

August 2, 1963

Letter, Homi Bhabhi to Jawaharlal Nehru

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Summary:

Homi Bhabha writes to Prime Minister Nehru to convey that the Chinese nuclear test will be of no military significance and Chinese possession of a few bombs will not make any difference to the military situation. In order to counter the Chinese bomb's psychological-political impact, Dr. Bhabha argues that India needs to be in a position to produce the bomb within few months.

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Transcript - English

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GOVERNMENT OF INDIA ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION

SECRET

Chairman

Ref: 5-12463

August 2, 1963

My dear Bhai,

Thank you for your letter of July 26, sending me an extract from Edgar Snow's book "The other side of the River". I have read this extract with great interest.

2. I note that while the General Electric Company and several other sources have thought that China might explode a nuclear device in 1963, Snow himself estimates that China will not successfully carry out a nuclear test before 1964- or 1965, and that the attainment of abundance or nuclear bombs may only be achieved in 1967 or 1968.

3. Snow also expresses views which I have myself expressed to you on several occasions. The nuclear test by China will be of no military significance, and even the possession of a few bombs will not make any difference to the military situation, since, if China were to use one against any neighbouring country, it would, I am sure, call forth very strong action from the Western side, and in particular the United States. In the event of such action precipitated by an aggressive act by China, I do not think that even the Soviet Union would come to China's aid and precipitate a global war, in which it itself would suffer severe destruction. However, Snow quite rightly points out that "In this perspective the psychological-political impact of a China-made nuclear device would be incalculably great. It would mean for the first time an Asian Communist vote, a colored vote, a poor-man's vote, and an end of the white man's monopoly of the Terror and of its use as a threat against China or her allies." It is this psychological-political impact that we have to be prepared to counter. I am inclined to the view that the only way that this can be done at present is for us to show that, should China explode such a device, we are in a position to do so within a few months thereafter. This implies that we should sign the Test Ban Treaty immediately to show our bona-fides and our intention not to make an atomic weapon, but we should sign it while making clear that, should any neighbouring country explode a nuclear device, we would consider ourselves free to review the decision. I am inclined to think that such a declaration might even be welcomed by the USA and USSR, since its effect, if any, would be to stop any neighbour who might be inclined to go in for nuclear weapons on the ground that India was developing them for exploding a nuclear device, knowing that we would not do so unless they did. Whether our signing the Test Ban Treaty with such a declaration would have this effect on China is doubtful, but in any case it is not an unreasonable position for us to take, since the only effect of such a position would be to thwart rather than encourage other countries from going in for nuclear weapons.

4. If China does not desist from making a test, and proceeds to a regular production of nuclear weapons, then a new situation will arise, as Snow has pointed out, by 1907 or 1968. At that stage the balance of power in Asia will definitely shift in favour of China, if we have no nuclear capability by then. For while China would not dare to attack any country having a nuclear capability like the United States or USSR, it could well attack a country without such capability, say, in Asia, knowing that in such an event American nuclear capability would not be used against China for fear or retaliation. Although the destruction of China would be vastly more severe than the destruction of America, nevertheless the wounds inflicted on America itself would be no severe as to deter such an action on America's part. In other words, China would be in a position, as USSR is today, to take up what is known as the "posture of the minimum nuclear deterrent". This can only be countered by the country liable to be so attacked, as for example India, itself possessing a minimum nuclear deterrent.

5. I will have this matter considered by the Commission and let you have a formal note on the subject. Having signified our willingness to sign the Test Ban Treaty, I presume our actual signature will not be affixed for some time, long enough to have all these points carefully examine. I hope I shall have an opportunity of discussing this matter with you before we sign the treaty.

Yours affectionately
Sd. Homi Bhabhi

Shri Jawaharlal Nehru,
Prime Minister,
New Delhi,