



ONE

THE LOST HALF CENTURY

WHEN I ARRIVED for work that damp, overcast morning of Monday, May 11, 1998, I was expecting a relatively normal week, at least by State Department standards. There was plenty to do at the office and plenty to worry about in the world, but nothing that quite qualified as a crisis.

Shortly after 8:00 a.m., I chaired the daily meeting of the department's senior staff. As deputy secretary, I was supposed to keep tabs on what was going on in the building and around the globe. Assembled at a mahogany table in the windowless conference room across from my office on the seventh floor were about twenty assistant secretaries. Their bureaus either covered various geographical regions or sought to advance such global objectives as the promotion of democracy and human rights, the protection of the environment, the struggle against terrorism, and the effort to stop the proliferation of lethal armaments, materials, designs and technologies.

Each official reported briefly on what had happened over the weekend and reviewed what lay ahead. The British government and Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, were looking for help in bringing peace to Northern Ireland. A team of American diplomats was in the Balkans trying to avert war over Kosovo. Iraq's deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz, was barnstorming through Europe, lobbying for an end to the U.S.-led campaign to isolate the Baghdad regime. The annual summit of the Group of Seven major industrial democracies, or G-7, was

coming up later in the week in Birmingham, England. Boris Yeltsin, the president of Russia, would be attending for the first time as a full member of the group, making it the G-8. As the administration's point man on Russia, I planned to spend most of the coming days preparing for the private session that President Bill Clinton would have with Yeltsin in Birmingham.

When the senior staff meeting ended, I returned to my office and settled behind the desk to read the *New York Times*. I skimmed articles on the front page about the latest Arab-Israeli tensions and drug trafficking in the Caribbean but skipped a feature article about India. That country could hardly have been further from my mind. In government, it is often said, the urgent drives out the merely important. India—the world's second most populous country, its largest democracy, and the most powerful country in a region that is home to nearly a quarter of humanity—seemed permanently stuck in the latter category.

At that moment, Phyllis Oakley, the foreign service officer in charge of the department's bureau of intelligence and research, was returning to her own office from the senior staff meeting when her deputy intercepted her in the corridor with the news that India had set off a nuclear device several hours earlier. Phyllis was stunned. How had we learned? she asked. From CNN, she was told. She winced, then rushed back to my office to make sure I had gotten the word. I hadn't. After sitting motionless for a moment with my eyes closed, I swiveled around in my chair and picked up the handset of the "red switch" phone behind my desk. The buttons on this clunky device, each labeled with bureaucratic initials, connected me by encrypted lines with my counterparts in other departments and agencies of the government. I punched the button that put me through to John Gordon, a four-star Air Force general who was deputy director of central intelligence at the CIA's headquarters in Langley, Virginia, nine miles up the Potomac River. I assumed John would be able to give me some details on what had happened overnight in India. We had been friends for about ten years, since the first Bush administration, when he had served on the staff of the National Security Council and I had been a *Time* magazine reporter covering foreign policy. John had just arrived at work, so instead of learning anything from him, I succeeded only in ruining his week just as it started. After hearing what I had to say, he, like me a few moments before, needed at first to absorb the

magnitude of the news in silence. He then remarked that the only thing worse than being scooped by CNN was being scooped by the State Department.

Phyllis took some consolation from this exchange, since her bureau was microscopic compared with the CIA. "It looks like we're all having a bad government day," she said over her shoulder as she hurried back to her office for more information. I got on the phone again, this time to the secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, who was at the White House in the office of Sandy Berger, the president's national security adviser. They had just heard what happened, also courtesy of CNN.

"When it rains, it pours," said Madeleine. She and Sandy had their hands full dealing with the latest setback in the Middle East peace process. The Israeli government had just rebuffed a U.S. proposal for a compromise with the Palestinians.

Also in the meeting was Bruce Riedel, a career intelligence officer on assignment to the National Security Council staff. He was in charge of the NSC office that covered South Asia as well as the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, which meant riding herd on U.S. diplomacy with the Arabs and Israelis and on U.S. military operations in Iraq. On learning of the Indian test, Bruce commented that he suddenly felt overemployed.

Phyllis Oakley soon returned to my office with a sheaf of printouts of classified cables and faxes that were by now pouring in from some extremely embarrassed offices around the U.S. government, especially in Langley. She had brought a map to show me where the explosion had occurred—in the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan. Phyllis knew the political geography of South Asia, having lived and worked in Pakistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s when her husband, Bob, served as U.S. ambassador there. The test site, she noted, was just over ninety miles from the Pakistani border, so the subterranean explosion must have set off seismographs in Pakistan.

"Let's just hope that's all it sets off," she added.

The week was no longer normal, and India was no longer merely important.

WHAT FOLLOWS IS the story of the negotiation—or, as we agreed to call it, the dialogue—that the Indian statesman Jaswant Singh and I conducted over the next two and a half years. We met fourteen times at ten

locations in seven countries on three continents. Those encounters added up to the most intense and prolonged set of exchanges ever between American and Indian officials at a level higher than ambassadors.

I held a parallel series of meetings with various Pakistani officials. That exercise, too, was called a dialogue, but it barely qualified as such. Why that was the case is also a subject of this book.

In a successful dialogue, the two parties do more than just talk to each other. Each makes an effort to understand what the other has said and to incorporate that understanding into a reply. A dialogue does not, however, necessarily mean that the participants change each other's minds. Hence the other term that figured prominently in the way Jaswant Singh and I defined our task: engagement. That word can connote eye-to-eye contact, a firm handshake, a pledge, or a long-term commitment. But engagement can also refer to the crossing of swords, a clash of armies or warships or wills. Both elements, conciliation and contest, were present in what went on between Jaswant Singh and me.

India's decision to conduct nuclear tests was a manifestation of long-festering differences over the rules governing the international system and our countries' self-assigned positions in that system. Jaswant Singh and I began the dialogue hoping that before it ended—or, better yet, once it became permanent and institutionalized—the United States and India would be able to reach agreement on some of those fundamental questions and, where we could not resolve our disagreements, we would be better able to manage them. To that extent, he and I were dealing with each other on behalf of two governments that shared a desire to fix something that had been broken for a long time: the U.S.-Indian relationship.

But first we had to grapple with the issue at hand, which was India's acquisition of the bomb. That thoroughly unwelcome development had occurred not just in the face of American objections but also against the backdrop of the United States, Britain, China, France, and Russia having acquired bombs of their own many years before.

From the American perspective, what was at stake was the stability of the global nuclear order. If India felt it had to have a bomb, other countries would conclude that they must have one too, and the world would become a much more dangerous place.

For their part, the Indians saw the matter in terms of sovereignty, security, and equity: if those other five powers had an internationally

recognized right to be nuclear armed, why did India not have the same prerogative?

My government attempted to finesse that question with what was essentially a compromise: the United States would limit the extent to which the Indian bomb was an obstacle to better relations if India would, by explicit agreement, limit the development and deployment of its nuclear arsenal.

But the Indian government was, from the outset, disinclined to compromise. Its short-term goal was to resist precisely the sort of abnegation the United States proposed. Its strategy was to play for the day when the United States would get over its huffing and puffing and, with a sigh of exhaustion or a shrug of resignation, accept a nuclear-armed India as a fully responsible and fully entitled member of the international community.

The Indians conducted their test knowing that it would provoke American castigation but also hoping it might have another consequence: perhaps it would force the United States to pay them serious, sustained, and respectful attention of a kind the Indians felt they had never received before. Engagement gave the Indians a chance to resist the Americans' pressure face-to-face. In that sense, the dialogue could be its own reward, as both a means and an end. By weathering the storm of U.S. disapproval—by outlasting and outtalking the Americans in the marathon of diplomacy spurred by the test, in short, by *not* compromising—the Indians would prove their resolve and their resilience, thereby giving a boost to their national self-esteem and self-confidence.

As one of the architects of the Indian strategy, Jaswant Singh came closer to achieving his objective in the dialogue than I did to achieving mine. Insofar as what follows is that story, it stands as an exception to Dean Acheson's maxim that the author of a memorandum of conversation never comes out second best.

However, there is more to the tale told here than that. This book can be read as a parable about a benign version of the law of unintended consequences. The annals of diplomacy are replete with examples of accords that backfired, apparent breakthroughs that led to disastrous breakdowns, signatures on peace treaties that lit fuses to war. But the opposite can also occur. Sometimes a negotiation that fails to resolve a specific dispute can have general and lasting benefits, especially if it is a dialogue in fact as well as name. Diplomacy that meets that standard can improve and even

transform the overall quality of relations between states. It can make it possible for governments to cooperate in areas that had previously been out of bounds and, at moments of crisis, enable their leaders to avert catastrophe.

That, too, is a theme of this book: it is the story of the turning point in U.S.-Indian relations.

The bad news from Rajasthan that Monday morning in May of 1998 marked a new low between two countries that had seen very few highs. Jaswant Singh and I sat down across from each other for the first time a month later. Yet a little more than a year after that, his prime minister trusted my president enough to let him play a decisive role in defusing a conflict between India and Pakistan that could have escalated to nuclear war. Then, in March 2000, President Clinton's triumphal visit to India established that these two countries were finally engaged in the unambiguously positive sense of that word. They remain so today.

That is all to the good. The great shame is that it took so long to happen.

THE OPPOSITE OF engagement is estrangement. By 1993, when the Clinton administration came into office, that word, which has no positive connotation, had become standard in describing the United States's dealings with India.¹

Relations between states often take on the attributes, in the minds and language of their citizens and political leaders, of relations between individuals. Countries are described as friends or enemies, partners or rivals; they feel good will toward each other, or they regard each other with irritation and disappointment.

The U.S.-Indian relationship has had this personalized aspect for half a century, especially on the Indian side, where the political and intellectual elite has felt neglected, patronized, or bullied by the U.S. government. Why, it is often asked, did two countries with so many political values in common, not get off to a better start?

Part of the answer is to be found in a difference between their historical experiences. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, America was, like India, a British colony—but with a major difference: it was made up largely of people transplanted from Britain itself, while Indians

were of a different race and culture. They were bearers of a great and ancient civilization who had been treated, in Rudyard Kipling's famous phrase, as a burden to be borne by the white man. A lingering sense of being objects of racism and condescension made many Indians all the more wary when, just as their own country was breaking free of the Raj in the late 1940s, America seemed to be inheriting from Britain the mantle of global empire.

On the U.S. side, too, the relationship was jinxed. For most of the next forty years, India was a target of American ideological and geopolitical antagonism. The affinity that might have otherwise existed was a victim of incompatible obsessions—India's with Pakistan and America's with the Soviet Union. One reason that the United States and India were so at odds for so long was that each was on such good terms with the other's principal enemy. The dissolution of the Soviet Union created an opening for the Clinton administration to free the United States's relations with South Asia from the strictures and distortions of the cold war.

But Pakistan was still on the map, and for many Indians, its very existence rankled. They resented what they saw as America's continuing patronage of their misbegotten neighbor.

MOHANDAS GANDHI AND Jawaharlal Nehru had conceived of India as an inclusive state in which the Hindu majority would coexist with Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and others. Muhammad Ali Jinnah and most other influential Muslim leaders, however, insisted that Hindus and Muslims were two nations and that Muslims should have a state of their own. That was, they believed, the only way to safeguard their community's interests and way of life. They did not fear religious persecution so much as political and social discrimination. When the people of British India won their freedom in 1947, the proponents of Pakistan insisted that independence be accompanied by partition, which brought with it massive transfers of populations, carnage on a horrendous scale, and an enduring legacy of mutual mistrust.

The prevailing inclination of many Indians was, for many years, not to accept the logic or the legitimacy of the two-nation theory. They regarded the idea of Pakistan not just as a mistake but as an insult to the idea of India.

Pakistanis not only reciprocated this hostility—they felt intimidated by India, which had more than three times the territory and four times the population, vast numbers of whom were Muslims.

The vision of India as a secular, pluralistic democracy was controversial within India itself. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers Association), or RSS, had been founded in 1925 on the principle that India could achieve national unity only on the basis of Hindu supremacy. That position put the RSS in opposition to Gandhi, the founding father and guiding spirit of modern India—whom most Indians and much of the world had come to refer to as the Mahatma, or Great Soul. When Gandhi died five months after independence at the hands of a militant affiliated with a Hindu extremist organization, officials of the Congress Party, which was then the dominant force in Indian politics and would remain so for a long time, accused the RSS of complicity in the assassination, and the Congress-led government banned the organization. The RSS formed a political wing that subsequently became the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP. After decades in opposition, the BJP eventually surpassed the Congress Party in electoral support and led the government of India through most of the period covered in this book.

PAKISTAN, WHILE POLITICALLY united around the idea of a separate state for Muslims, was geographically split between noncontiguous eastern and western portions, since those were the principal areas of British India that had Muslim majorities. The disparities and tensions between the dominant, relatively prosperous Pakistanis of the west, especially the Punjabis with their martial tradition, and the poorer but equally proud and more numerous Bengalis of the east constituted a further source of weakness, insecurity, instability, and division for Pakistan.

Another anomaly of partition created a sense among Pakistanis of having been deprived of territory and population rightfully their own. The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, a mountainous region in the northern part of the subcontinent, had a Muslim majority but a Hindu maharaja who at first wanted independence for his realm but quickly gave in to pressure from New Delhi to join India after Pakistani irregulars mounted an invasion. The ensuing war left India in control of two-thirds of Kashmir, including the verdant Srinagar Valley.

With the end of hostilities in 1949, the two governments established a cease-fire line between the Pakistani and Indian portions of Kashmir. It was an interim arrangement intended to buy time for a permanent settlement.

The United Nations had passed a resolution the year before calling for the complete withdrawal of Pakistani forces from Kashmir, a reduction (though not the withdrawal) of the Indian forces, and a plebiscite whereby the Kashmiri people could determine their future status. At the time, India had a good chance of winning the plebiscite, since Kashmir's nationalist hero, Sheikh Abdullah, even though he was a Muslim, was an ally of Prime Minister Nehru. Later, however, when Abdullah began flirting with the idea of independence, Nehru had him jailed and local opinion began to turn against India. The Indians backed away from holding the plebiscite because they did not want to give the Kashmiris a chance to vote themselves out of the union.

Since Kashmir was the only Muslim-majority state in a Hindu-majority union, Indians saw its retention as an affirmation of their success in building a society that welcomed Muslims along with everyone else.

From the Pakistanis' viewpoint, Indian rule over Kashmir was the theft of their birthright, a foreign occupation of what should have been part of Pakistan, and an abomination against Pakistan's definition of itself as a homeland for the subcontinent's Muslims.²

I HAVE ALWAYS associated this intractable conflict with a recollection from childhood. Sometime in the 1950s, my parents attended a speech by Norman Cousins, the liberal internationalist editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*. What stuck in their minds, and mine when they told me about it, was Cousins's warning that World War III would begin in the Vale of Kashmir. That prediction made an impression on me in part because the name of the place made it sound so exotic and beautiful, but also because those were the days when the possibility of global thermonuclear war was a nightmare for all Americans, including children who practiced duck-and-cover drills in their schoolrooms.

The global rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union was a crucial factor in determining American relations with both India and Pakistan. Those two countries came into being at a time when the United States was enlisting allies around the periphery of the Soviet empire and when the principal objective of Pakistani foreign policy was

to protect itself against India. Pakistan signed up for two U.S. regional anti-Soviet alliances in the 1950s—the Central Treaty Organization, known early on as the Baghdad Pact, and the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, or Manila Pact. It was from an airfield near Peshawar in Pakistan that Francis Gary Powers took off in his U-2 spy plane on his doomed flight over the Soviet Union in 1960.

Looking for a protector in Asia, Pakistan developed close ties with China, which was embroiled in a border dispute with India that flared into war in 1962. That conflict ended in a humiliating defeat for India.

By then, there were already signs of a Sino-Soviet schism, which meant that Pakistan had now allied itself with the USSR's two principal foes—the United States and China. That gave India yet another reason to cultivate the best possible relations with the Soviet Union as an offset to both the Chinese threat and the American alliance with Pakistan.

Nehru was a founding member of the so-called Non-Aligned Movement, made up of developing (or third world) nations that vowed to steer clear of the two superpowers. But for many of the movement's members, nonalignment had a distinct pro-Moscow slant, which irritated Washington no end. India was a prime example, since it accepted symbolically potent Soviet aid for steel mills and public works projects, equipped its air force with MiGs, and often voted with Moscow against Washington in the United Nations.

THERE WERE A few brief periods when relations between the United States and India showed some promise of improvement. Dwight Eisenhower had a genuine, though publicly muted, rapport with Nehru, whom he entertained in 1956 at his farm in Gettysburg. In 1959 he became the first American president to visit India. President Kennedy's ambassador to New Delhi, John Kenneth Galbraith, developed a close friendship with Nehru, and the Kennedy administration responded favorably to Indian pleas for military help during the 1962 Sino-Indian war in the Himalayas.

Jacqueline Kennedy's visit to India in March of that year was a tour de force of goodwill diplomacy. She took in the Taj Mahal by moonlight, put on an expert display of equestrian skills, and charmed Indian politicians on numerous occasions, listening to them talk, as she later recalled, "about what they were reading, about people, and about some of the

insanities of foreign policy.” She called the experience “the most magical two weeks in my life.” For his part, Nehru was so charmed that he insisted she move from the Galbraiths’ guest house into the prime ministerial residence.³

Galbraith’s successor as ambassador in New Delhi, Chester Bowles, was a champion of the idea that India should be seen not as a quasi-ally of the USSR but as a vast developing country that, in contrast to China, had chosen democracy over communism.*

But advocates of that view were relatively scarce, primarily because of India’s close relations with the USSR, and moments of warmth in the U.S.-Indian relationship were exceptions to the general chill.

IN 1964, THE YEAR that Nehru died, China conducted its first test of a nuclear weapon. India sought security guarantees from the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. That idea went nowhere. Washington regarded India as a country that was, if not playing for the Soviet side, then at least rooting for Moscow from the sidelines. In any event, the United States was not about to commit itself to going to war with China if there was another Sino-Indian conflict.

Now that their giant, intimidating, and recently hostile neighbor possessed the bomb, the Indians had a classic strategic rationale for developing one of their own. They also had world-class talent in physics, most notably Homi Bhabha, a Cambridge-educated scientist, the founder and prime mover of India’s nuclear energy program.

THE FOLLOWING YEAR, 1965, the dispute over Kashmir further poisoned Indo-Pakistani relations and roiled the internal politics of Pakistan itself. A short but bloody war between India and Pakistan solidified an autocratic military regime in Pakistan dominated by officers from the western part of the country, a state of affairs that exacerbated tensions with the eastern part. In 1971 civil war broke out between the west and east. Seizing the opportunity to weaken its enemy, India helped bring about the breakup of Pakistan. The newly independent eastern part of the country took the name Bangladesh. The number of Muslim citizens

*Bowles had served a previous tour as U.S. envoy to India during the Eisenhower administration. After succeeding Galbraith in 1963, he stayed on in his post into the Johnson administration.

of India now exceeded the entire population of Pakistan, making India the second largest Muslim country in the world, after Indonesia.

Throughout this turmoil, the United States remained protective of its Pakistani ally, dispatching the aircraft carrier *Enterprise* to the Bay of Bengal—a show of force that India saw as all too reminiscent of British gunboat diplomacy.

Around the same time, Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, used Pakistan as a channel for the American rapprochement with India's other adversary, China. This was further evidence, as seen from New Delhi, that the United States was on its way to becoming not only the enemy of India's Soviet friend but the friend of India's Pakistani *and* Chinese enemies.

A new word entered the lexicon of U.S.-South Asian relations: both in Washington and New Delhi there was perceived to be an American "tilt" toward Pakistan.⁴

In 1972, at a summit in Simla, the prime ministers of India and Pakistan—Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto—pledged that each country's forces would stay on their own side of the 1949 cease-fire line, which was renamed the Line of Control, until future negotiations could yield a solution to the problem.*

While the Simla Accord helped maintain a precarious peace in South Asia, it represented the regional demarcation of the global standoff between countries like Pakistan that clung to their ties to Washington and those like India that leaned more toward Moscow.

IT WAS AGAINST this setting of multilayered cold war enmities that India took a big step in the direction of breaking, once and for all, with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT.

The NPT grew out of a global grand bargain that Dwight Eisenhower proposed in what became known as the Atoms for Peace Speech to the United Nations General Assembly in 1953: countries that did not possess nuclear weapons would receive international assistance in gaining access to the benefits of peaceful applications of nuclear energy. In the aftermath of the first Chinese nuclear test in 1964, India proclaimed itself

*Indira Gandhi had taken the name of her late husband, who was no relation to Mohandas Gandhi.

in favor of a treaty that would have required China and the other four states that had tested—Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States—to give up their weapons. When the NPT was finally completed, in 1968, it obliged its signatories “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.” This provision was never taken seriously by the five nuclear “haves”—it was a sop to the “have-nots.” In effect, the treaty grandfathered those that had established themselves as nuclear weapons states and required everyone else to forgo the option forever. The overwhelming majority of countries went along with this arrangement, however lopsided it might be, on the theory that the only way to avert a free-for-all among them was to accept the ban. In keeping with Eisenhower’s original idea, the treaty made the non-nuclear weapons states eligible to receive financial and technical assistance in peaceful uses of nuclear energy for medicine, agriculture, water management, and the generation of electric power.

India was one of the few holdouts, refusing to sign the NPT on the grounds that it was the charter for an inherently discriminatory club. As a result, India was excluded from receiving atoms-for-peace help.

The willingness of the rest of the world to let China join the NPT as a nuclear weapons state was especially infuriating to the Indians. Why, they asked, should the world’s largest tyranny be permitted to have the bomb, while the world’s largest democracy—projected to be the world’s most populous country by the middle of the twenty-first century—was not? The answer, which India found neither logical nor fair, was that since the testing of the Chinese bomb predated the signing of the NPT, its status as a nuclear weapons state was a reality that the rest of the world had to accept.

Indira Gandhi decided to confront the world with a new reality.

AFTER THE 1971 war with Pakistan, the Indian government had established a fifty-mile-long firing range in Rajasthan near the town of Pokhran, named after a fourteenth-century red sandstone fortress at the junction of three roads that were part of the ancient Silk Route. Within the walls of the old city was an open market locally known for an annual cattle fair and ringed by cafes where truck drivers stopped for lunch on

their way to and from Jodhpur, ninety miles away. The people of Pokhran and the adjacent areas often complained of warplanes screeching overhead as they conducted target runs in the nearby Thar, or Great Indian Desert.

On May 18, 1974, the Thar shook, breaking windows and cracking mud-brick walls in villages on the edge of the Pokhran range. Officials supervising the underground nuclear test sent a flash message to Prime Minister Gandhi reporting that “the Buddha has smiled,” as though to mock the notion that India, as the birthplace of a pacific religion and of an earlier Gandhi who preached nonviolence, was somehow culturally and ethically obliged to deprive itself of the most potent weaponry.

A normally reserved Indian diplomat I knew in Washington at the time could not contain his glee. He reminded me of what the father of the American atomic bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer, had thought when he witnessed the world’s first successful test of an atomic bomb near Alamogordo, New Mexico, in 1945. Watching that spectacle, Oppenheimer recalled a line from a Hindu holy text, the Bhagavad-Gita, in which the warrior Arjuna has a vision of Krishna as a charioteer guiding him into battle:

If the radiance of a thousand suns
Were to burst at once into the sky
That would be like the splendor of the Mighty one . . .
I am become Death,
The shatterer of Worlds.

“You Americans may have expropriated our deity when your scientists broke open this great secret,” said my acquaintance, “but that did not give you a permanent monopoly on morality or on technology.”

Publicly, the Indian government was restrained to the point of subterfuge about what had happened at Pokhran. The event itself was “a peaceful nuclear explosion,” a concept first propounded by U.S. and Soviet scientists who, in the 1950s and 1960s, believed that nuclear explosions could be used for mining and excavation. Although that concept never proved feasible or cost-effective, it provided a handy cover story for the Indians. It was also consistent with the position taken by Indira Gandhi’s father, Nehru, that India would use its nuclear expertise exclusively for peaceful purposes. “There is a difference,” said Mrs. Gandhi, “between a nuclear country and a nuclear *weapons* country; we are *not* a

nuclear weapons country; we don't have any bombs." She later added that India would "keep its options open," but she and her five successors as prime minister resisted pressure from many in the nation's political, scientific, and military elite who believed that India could never attain either full security or the full respect of the world unless it had a truly modern defense capability, and that meant a nuclear weapons program.

LATER IN 1974 I made my first trip to India. There was some irony in the way the opportunity came about. I had been working for three years as a foreign affairs reporter for *Time* but had yet to travel with Kissinger, who was by then President Gerald Ford's secretary of state. In October Kissinger was making a journey that would begin with several days of talks in Moscow. My specialty at *Time* was coverage of the Soviet Union, so the chief diplomatic correspondent, Jerrold Schecter, gave up his seat on Kissinger's Air Force 707 and let me go in his stead.

The Soviet authorities, however, had other ideas. Several months earlier they had labeled me "an unacceptable person" and a "young sprout of the CIA" because I had been the translator and editor of two volumes of memoirs that Nikita Khrushchev dictated into a tape recorder in the last years of his life when he was under virtual house arrest. The Kremlin and KGB, which were furious at the publication of the books in the West, refused me permission to enter the country, even as part of the Kissinger entourage. At the urging of my companions in the airborne press corps, Kissinger appealed the decision while we were en route from Washington to Moscow. When the Russians refused to yield, Kissinger came to the back of the plane and told me that I would have to get off during a refueling stop in Copenhagen. I cut a mournful figure as I hustled down the rear stairs, hastily collected my bags from the hold, and dragged them across the tarmac to the commercial terminal.

From Copenhagen I leapfrogged ahead of Kissinger to what would be his next stop, New Delhi, so that I could join him for the remaining six stops on his itinerary.* I hooked up with Jacques Leslie, a Yale classmate

*Recalled from the vantage point of many years later, the trip has a macabre aspect. Of the foreign leaders Kissinger met, only Leonid Brezhnev died in his own bed and in his own country. All Kissinger's other hosts—Indira Gandhi of India, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of Bangladesh, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan, Mohammed Daud of Afghanistan, the Shah of Iran, and Anwar Sadat of Egypt—were assassinated, executed or, in the case of the Shah, destined to die in exile.

who was the South Asia correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*, and tagged along on a reporting swing he made through several cities and villages. In Agra we toured the Taj Mahal with Elizabeth Moynihan, an expert in Mogul gardens and the wife of the U.S. ambassador, Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

Back in New Delhi, I called on Moynihan himself, who was as intellectually passionate a public figure as I have ever known. He was enthralled by what he saw as the defining strength of Indian civilization: its ability to “absorb synergistically” the culture of outsiders, such as the Moguls, thereby “conquering its conquerors.”

In Delhi I also met Bhagwant and Amarjit Singh and their daughter Geetanjali, the “Indian family” of my wife, Brooke Shearer, who had lived with them in 1968 when traveling in India under the auspices of the Experiment in International Living.*

By the time I rejoined the Kissinger road show, I felt as though I had just taken a crash course in a country that I had not known—and it was all thanks to the Soviets for keeping me out of the country that I had devoted years to studying.

KISSINGER CAME TO New Delhi primarily to consult with Indira Gandhi. Like many American officials during her long tenure as prime minister, he found her hard to take. He complained in his memoirs about “her assumption of almost hereditary moral superiority” and “a disdain for capitalism quite fashionable in developing countries.”⁵

But Kissinger also found in Mrs. Gandhi a steeliness of character and a hardheadedness about the ways of the world with which he could relate. He was a master of *realpolitik* who had attained prominence in the 1950s with a book that explained how the possession of nuclear weaponry could be an effective instrument of a nation’s foreign and security policy and how the balance of terror was a corollary to the balance of power. Briefings that Kissinger gave to reporters who traveled with him to New Delhi suggested that he accepted, and even grudgingly admired, the way Mrs. Gandhi put that theory into practice with the Buddha’s smile test. He said as much to her privately in New Delhi, although with a heavy dose

*Singh (which means lion) is one of the most common Indian names, especially among Sikhs, like Amarjit, Bhagwant, and Geetanjali, but it is also found among Hindus from northern provinces such as Rajasthan, like Jaswant Singh.

of his trademark sarcasm: "Congratulations. You did it, you showed you could build nuclear weapons. You have the bomb. Now what do we do to keep from blowing up the world?"⁶

Implicit in the rhetorical question and the pronoun "we" was the premise that India had joined the United States as one of those countries responsible for keeping the nuclear peace. Kissinger assumed that India would conduct more tests and asked only that they be postponed until after the NPT came up for its periodic review and renewal the following year.

During Kissinger's visit to New Delhi, I attended a speech he gave to the Indian Council of World Affairs. He engaged in none of the finger-wagging his audience expected. Instead, he called for a more "mature" relationship, based on America's recognition of India's preeminence in the region.⁷ Later Kissinger directed that the United States adopt a "basic policy of not pressuring the [Indians] on their nuclear weapons program."⁸

The Indians appreciated Kissinger's reaction to the Buddha's smile test. Twenty-four years later, they wished they had like-minded Americans to deal with when they made the Thar shake again. But even in 1974, Kissinger was in a small minority in Washington who saw a nuclear-capable India as something the United States would just have to get used to. Over his objections, the U.S. Congress insisted on barring international help to India for developing nuclear energy unless the government in New Delhi agreed to place all its nuclear facilities under international inspections.* India refused to do so. Prime Minister Gandhi did indeed consider follow-up tests but decided to let Buddha's smile speak for itself.⁹

THE PAKISTANIS, MEANWHILE, were not waiting passively to see what happened next. Prime Minister Bhutto, a charismatic populist, proclaimed that his people were prepared to "eat grass" if that was what it took to get the bomb. The key figure in the Pakistani program was Abdul Qadeer Khan. Born in the central Indian city of Bhopal, he had been eleven at the time of partition and experienced the full horror of his family's flight to Pakistan. A metallurgist by profession, he was instrumental

*The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act of 1978 precludes U.S. nuclear cooperation or commerce with countries that have not accepted International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards. This feature of American law was later adopted by the multilateral Nuclear Suppliers Group as a precondition for a country's eligibility for nuclear commerce.

in the purchase and theft of European designs for devices to produce weapons-grade uranium at a plant in Kahuta, about thirty miles east of the capital, Islamabad. China, seeing Pakistan as a regional counterbalance to Indian power, provided some help.¹⁰

In putting the Pakistani program into high gear, Bhutto hoped not only to give his country a way of trumping India militarily but also to give himself, as a civilian leader, a way of trumping the political power of the Pakistani army. Instead, the program fell under the control of the military, which was, consequently, emboldened both against India and against Bhutto. He was overthrown in a coup in 1977, then hanged by General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, the chief of the army staff who made himself president.¹¹

PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM complicated and in many ways soured its relationship with the United States. Members of the U.S. Congress, fearing nuclear proliferation in general and an "Islamic bomb" in particular, imposed sanctions on Pakistan. The executive branch, under Republican and Democratic administrations, still saw Pakistan as a bulwark against Soviet expansionism in the region. When the USSR invaded Pakistan's neighbor Afghanistan in December 1979, the administration of Jimmy Carter waived the sanctions and made Pakistan the U.S. base of operations for support of the Islamic guerrillas who were fighting the Soviets.

The U.S.-backed resistance of the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan was the last battle of the cold war and, as it turned out, the terminal debacle of the USSR. While that proxy war was under way, it confirmed Pakistan's value to the United States. Ronald Reagan offered Pakistan a multibillion-dollar package of economic and military assistance, including F-16 fighters. Congress reluctantly went along.

In 1985 the State Department, in an effort to protect U.S. relations with Pakistan, persuaded Senator Larry Pressler, a Republican from South Dakota, to sponsor legislation allowing foreign assistance to go forward as long as the president could certify annually that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear explosive device. Pressler turned out to be less pliable than the administration hoped, and the amendment that bore his name became a means for nonproliferation advocates in Congress to put

pressure on both the State Department and Pakistan. Officials of the Reagan and first Bush administrations had to engage in increasingly elaborate casuistry to exempt Pakistan from sanctions. American intelligence analysts, who were convinced that Pakistan had everything it took to make the bomb, felt under pressure from their political masters to give the Pakistanis the benefit of an almost nonexistent doubt. Holding their noses, they stopped short of concluding that Pakistan had completed the fabrication and assembly of a nuclear device.

The Pakistanis, however, made it increasingly hard for the United States to practice denial on their behalf. In 1987, at a time of increased military tensions between India and Pakistan, with 370,000 troops squared off against each other along the border, President Zia told *Time*, "Pakistan has the capability of building the bomb. You can write today that Pakistan can build a bomb whenever it wishes. Once you have acquired the technology, which Pakistan has, you can do whatever you like."¹²

The following year, American monitoring of the program Zia was boasting about compelled President Reagan to issue a public warning that future U.S. military sales to Pakistan would become "difficult or impossible." He was yielding not just to the facts but to the waning of the geopolitical justification for the tilt toward Pakistan, since the Soviet Union was in the early phases of withdrawing from Afghanistan and, as it turned out, from the stage of history.

THAT SAME YEAR, 1987, India took another step away from playing coy about its own nuclear capability. Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister, having succeeded his mother after she was gunned down by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984 in reprisal for her use of force to end a siege by Sikh militants in Amritsar. Rajiv Gandhi conducted a personal campaign on behalf of global nuclear disarmament, most dramatically in an address to the United Nations in June 1988. He attached a deadline to India's original position on the NPT: if the nuclear weapons powers would promise to eliminate their arsenals by 2010, India would give up the option of becoming a nuclear weapons state that his mother had left open. The unstated but unmistakable implication was that if the United States and the other nuclear weapons states did not move toward real disarmament, India might conclude it had not just the right but the need to join their ranks.

To make sure that that option was available to his successors, Rajiv Gandhi secretly ordered a series of steps that would enable India to manufacture the components for a bomb that could be tested at Pokhran.

His premiership was plagued by financial scandals, and he was voted out of office in 1989, although he remained head of the Congress Party. In 1991 he was assassinated by a suicide bomber connected with a Sri Lankan Tamil separatist movement—the third Indian political leader (and the third named Gandhi) to fall victim to the dark side of the region’s kaleidoscopic diversity.*

IN 1989 AND 1990, after almost two decades of relative calm, Kashmir suffered renewed unrest, partly because many in the local population still seethed with resentment against New Delhi after Indira Gandhi’s government had flagrantly manipulated state elections. Homegrown secessionists took inspiration from the disintegration of the USSR. Islamist freedom fighters who had succeeded in driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan turned their attention to the liberation of Kashmir. They did so with the support of the Pakistani intelligence services. Benazir Bhutto, the prime minister of Pakistan at the time (and the daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto), vowed a “thousand-year war” in support of Kashmiri Muslims bent on driving out the Indian “occupiers.”

During this upsurge in trouble, the United States saw an alarming buildup of conventional forces and training exercises on both sides of the Line of Control. There was evidence that the Pakistani military might have assembled one or more nuclear weapons and might even be preparing them for use.¹³

President Bush dispatched his deputy national security adviser, Robert Gates, and Richard Haass of the NSC staff to the region. They secured a Pakistani promise to shut down training camps for insurgents who had been infiltrating Kashmir and carrying out acts of terrorism, and India agreed to “confidence-building measures” that were intended to reduce the danger of a border incident getting out of control.

This discreet and successful intervention did not earn much gratitude from New Delhi at the time. The Indians had little doubt that the

*The Tamils, while Hindu, are a distinct ethnic and language group that makes up a majority in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu and significant minorities in Sri Lanka as well as the Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh.

Pakistanis would soon resume infiltration—which in fact happened. The Indians also wanted to squelch any suggestion that the Kashmir dispute had been “internationalized” (that is, mediated), lest other would-be peace brokers might someday think they could step in and insist on allowing Kashmir’s Muslim majority to join Pakistan or gain independence. Years later, however, the Gates-Haass mission of May 1990 came to be recognized in India as an example of the right kind of quiet American diplomatic assistance and therefore a potential precedent for how the United States might help in future crises.¹⁴

BY OCTOBER 1990 the Pakistanis’ covert nuclear program had advanced to the point that Bush could no longer certify to Congress that they did not possess an explosive device. He also had less reason to try, now that the Soviets had given up in Afghanistan, and Eastern Europe was breaking free of Moscow’s control. The Pressler amendment required the United States to cancel further economic and military assistance to Pakistan and stop the remaining shipment of twenty-eight of the F-16s for which the Pakistanis had already partially paid. Feeling cheated and abandoned by the United States, and also concerned about the efficacy of their deterrent, the Pakistanis stepped up their efforts to find another means of signaling their determination to stand up to India.

The arms race on the subcontinent moved into yet another lane: a competition over the acquisition of ballistic missiles.

India already had a rocketry program, masterminded by the aeronautical engineer A. P. J. Abdul Kalam. As head of the Indian Defense Research and Development Organization, he was heavily involved in the development of nuclear weaponry as well. By the end of the first Bush administration, India had two missiles in the testing stage. One, the medium-range Agni, was named for the Hindu god of fire, while the other was a short-range missile called Prithvi, which means earth. As “delivery vehicles” for nuclear weapons, these rockets would be able to reach targets in Pakistan much more quickly than India’s French Mirage and Soviet Sukhoi-30 fighter-bombers—and without the risk of being intercepted or shot down en route by Pakistani anti-aircraft defenses.

The Pakistanis did not have an indigenous missile program, but in the early 1990s they acquired the short-range M-11 from China. Then, in 1998, they got the medium-range No Dong from North Korea and

renamed it the Ghauri, after a twelfth-century Muslim leader who had stormed the Hindu lands to the south and defeated a ruler of Delhi named Prithviraj Chauhan. Pakistan's other two missiles, the Abdali and Shaheen, were also named after Muslim warriors who had invaded India.

Thus, even the nomenclature of the weaponry accumulating in South Asia kept alive, on both sides, vengeful and largely mythologized memories from nine centuries earlier.