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September 21, 1972
Memorandum of Conversation, 'Indian Nuclear Developments'

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Summary:

A meeting between British Foreign Office and State Department officials on the Indian nuclear problem occurred the same month that Indian Prime Minister Gandhi approved the “final preparations for a PNE.” Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Christopher T. Van Hollen (the father of the future Maryland Congressman) and his colleagues followed the approach taken by the Special National Intelligence Estimate, which was close to that taken by the British Joint Intelligence Committee. According to country director David Schneider, the “odds were about even” that India would make a decision, but once it was made, India could test very quickly. There was “no firm intelligence” that a “go-ahead signal” to prepare for a test had been made. Schneider reviewed bilateral and multilateral steps, proposed in the NSSM 156 study, that the U.S. and others could take to try to discourage an Indian test and the range of reactions that would be available if India went ahead. A “weak” U.S. reaction, Schneider observed, would suggest that Washington would “acquiesce” if other countries followed India’s example.

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: Sept. 21, 1972

9/21/72

SUBJECT: Indian Nuclear Developments

PARTICIPANTS: Sir Eric Norris, Deputy Under Secretary, Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Mr. Iain Sutherland, Head of South Asia Department, FCO
Mr. Bill Squire, Head of Southeast Asia Department, FCO
Mr. John Moberly, Political Counselor, British Embassy
Mr. John Boyd, First Secretary, British Embassy

Mr. Christopher Van Hollen, Deputy Assistant Secretary, NEA
David T. Schneider, Country Director, NEA/INC
L. Bruce Laingen, Country Director, NEA/PAB
Thomas Thornton, S/PC
Douglas Cochran, NEA/PAB
Dennis Kux, NEA/INC

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Mr. Van Hollen explained that interest in Indian nuclear developments, in particular, the possibility that India might shortly conduct an underground nuclear test, had been stirred by a variety of intelligence reports over recent months. In this regard, we much appreciated the UK Joint Intelligence Committee report we received in late Spring on Indian capabilities and intentions.

We had now conducted our own assessment. The conclusions were very similar to those reached by the British.

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The Indians had the capability of conducting a nuclear test on relatively short notice, once the political leadership had given a go-ahead signal. We had, however, no firm intelligence that such a decision had been made. Mr. Schneider added that we had also concluded that the odds were about even that over the course of the next several years the Indians would decide to explode a device. On the other hand, there was no firm evidence that they were proceeding with the more complex and far more expensive task of developing a missile delivery capability.

Mr. Schneider continued that since we had a general identity of views on the capability/intentions question, it might be useful to consider possible steps, both before and after an Indian test, that should be taken. We had done some thinking in this regard and wanted to present some ideas for the British to consider. Assuming the British were interested, we might discuss the British reaction to these and whatever ideas the British had at some later time. On such an occasion, it would be useful to have officials who specialized in nuclear matters participating in the talks.

Mr. Schneider elaborated a number of possible bilateral and multilateral steps the U.S. might take to maintain India on a non-nuclear path. On the bilateral side, these included continued stressing of USG concern about proliferation, pointing out the potential damage to US-Indian technical cooperation should India commence testing, stimulating discussion among Indian scientists regarding the high costs and limited return of developing a credible nuclear force, and maintaining and possibly expanding, US-Indian scientific cooperation to help channel Indian attention toward peaceful scientific applications. Mr. Schneider noted that the likely effectiveness of the US effort would perforce reflect the state of our bilateral relations.

On the multilateral side, we had in the past talked with the UK, Japan and Canada and thought we might extend our discussions to the French. We found these talks helpful and believed other countries had taken steps similar to our own, vis-a-vis India. We now thought it might be useful to talk with the Soviets in view

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of their position of influence with the Indians and, possibly, the Chinese. We could also maintain our efforts in the IAEA to gain broader international acceptance of the view that the technology of peaceful and military explosions could not be distinguished.

After an explosion, Mr. Schneider said, the problem we would face would be quite different. In determining how we would respond to Indian testing, we would be weighing the damage we would cause to our position in India with the potential gains in the non-proliferation field. While other near-nuclears would decide their nuclear policy on the basis of their own assessment of their national security interests, a very weak US response to an Indian explosion could suggest that the US would be likely to acquiesce if they too followed India in joining the nuclear club. The array of choices would thus range from relatively mild expressions of disapproval at the one extreme to a major effort to penalize India through reduced economic as well as scientific assistance at the other extreme.

Sir Eric Norris expressed interest in the exposition and said the British would take a further look into the question in light of the US comments. In the past, he added, the British had sought to dissuade the Indian political leadership. For the present, they were taking advantage of opportunities that arose to point out to Indian scientists and technical people the high costs of a nuclear decision.

Sir Eric continued that the British also wondered about a possible loss of efficiency in the Indian nuclear and space establishment following the death of Sarabhai last year. It was the UK impression that some of the steam had gone out of the Indian effort with Sarabhai's passing. Mr. Sutherland commented that even if the Indian program was somewhat less effective, the British assessment expressed in the Joint Intelligence Committee report still stood. The Indians could relatively quickly detonate a nuclear device.

Sir Eric turned briefly to the possibility of Soviet action. He thought it was probably correct that the Soviets opposed Indian nuclear aspirations, but wondered how far the Soviets would be willing to go in pressing the Indians against testing. Mr. Van Hollen said we shared this view, although we

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felt it worthwhile to consider an approach to the Soviets as this could cause little harm and some possible good. Mr. Van Hollen concluded by re-iterating our interest in the UK reaction to possible measures that might be taken both before and after an Indian test.