

October 31, 1974

Memorandum, Hungarian Foreign Ministry, on India's Policy on Nuclear Disarmament

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Summary:

An extended Hungarian Foreign Ministry memorandum explicating the development of India's policy on nuclear arms and disarmament from the 1960s as well as a discussion on the reasons that the socialist countries--including Hungary--have chosen not to condemn India for its May 1974 nuclear explosion.

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The approval of steps which were aimed at strengthening international peace and security, such as measures aimed at curtailing the arms race and furthering universal and complete disarmament, always constituted a major component of India's foreign policy. This is why it was a surprise that from the mid-1960s, India adopted a negative standpoint on the issues of nuclear disarmament. It was still one of the first countries to sign and ratify the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty, but since then it has stayed away from every effort aimed at disarmament. India's conduct can be explained from two sides: Partly from the outside, primarily by the perceived threat from China, and partly from the inside, by [India's] big power aspirations; the independent nuclear development program is an important manifestation of these [aspirations]. Some research in nuclear physics had been done in India as early as the aftermath of the Second World War, but the real impetus was given by the Chinese test explosion carried out at Lop Nor on 16 October 1964. In 1967, while the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was being drafted in the Disarmament Commission in Geneva, the representative of India already firmly defied the majority. Of course, in principle they did not oppose the treaty aimed at preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, but by maintaining their right to conduct nuclear experiments for peaceful purposes, they practically rejected the whole of it. Recently they referred precisely to that declaration when they asserted that as early as 1967, at the public forum of Geneva, they had announced their intention to carry out underground test explosions for peaceful purposes. India's first nuclear test explosion took place in Pokhran, on 18 May 1974. While the Indian standpoint summarized above was well known, the test nevertheless caused immense surprise and a great stir all over the world. The Indian government was quick to reassure world public opinion that the test had served solely peaceful purposes, and that India did not intend to launch a nuclear weapons program. To the most directly affected – and thus the most vividly reacting – side, the Pakistani government, Premier Indira Gandhi sent a letter, in which she reaffirmed that the test had served solely peaceful purposes, as early as May 20. Despite these declarations, a very high number of countries expressed their disapproval in a more or less open form. For the socialist countries, including us, it was a rather difficult task [to deal with] this problem, since we did not want to condemn India, nor could we stand up for it without setting ourselves against our own standpoint. For a long time, we have propagated, and we still profess, that there is no essential difference between the nuclear explosive devices which serve military or peaceful purposes, and it depends solely on the manufacturer or possessor of the device to decide which purpose he will use it for. For this very reason, we adopted the standpoint of refraining from expressing our opinion, which was duly appreciated by the Indian leadership. (On several occasions, they said thanks to us for our “expressive silence.”) While, at various domestic and international forums, the representatives of India rose to the defense not only of their first test explosion but also of their right to proceed with their nuclear program, they also unambiguously declared that this first test would be followed by additional ones. In the current period of “energy crisis,” the programs aimed at harnessing nuclear energy are more and more favorably received [by public opinion], and this undoubtedly plays into India's hands. For instance, during the current debate over disarmament in the UN General Assembly, India does encounter criticism, but to a lesser extent than expected and in a considerably muffled voice. Instead, an increasing number [of countries] emphasize the growing importance of harnessing atomic energy, including the importance of peaceful nuclear explosions. Ferenc Gajda