



## VOICES

# Nuclear testing times

**In India, membership of the CTBT is not on the agenda. But perhaps it's time to reconsider.**

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**Foreign editor of Hindustan Times, Pramit Pal Chaudhuri, states that when New Delhi declared Pokhran II a complete success, this in effect indicated that India does not need to conduct more tests. In this case, India's current moratorium could be extended indefinitely and transmuted into a CTBT signature-cum-ratification.**

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, an international agreement that would bind all nations to never again carry out a nuclear test, has passed from the lexicon of India's foreign policy debate – even though it used to be one of the most frequent disparagements in New Delhi's strategic circles.

In February this year, I attended a conference in Vienna, Austria, on *The Comprehensive Nuclear -Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) at 15: Status and Prospects* as well as the anniversary celebrations of the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty

Organization (CTBTO). This invitation possibly arose because no Indian official was willing to attend. New Delhi has put so much space between itself and the CTBT that it even declines from sending observers to CTBTO functions. Other non-parties did attend, however, as diplomats from China and Pakistan were present at the conference.

### PREVENTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW NUCLEAR WEAPONS

It was a useful refresher on where the CTBT stands today. My conclusion, reinforced by the conference and the anniversary celebrations, was that the Treaty is in remarkably good stead. It is also in a much better position to respond to a number of the criticisms that have been levied against the agreement in the past.

One is the issue of whether the CTBTO can actually detect a nuclear

explosive. The answer is, largely, "Yes." The CTBTO today has an impressive network of international monitoring stations in a range of locations from the Arctic to the Antarctica, on mountaintops and deserts and even the ocean bed. Of the 337 facilities envisaged under the Treaty, over 80 percent are already fully operational and transmitting data to the CTBTO. These stations are of four varieties: seismic, hydroacoustic, radionuclide and infrasound. I visited an example of the third variety on the roof of the CTBTO's headquarters in Vienna, complete with its pure germanium detector and giant rooftop air-sampling vacuum cleaner.

There are some types of tiny nuclear tests, in the range of one-tenth of a tonne of TNT equivalent and less, that this network would struggle to detect. However, there are some who believe that such tests could help finesse existing weapons systems, but would be useless in the development of new ones. The CTBT is designed to constrain both the development and qualitative improvement of nuclear weapons.

The other issue is whether the Treaty is ever likely to get the approval of the main nuclear powers. The answer: it all depends on the United States' presidential elections in November.



From left to right: Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh; former Prime Minister of India, Atul Bihari Vajpayee; and K. Santhanam, formerly of the Defence Research Development Organisation. They have all participated in the debate on nuclear testing in India. According to Chaudhuri: "What is noteworthy is that the two most marginal groups, the ultranationalists and the left, are the only schools strictly opposed to signing the CTBT under any circumstances."

### THE NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION DOMINO EFFECT

As the conference made amply clear, until the US ratifies the CTBT, China will not do so. And if neither of them ratifies, then India won't either. If India is on board, so is Pakistan. Israel, one of the quiet nuclear weapons possessing States, would probably go in once the US does. This is the nuclear non-proliferation domino effect.

This chain reaction of ratifications and signatures is expected to follow a US action. In India's case the two acts are merged into one as adherence to an international treaty is an executive privilege, not requiring legislative sanction. This fact I realized in Vienna is not widely understood even among many non-proliferation advocates, resulting in the criticism that New Delhi has 'not even' signed the CTBT unlike, say, the United States and China.

What has happened since the CTBT came into effect, however, is that almost every country in the world accepts the norm that there should be no testing.

India, of course, famously refused to sign the CTBT when it opened for signature on 24 September 1996, and subsequently carried out a set of nuclear tests in 1998. Despite attempts by the government of Prime Minister Atul Bihari Vajpayee

and his successor, Manmohan Singh, to consider putting pen to dotted line, they have been put off by strong political and intellectual opposition that has been able to recast adherence to a test ban as a "loss of sovereignty" issue – or worse.

### INDIA'S FOUR SCHOOLS OF FOREIGN POLICY

Using the formulations of Dr Kanti Bajpai, and its reformulation in Dr Henry Nau's soon to be released study on the foreign policies of emerging powers, it can be said there are four schools of foreign policy in India. Of these, the ultranationalists want more nuclear tests and remain wary of accepting any non-proliferation treaty obligations; the cautious pragmatists say ratify the Treaty after the United States and China; the left wing favour global zero – worldwide nuclear disarmament – and say the CTBT merely reinforces the monopoly of existing powers; and the neo-liberals, for whom this is about leverage for technology and status, and who are prepared to trade the right to test for either.

What is noteworthy is that the two most marginal groups, the ultranationalists and the left, are the only schools strictly opposed to signing the CTBT under any circumstances.

Prime Minister Singh has in recent times stated in public and in private that

the situation regarding India's stand on the CTBT will "change" after the US and China have led the way. It all depends on whether India actually needs to carry out more nuclear tests.

Opinion is divided, but a 2009 debate on this issue was triggered by K. Santhanam, the former number two at the Defence Research Development Organisation, who claimed that the Pokhran II nuclear tests had failed and that, in particular, India did not have a credible hydrogen bomb capacity. In the resulting furore, the government released more information about the tests and made a strong case for the tests having succeeded.

In its defence, New Delhi had the then Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, Dr Anil Kakodkar, publicly say in September 2009: "We want to re-emphasise that the 1998 tests were fully successful and had achieved in toto their scientific objectives and the capability to build fission and thermonuclear weapons with yields up to 200 kilotonnes."

### NO NEED FOR INDIA TO CONDUCT FURTHER NUCLEAR TESTS

By declaring Pokhran II a complete success, New Delhi in effect indicated it does not need further tests. In this case, India's existing moratorium on further



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nuclear tests can be extended indefinitely and, if so, might well be transmuted into a Treaty signature-cum-ratification.

It is possible New Delhi could keep CTBTO membership as a negotiating chip, keeping it on hold until it becomes a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and other non-proliferation technology control regimes. But this is a tactical issue. Non-membership of the CTBTO would not be in foreign policy interests or an ideological stance.

Over the last two years, there has been a remarkable paralysis within the Indian polity. Prime Minister Singh's ruling coalition has become increasingly unruly, the Indian economy has experienced a slowing growth rate and high inflation, and anti-incumbency runs between 30 to 50 percent in legislative elections. This has led the political class to become extremely risk-averse, avoiding issues that are even remotely sensitive. By the middle of 2012, there were an estimated 180 pieces of legislation stuck in the Indian Parliament.

As a consequence, it is perfectly possible that even if the US and China do ratify the Treaty, India would not necessarily be the first off the block among the remaining nuclear powers to join the CTBT. This would not be a result of opposition to a test ban *per se* but

rather because political circumstances would place it low on the priority list.

#### THE CTBT OFFERS A RANGE OF CIVIL AND SCIENTIFIC APPLICATIONS

There are also a number of other reasons why India should take another look at the CTBT. In India, the Treaty's civil and scientific applications are largely unknown. That its network of monitoring sites allowed the CTBTO to play a remarkable role in detecting and tracking the consequences of the March 2011 Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear accident in Japan has received little notice in India.

Similarly, there is little awareness in India that CTBTO data can be used to monitor tsunami-type geological activity and to help tsunami warning centres issue timely alerts. This was the case when Japan suffered the 9.0 magnitude earthquake that led to the destruction of the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant reactor. Tokyo confirmed that CTBTO data had helped them to send out tsunami warnings within a few minutes, allowing many people to escape to higher ground.

India, which saw a surge in anti-nuclear protests on its home soil after the Fukushima accident, has been much more conscious about tsunamis since the

2004 Indian Ocean tsunami which killed an estimated 18,000 Indians.

While New Delhi is waiting for the US Senate to get the CTBT ball rolling again, it can afford to bring an end to its present Cold War-derived allergy to the CTBTO and similar bodies.

Pakistan is a CTBTO observer State even though it has not signed the Treaty. The US and China – both CTBT signatory States but who have yet to ratify the Treaty – participate fully in the work of the organization. India could therefore easily be an observer of the CTBTO without compromising any of its principles.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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is the Foreign Editor of *Hindustan Times* and has been with the paper since 2000. He wrote about international politics and economic issues for *The Telegraph* and *The Statesman* newspapers in Calcutta from 1985 to 2000.

In 2011, he was appointed to the National Security Advisory Board to the Prime Minister of India for a two-year term.

Mr Chaudhuri also serves as a delegate for a number of strategic and economic dialogues on behalf of the Confederation of Indian Industries and the affiliated Aspen Institute of India.

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