assistance, but the estimate noted that foreign reactions were "becoming less important" to India.

Document 15: "No Firm Intelligence"

Memorandum of Conversation, "Indian Nuclear Developments," 21 September 1972, Secret

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, Def 12 India

A meeting between British Foreign Office and State Department officials on the Indian nuclear problem occurred the same month that Indian Prime Minister Gandhi approved the "final preparations for a PNE."[7] Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Christopher T. Van Hollen (the father of the future Maryland Congressman) and his colleagues followed the approach taken by the SNIE, which was close to that taken by the British Joint Intelligence

Committee. According to country director David Schneider, the "odds were about even" that India would make a decision, but once it was made, India could test very quickly. There was "no firm intelligence" that a "go-ahead signal" to prepare for a test had been made. Schneider reviewed bilateral and multilateral steps, proposed in the NSSM 156 study, that the U.S. and others could take to try to discourage an Indian test and the range of reactions that would be available if India went ahead. A "weak" U.S. reaction, Schneider observed, would suggest that Washington would "acquiesce" if other countries followed India's example.

Document 16: "A Set-Back to Nonproliferation Efforts"

H. Daniel Brewster to Herman Pollack, "Indian Nuclear Developments," 16 January 1973, enclosing "Summary," 1 September 1972, Secret

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, AE 6 India

The interagency group prepared a response to NSSM 156 on 1 September 1972 and it was sent to Kissinger at whose desk it would languish, suggesting the low priority that the Nixon White House gave to nuclear proliferation issues. The summary of the study reproduced here includes the conclusion that an Indian test would be "a set-back to nonproliferation efforts" and that Washington should "do what [it] can to avert or delay" one. Thus, recommendations included a number of unilateral and multilateral actions that the United States government could take, noting that "given the poor state" of Indo-American relations, an "overly visible" U.S. effort would more likely speed up an Indian decision to test a device, Even non-US efforts were likely not to "be per se effective."

Documents 17A-B: India "May Well Have Decided"

A. Bombay consulate cable 705 to Department of State, "India's Nuclear Position," 4 April 1973, Confidential

Source: RG 59, SN 70-73, Def 1 India

B. U.S. Embassy India cable 5797 to State Department forwarding Bombay consulate cable 983, "India's Nuclear Position," 17 May 1973, Confidential

Source: AAD 1973

The possibility that the GOI had made a decision to test surfaced in a message from the U.S. consulate in Bombay (Mumbai) signed off by Consul David M. Bane. The latter reported that Oak Ridge Laboratory scientist John J. Pinajian, then serving as the Atomic Energy Commission's scientific representative in India, had pointed out several "indications"—notably his lack of access to key individuals and facilities in India's atomic establishment–suggesting that India "may well have decided" to test a nuclear device. While stating that Pinajian's evaluation was "subjective and impressionistic," Consul Bane agreed that the atomic energy establishment did not want this American poking around because he might find out too much. Bane further observed that a nuclear test "in the not too distant future" could meet the GOI's political goals and help attain "greater recognition major power status."

Raja Rammana, the director of the Bhabha Atomic Research Center, one of the organizations that Pinajian was trying to contact, played a key role in directing the PNE

project so his suspicions were on target.[8] In any event, a month later, Pinajian got some access to BARC, but noticed the absence of personnel responsible for experimental work. Moreover, he was getting cooperation from the Institute for Fundamental Research to conduct an experiment. Whether Pinajian remained suspicious needs to be learned, but the authors of the 1974 post-mortem pointed to the Consulate report as evidence that should have been considered (although it is worth noting that Secretary of State William Rogers was aware of the report and asked for more information).

Document 18: "The Likelihood of an Early Test [at] a Lower Level than Previous Years"

U.S. Embassy India cable 0743 to State Department, "India's Nuclear Intentions," 18 January 1974, Confidential

Source: http://static.history.state.gov/frus/frus1969-76ve08/pdf/d156.pdf

The embassy concluded that "deeper economic problems," among other considerations militated against a nuclear test in the near future, even though the Indian government had the capabilities to produce and test a device. While there were no rumors about a test as there had been in 1972, "we know little about relevant internal government debate." All in all, the embassy believed that economic conditions "tip the likelihood of an early test to a lower level than previous years." Russell Jack Smith, previously the deputy director for intelligence at the CIA, and then serving as special assistant to the ambassador (station chief), was one of the officials who signed off on this cable.[9]

Document 19: "Rebound to their Credit Domestically"

U.S. Embassy India cable 6598 to State Department, "India's Nuclear Explosion: Why Now?" 18 May 1974, Secret

Source: AAD

Having written off an early test, the day that it took place the Embassy scrambled to come up with an explanation. Deputy Chief of Mission David Schneider signed off on the telegram because Moynihan was in London. While the Embassy had no insight on the decision-making, it saw domestic politics and "psychological" explanations for the test: the need to offset domestic "gloom" and the need for India to "be taken seriously." According to the telegram, "the decision will appeal to nationalist feeling and will be widely welcomed by the Indian populace."

Document 20: "Enough Plutonium for Some 50-70 Nuclear Weapons"

State Department cable 104613 to Consulate, Jerusalem, "India Nuclear Explosion," 18 May 1974, Secret

Source: State Department MDR release

The day of the test, INR rushed to update Kissinger, then in the Middle East negotiating with Israel and Syria. INR provided background on what had happened, how the United States and Canada had inadvertently helped India produce plutonium for the test device, earlier U.S. and Canadian demarches against "peaceful nuclear explosions," and India's capabilities to produce and deliver nuclear weapons. The report did not state whether India had made a decision to produce weapons, but it forecast that two large unsafeguarded reactors under

construction could eventually "produce enough plutonium for 50-70 nuclear weapons."

Document 21: "No Sense of Urgency in the Intelligence Community"

Intelligence Community Staff, Post Mortem Report, An Examination of the Intelligence Community's Performance Before the Indian Nuclear Test of May 1974, July 1974, Top Secret, Excised copy

Source: Mandatory review request; release by ISCAP

After the test, policymakers in and out of the intelligence establishment wanted to know why the CIA and its sister agencies had missed it. As Jeffrey Richelson has observed, this was not an "epic failure," but it was serious enough to produce a post-mortem investigation to determine what had gone wrong.[10] The partial release of the July 1974 post-mortem provides some answers, even if the full picture is denied because of massive excisions. Readers already know from the previous release published on the Archive's Web site that two problems were especially important: 1) the lack of priority given to the Indian nuclear program for intelligence collection (further confirmed by the January 1972 INR report), and 2) the lack of communication between intelligence producers (analysts and estimators) and intelligence collectors (spies, NRO, etc.). The low priority meant that intelligence production "fell off" during the 20 months before the test (from October 1972 to May 1974). Moreover, there may have been a lack of communication between producers, with the "other guy" assuming that someone else was "primarily responsible for producing hard evidence of Indian intentions."

Trying to explain the lack of follow-up on relevant "raw intelligence," e.g. Pinjanians's surmises about the Indian nuclear program, the post-mortem saw no "sense of urgency" in the intelligence community, which may have "reflected the attitudes of the policymakers." Another problem was that the intelligence community focused more on "capabilities" than on "intentions," which implicitly raised the difficult issue of breaching the nuclear establishment or Indira Gandhi's small circle of decision-making.

The substantive discussion of satellite photography has been excised, but the recommendations were left intact, including the point that "The failure of production elements to ask NPIC [National Photographic Intelligence Center] to exploit photography that had been specifically requested from the National Reconnaissance Office suggests a weakness in the imagery requirements system." The implication was that NRO satellites had imagery of the Thar Desert that could have been scrutinized for suspect activity, but no one asked NPIC to look into it. In any event, this and other failures fed into a number of recommendations, including the broader point that nuclear proliferation intelligence receive "much higher priority."

Document 22: "India may not yet have decided whether to proceed with .... [the] development of a weapons capability"

Special National Intelligence Estimate 4-1-74, "Prospects for Further Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,"23 August 1974, Top Secret, Excised Copy

Source: MDR release by CIA

A few months after the Indian test, the intelligence community prepared an overall estimate of the global nuclear proliferation situation. Such an estimate had not been prepared since

the 1960s, no doubt because of the White House's lack of interest. This estimate, SNIE 4-1-74, has been released before but this version includes more information, mainly a section on the Indian nuclear program, which had previously been withheld. While finding it "likely" that India would launch a covert program to produce a few weapons, the analysts were not sure that such a decision had been made and suggested that Moscow or Washington might be able to persuade the Indians from moving in that direction. The hypothesis about a covert program was mistaken because the Government of India did not make a basic decision to produce nuclear weapons until the 1980s.

Document 23: Whether the "Intelligence Community is Adequately Focused on Proliferation Matters"

Intelligence Community Staff, Director of Performance Evaluation and Improvement, to Deputy to the Director of Central Intelligence for the Intelligence Community, "Nuclear Proliferation and the Intelligence Community," 12 October 1976, Top Secret, Excised copy

Source: CIA Research Tool [CREST], National Archives Library, College Park, MD

As this report indicates, the recommendations made in the 1974 post-mortem had little impact. The authors identified a basic disconnect between "national level users"—the top policymakers—and those who "set analytical and collection priorities in the intelligence community." The latter were not sure how high a priority that the policymakers had given to nuclear proliferation intelligence. Moreover, a study for the Defense Department produced by MIT chemistry professor (and future DCI) John Deutch questioned whether the intelligence community "is adequately focused and tasked on proliferation matters." This would be a recurring problem for the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

Notes

[i] For background, see Jeffrey Richelson, Spying on the Bomb: American Nuclear Intelligence from Nazi Germany to Iran and North Korea (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 218-235.

[1] For background, see Jeffrey Richelson, Spying on the Bomb: American Nuclear Intelligence from Nazi Germany to Iran and North Korea (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 218-235.

[2] For U.S.-India relations during the Nixon administration, see Dennix Kux, India and the United States: Estranged Democracies, 1941-1991 (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1993), 279-314, and Perkovich, India's Nuclear Bomb, 162-166. For the impact of Kissinger's trip, see Andrew B. Kennedy, "India's Nuclear Odyssey: Implicit Umbrellas, Diplomatic Disappointments, and the Bomb," International Security 36 (2011): 136-139.

[3] Perkovich, India's Nuclear Bomb, 172.

[4] Thomas Powers, The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms & the CIA (New York: Knopf, 1979), 206-207; Mark Feldstein, Poisoning the Press: Richard Nixon, Jack Anderson, and the Rise of Washington's Scandal Culture, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 171.

[5] Murata would later rise to vice foreign minister and in 2009 revealed significant details

about secret U.S.-Japanese understandings on nuclear weapons issues during the Cold War.http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20090630a2.html

[6] Perkovich, India's Nuclear Bomb, 171.

[7] Ibid. 172.

[8] Ibid, 172.

[9] Russell J. Smith, The Unknown CIA: My Three Decades with the Agency (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey, 1989, 124.

[10] Richelson, Spying on the Bomb, 233.

Articles by: **The National Security Archive**