

**The Strategy of Virtue:
Explaining Ambiguity in India's
Post-Pokhran Nuclear Policy**

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Abstract

India's 1974 nuclear test at Pokhran marked the onset of a prolonged and anomalous period of nuclear restraint, during which technical capability and overt weaponization were deliberately decoupled. Despite possessing the capacity to produce nuclear weapons, India maintained strategic ambiguity for over two decades while consistently articulating a normative commitment to global nuclear disarmament. This article explains this puzzle by conceptualizing India's post-Pokhran nuclear posture as a strategy of virtue, a deliberate dual-track approach that paired latent nuclear capability with sustained normative statecraft. Challenging realist and liberal-institutionalist accounts, the study develops a Three-Level Dual-Track Framework that integrates domestic political contestation between pro-bomb and anti-bomb coalitions, a constitutive postcolonial normative identity, and shifting international structural constraints. Through a phased historical analysis (1975–1982; 1983–1998), the article shows that ambiguity functioned as a coherent grand strategy to preserve autonomy, manage structural asymmetry, and buy time in an unfavorable strategic environment. The 1998 nuclear tests are interpreted not as a rupture but as the culmination of this long strategy, triggered by structural pressures and a decisive domestic political shift. The article contributes to nuclear studies by integrating ethics, identity, and domestic politics into explanations of proliferation outcomes traditionally anchored in security-centric explanations.

Keywords: India's nuclear policy, strategic ambiguity, moral high ground, nuclear deterrence, disarmament

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