

Kissinger and India's Bomb

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Frontline : May 27, 2009

After Pokhran-I, in 1974, Henry Kissinger's formulations on the nuclear question fully accorded with India's interests and claims.

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May 1974: Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the Pokhran nuclear test site. AFTER the Pokhran explosion on May 18, 1974, United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger not only accepted realistically the possibility of India going for the Bomb but also made a constructive proposal to India's Ambassador, T.N. Kaul, which might have radically altered the course of events. It was, however, ignored. Rebuffed, the U.S. refused to grant its consent to the reprocessing of spent fuel at the Tarapur Atomic Power Station, reneged on its promise of a regular supply of enriched uranium for TAPS, set up the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and imposed certain sanctions.

Kissinger plugged the loopholes in the non-proliferation regime. The Zangger Committee of 20 States, committed to coordinating export restrictions on key materials and technologies, met to upgrade the rules. On August 22, 1974, 10 of the states filed identical memoranda with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to establish a "trigger list" of crucial material. In April 1975, Kissinger convened a secret meeting in London of what became the NSG. By then relations with India had deteriorated. Kissinger had excellent relations with Kaul. He was one of the few Ambassadors whose invitations Kissinger would accept.

On February 24, 1975, President Gerald Ford lifted the arms embargo against Pakistan, signalling a new arms relationship with that country. External Affairs Minister Y.B. Chavan cancelled his trip to the U.S. Breaching diplomatic etiquette, Kaul publicly attacked the decision. Kissinger replied: "The comments of the Indian Foreign Minister are restrained and statesmanlike but those of the Indian Ambassador are unacceptable." Not one to leave well alone and keep quiet, Kaul went on churlishly to retort that Kissinger's remarks were unacceptable to him. He lost his privileged access to the U.S. Secretary of State. Kissinger declined private meetings and invitations to tandoori chicken dinners. Kaul became ineffectual but fancied that he had won brownie points with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who had an intense, irrational dislike for Kissinger. She wantonly snubbed him when he visited India in October 1974.

Kaul was more a family retainer than a professional. In 1959, when Indira Gandhi became Congress president, he advised her, with crass impropriety and utter lack of sense, to split the Congress on ideological lines, as if, with Nehru still alive, the party was hers to split. His letters, years later, on jobs for himself make pathetic reading. But it is his post-Pokhran reports to New Delhi on his talks with Kissinger that merit careful study. They had met in New Delhi in July 1971 when Kaul was Foreign Secretary. Kissinger made little secret of his assessment that India had decided to intervene militarily in the then East Pakistan. Kaul noted that Kissinger “tried to drop an indirect hint about the possible normalisation of relations with Peking [Beijing]”. He added “under no circumstances shall we cooperate with China, directly or indirectly, in any move which is directed against India, and any military move by China against India would retard our political relationship with China”. He added, “India is a Great Power. Pakistan is a regional power.” He criticised bureaucrats and “suggested that we should open a channel of direct contact with him bypassing the State Department”.

On July 7, 1971, Kissinger met Vikram Sarabhai, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, and P.N. Haksar, the Prime Minister’s Principal Secretary, at lunch at the Ashoka Hotel. Haksar arrived late and spoke little. Haksar, incidentally, always tried hard to conceal his poor opinion of Kaul. From New Delhi, Kissinger went to Islamabad and thence to Beijing. On his return, he summoned Ambassador L.K. Jha to the Western White House, in San Clemente, on July 16, to warn him that India could not count on American help in the event of China intervening in an India-Pakistan war. In New York on December 10, 1971, he vigorously prodded Ambassador Huang Hua to intervene in the Bangladesh war by taking military action against India. In 1974, Kissinger came to terms with the realities. Hence, the relevance of his talks with Kaul. Why would he have befriended this voluble man if he did not seek to make amends to his country? U.S.’ mild statement

On December 27, 2007, the U.S. State Department published the volume on South Asia in its series Foreign Relations of the United States, covering the years 1969-76. Kissinger was in Syria on his shuttle diplomacy when he learnt of Pokhran. He promptly issued orders for a “low-key” response by the U.S. Kenneth Rush, the Deputy Secretary of State, acknowledged the orders and repeated it to the missions abroad. A draft “strong statement” was rejected.

Kissinger and Kaul met alone at lunch at the State Department for over an hour on June 7, 1974. Kaul reported to Foreign Secretary Kewal Singh: “I told him I had been rereading his book on Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy published in 1957. He had predicted therein that secondary powers would be able to acquire nuclear device within a few years. He said: ‘I am not surprised that India has exploded a nuclear device. I was sure India would do so sooner or later. State Department wanted to launch a campaign against India, but I had to firmly put it down and authorised issue of only a mild statement. I do not mind if India makes nuclear weapons. In fact, I am sure India will do so. Why should India not make them if she has the capability, when we and other nuclear powers make them?’ I felt he was deliberately leading me on. I therefore categorically rejected any idea of India going in for nuclear weapons, firstly because we could not afford the luxury and secondly, because we did not feel the necessity for it as it

was inconceivable that any nuclear weapon power would dare to use nuclear weapons in any future conflict. He said he was glad to hear this because he had to answer a lot of questions in the Congress where he had been for the last two days and today pleading for the aid packet....

“In the end Kissinger said: ‘India is a Great Power. We want to deal with India as a Great Power. Please rest assured that we want to maintain and further strengthen the improvement that has already taken place. I am greatly looking forward to my visit to India.’”

Kaul hosted a dinner on July 16 and sent a report of the talks not only to the Foreign Secretary but also to the Prime Minister: “I told Kissinger I was glad to see that the two Super Powers had expressly recognised the difference between peaceful and military purposes of underground nuclear explosions in the latest agreement signed in Moscow. He replied: ‘I knew that you would use this to justify your own explosion. I have taken a very sober and realistic view of your explosion and I would not be surprised even if you went in for nuclear weapons.’ I told him that we had no such intention and we would much rather see an international agreement applicable to all countries including nuclear weapon countries to regulate underground nuclear explosions for peaceful purposes. That would be a real step towards non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. He replied that it would be difficult if not impossible to distinguish between explosions for peaceful and military purposes unless there was some machinery for on-site inspections. According to him Soviets were not willing to allow such inspections.

“He then said: ‘Even if we and the Soviets agreed, you are unlikely to agree unless France and China also agreed. That is why perhaps you are making the suggestion because you know that all nuclear weapon powers will not agree.’ He then asked me: ‘Would you sign such an international agreement if USA and USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] agree to do so?’ I told him that I could put it to my government and we might consider it if it was a real step towards nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament without any discrimination against the nuclear non-weapon powers. He admitted that such an agreement was unrealistic at the present moment but may be a possibility in the future.”

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October 1974: U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger with Indira Gandhi in New Delhi. Meanwhile, Kewal Singh had met U.S. Ambassador Daniel P. Moynihan, who “confirmed what Kissinger had told us, namely, that the latter would like to have confidential talks with Prime Minister and Foreign Minister on proliferation. Americans, according to Moynihan, are certain that Pakistan would go all out to acquire processing technology and plant for conducting her own nuclear explosions and Iran too will eventually do the same. This would begin a nuclear arms race in the Middle East [West Asia]. However, he agreed that ‘India had a point in objecting to discriminatory nature of NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty] and that the suggestion that a country like India should depend on another power for PNEs [peaceful nuclear explosions] was an absurd one. Moynihan

also revealed that a study group had been established on 15th July to look into proliferation problems resulting from India's PNE and the group would submit its report" to Kissinger before his visit to India.

Kaul was advised by a good friend from India who had known Kissinger: "I would suggest that we start some studies on the hint that Kissinger threw when you saw him that he wished to discuss some kind of an agreement between the nuclear powers, in which he included India, regarding non-proliferation. We are trying to study it here, but we do not have all the facts. If you wish any particular information on the subject, I shall be glad to get what I can. I would, however, suggest that you ask Dr. Homi Sethna, P.N. Haksar, yourself and one or two others to get together and clear our own thinking on the subject. I should be grateful for any guidance that you can give me so that I may try to probe Henry accordingly.

"He [Kissinger] also asked me to give him some points for his talks and discussions in Delhi. I thought he was joking, but he told me he was serious and respected my judgment. I would also appreciate if you could kindly send me some points that you wish him to bear in mind when he talks both at Sapru House, on the TV and radio as well as in his discussions with FM and PM."

At a dinner on October 10, 1974, in honour of the Finance Minister, Kissinger gave a concrete shape to his thoughts. Kaul reported to Kewal Singh: "Kissinger would like to enter into a confidential bilateral or multilateral understanding with us that no nuclear country would transfer nuclear technology including underground nuclear explosive technology to any other (non-nuclear?) country except under adequate safeguards. He said if some suitable formula could be worked out he would then be able to meet criticism in the Congress and elsewhere and India's position as a nuclear power would be recognised by the whole world. He did not think China would join any such understanding, but France and other nuclear powers would" (emphasis added throughout). That surely was not a gain to be sniffed at.

Indira Gandhi's fears

The New York Times of September 13, 1974, published a report by Seymour M. Hersh from Washington, based on a leak of Moynihan's dispatch to the State Department on Indira Gandhi's fears about the activities of the Central Intelligence Agency in India. It was in delightful prose, to Kissinger's great annoyance: "Her concern is whether the United States accepts the Indian regime. She is not sure but that we would be content to see others like her overthrown. She knows full well that we have done our share and more of bloody and dishonourable deeds."

"The ambassador said Mrs. Gandhi was not worried about being overthrown, and added: 'It is precisely because she is not innocent, not squeamish and not a moraliser that her concern about American intentions is real and immediate.'

“And of course the news from the United States, as printed in the Indian press, repeatedly confirms her worst suspicions and genuine fears. ‘Nothing will change her unless she is satisfied that the United States accepts her India. She does not now think we do. She thinks we are a profoundly selfish and cynical counter-revolutionary power.’

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T.N. Kaul. His post-Pokhan-I reports to New Delhi on his talks with Kissinger merit careful study.

“Because of that belief Mr. Moynihan noted: ‘She will accordingly proceed to develop nuclear weapons and a missile delivery system, preaching non-violence all the way.’” Soon thereafter, Kissinger and Kaul met alone when the Secretary of State referred to his Ambassador’s “hysterical” cable. This time, Kaul reported directly to the Prime Minister. Kissinger ridiculed Moynihan’s remarks on the Indian Bomb. “I know that it will take India 10 or 15 years to develop means of delivery, and it is presumptuous of Moynihan to have said that India is going for means of delivery in nuclear weapons.”

By then, the dates for Kissinger’s trip to Delhi were fixed. He was to arrive on October 27. Kaul reported to the Prime Minister: “I asked him about what sort of discussions on nuclear questions he wanted to have in Delhi. He replied as follows.” The points Kissinger made are extremely important:

“a) We recognise India as a nuclear power and would like to deal with you as such;

“b) India has a nuclear weapons capability but we do not wish to split hairs or argue as to whether you are going to use such capability or not;

“c) We are only anxious that other countries like Pakistan should not develop nuclear weapons. That would not only upset the present military balance on the subcontinent but encourage others to go in for nuclear weapons;

“d) We are not going to ask India to do anything that we are not prepared to do ourselves;

“e) It may be advisable for India and U.S., either bilaterally or jointly with other nuclear powers, to agree that they will not transfer nuclear explosive technology to non-nuclear countries or other nuclear technology except under strict safeguards. (He hoped that India would agree to this.)

“I told him that while we could not make a public declaration unilaterally that we would not transfer the benefits of such technology to other countries, however, if there was a consensus among the nuclear powers, then we might consider joining such a consensus. I expressed this as my personal opinion but told him that I would convey his views to my government.” Kissinger’s formulations fully accorded with India’s interests and its claims. One fails to understand Kaul’s precondition of a nuclear power consensus. It was a sensible offer which India should have enthusiastically welcomed. Kissinger pursued the idea in Delhi. It went nowhere. A good opportunity was missed. Had it been seized, India might have avoided the travails it underwent later.

Indira Gandhi’s ire was a purely personal one. She was “friendly” with Moynihan. Hers was the imperial style of an inordinately vain person, which fawning civil servants and journalists encouraged. She harmed the national interest. For Kissinger came prepared to accept India as “a nuclear power”. He had not only asked the State Department to react to Pokhran in “low key”, but in another cable, had sent his “preliminary weekend assessment”. He wrote: “The Nth power has finally come forward.... The challenge is no longer keeping India from going nuclear; it is stabilising a new nuclear ‘power’ within the international framework and trying to dissuade others from following suit.”

His proposal ensured both. India’s status as a nuclear power was accepted provided that it would not help others attain that status. The proposal was sensible, fair and expedient. Thirty years later, India gave the very same pledge, more than once. Instead of grandstanding for an international “consensus”, had India responded to this manifestly fair offer – especially in view of Kissinger’s explicit formulations to Kaul – unequivocally and even warmly, it would have deflected the U.S. from doing a lot it did later. After Pokhran-II, in 1998, the U.S. refused even to think of those formulations. Neither for the first nor for the last time was India’s national interest sacrificed at the altar of its leader’s vanity and ineptness. The national mood of chauvinism was fostered by such leaders.
