

**May 18, 1974**

**US Embassy India Cable 6598 to State Department,  
'India's Nuclear Explosion: Why Now?'**

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<https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/113911>

**Summary:**

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."

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**Contents:**

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INFO AMEMBASSY LONDON IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T NEW DELHI 6598

LIMDIS

LONDON FOR MOYNIHAN

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: MCAP, PARM, TECH, PINT, IN

SUBJECT: INDIA'S NUCLEAR EXPLOSION: WHY NOW?

1. INDIA HAS EXPLODED A NUCLEAR DEVICE AT A TIME WHEN INDIA IS IN DEEP ECONOMIC DIFFICULTY AND THE GOVERNMENT IS CONTENDING WITH A RISING TIDE OF DISILLUSIONMENT AND DISCONTENT. CORRUPTION, MISMANAGEMENT, LABOR INDISCIPLINE, RAMPANT INFLATION, FOOD SHORTAGES, AND THE IMPACT OF THE HIGH COST OF CRUDE HAVE LED TO DISMAL ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE AND SEVERE POLITICAL UNREST. THE TURMOIL EARLIER THIS YEAR IN GUJARAT AND THEN BIHAR, SCATTERED SMALL-SCALE VIOLENCE, AND THE CURRENT RAIL STRIKE HAVE CONFRONTED THE GOVERNMENT WITH A SERIES OF CRISES IN MAINTAINING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DISCIPLINE.

2. WE ARE INCLINED TO BELIEVE THAT THIS GENERAL DOMESTIC GLOOM AND UNCERTAINTY WEIGHED SIGNIFICANTLY IN THE BALANCE OF INDIA'S NUCLEAR DECISION. THE NEED FOR A PSYCHOLOGICAL BOOST, THE HOPE OF RECREATING THE ATMOSPHERE OF EXHILARATION AND NATION-SECRET

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ALISM THAT SWEEPED THE COUNTRY AFTER 1971--CONTRARY TO OUR EARLIER

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EXPECTATION--MAY HAVE TIPPED THE SCALES.

3. INTERNATIONALLY, INDIA IN RECENT YEAR HAS FELT IT HAD BEEN RELEGATED TO THE SIDELINES WITH ITS SIGNIFICANCE IGNORED AND ITS POTENTIAL ROLE DOWNPLAYED. THE FEELING THAT IT NEEDED TO DEMONSTRATE ITS NUCLEAR CAPABILITY IN ORDER TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY MAY ALSO HAVE BEEN A PSYCHOLOGICAL ELEMENT IN ITS DECISION.

4. THE SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION OF INDIA'S TRIPARTITE NEGOTIATIONS WITH PAKISTAN AND BANGLADESH IN EARLY APRIL MAY HAVE INFLUENCED THE TIMING OF THE EXPLOSION. INDIA PROBABLY WANTED TO WIND UP THIS PHASE OF CLEARING UP THE PROBLEMS FROM 1971 BEFORE MOVING AHEAD WITH AN ACTION WHICH WAS CERTAIN TO UPSET ITS RELATIONS WITH PAKISTAN.

5. WE ARE AWARE OF NO RECENT MILITARY PRESSURE OF THE GOVERNMENT TO GO NUCLEAR.

6. THERE HAS BEEN, HOWEVER, NO RECENT DOMESTIC POLITICAL PRESSURE FOR INDIA TO GO NUCLEAR. IN FACT, THIS ISSUE HAS BEEN RELATIVELY QUIESCENT DURING THE PAST YEAR. RIGHTWING NATIONALIST JANA SANGH MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT HAVE PRESSED THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT FROM TIME TO TIME, AS THEY HAVE IN PAST YEARS, ABOUT LAGGING PROGRESS IN THE NUCLEAR FIELD AND ABOUT WHY THE GOVERNMENT WAS NOT TAKING STEPS TO ACQUIRE A NUCLEAR CAPABILITY. BUT THESE OCCASIONAL SALLIES WERE ANSWERED BY STANDARD POLICY STATEMENTS THAT THE GOVERNMENT WAS INVESTIGATING THE POSSIBILITIES OF "PEACEFUL" NUCLEAR EXPLOSIONS AND THAT INDIA WOULD USE ATOMIC ENERGY ONLY FOR PEACEFUL PURPOSES. WITH A LARGE CONGRESS MAJORITY IN PARLIAMENT PRESSURE FROM THE FEW VOCAL RIGHT-WINGERS COULD BE CONTAINED.

7. AT THIS STAGE WE DO NOT KNOW WHEN INDIA'S DECISION TO EXPLODE A NUCLEAR DEVICE WAS TAKEN. NOR DO WE KNOW EXACTLY HOW THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION, DOMESTIC CONSIDERATIONS, AND TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS INFLUENCED THE TIMING OF EXPLOSION. IT SEEMS CLEAR, HOWEVER, THAT THE DECISION WAS TAKEN BY MRS. GANDHI, THAT IT WAS SUPPORTED OR ACCEPTED BY THOSE OF HER ASSOCIATES THAT KNEW OF THE DECISION, AND THAT THE INDIAN LEADERSHIP BELIEVED THE SECRET

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DECISION WOULD REDOUND TO THEIR CREDIT DOMESTICALLY.

8. WE BELIEVE THAT THE DECISION WILL APPEAL TO NATIONALIST FEELING AND WILL BE WIDELY WELCOMED BY THE INDIAN POPULACE. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN TO WHAT EXTENT THE GOVERNMENT WILL SUCCEED IN TRANSLATING THIS FEELING INTO TANGIBLE POLITICAL RETURNS. GOVERNMENT WILL ALSO BE TEMPTED TO SEIZE ON INTERNATIONAL BACKLASH, CONDEMNATION AND RETRIBUTION TO APPEAL FOR ITS OWN

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DOMESTIC PURPOSES TO CHAUVINIST FEELING AT HOME. THE PICTURE  
OF A GOVERNMENT EMBATTLED AND STANDING UP TO FOREIGN ABUSE  
COULD BE QUITE USEFUL TO THE INDIAN LEADERSHIP TODAY.

9. DEPARTMENT REPEAT AS DESIRED. SCHNEIDER

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