

July 1974

Intelligence Community Staff, Post Mortem Report, 'An Examination of the Intelligence Community's Performance Before the Indian Nuclear Test of May 1974'

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Summary:

This partial release of the July 1974 post-mortem investigation analyzes why the CIA and its sister agencies failed to predict the 1974 Indian nuclear test. Two problems were especially important: 1) the lack of priority given to the Indian nuclear program for intelligence collection (further confirmed by the January 1972 INR report), and 2) the lack of communication between intelligence producers (analysts and estimators) and intelligence collectors (spies, NRO, etc.). The low priority meant that intelligence production "fell off" during the 20 months before the test (from October 1972 to May 1974). Moreover, there may have been a lack of communication between producers, with the "other guy" assuming that someone else was "primarily responsible for producing hard evidence of Indian intentions." Trying to explain the lack of follow-up on relevant "raw intelligence," e.g. Pinjanians's surmises about the Indian nuclear program, the post-mortem saw no "sense of urgency" in the intelligence community, which may have "reflected the attitudes of the policymakers." Another problem was that the intelligence community focused more on "capabilities" than on "intentions," which implicitly raised the difficult issue of breaching the nuclear establishment or Indira Gandhi's small circle of decision-making. The substantive discussion of satellite photography has been excised, but the recommendations were left intact, including the point that "The failure of production elements to ask NPIC [National Photographic Intelligence Center] to exploit photography that had been specifically requested from the National Reconnaissance Office suggests a weakness in the imagery requirements system." The implication was that NRO satellites had imagery of the Thar Desert that could have been scrutinized for suspect activity, but no one asked NPIC to look into it.

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POST-MORTEM REPORT

*An Examination of the Intelligence Community's
Performance Before the Indian Nuclear Test of May 1974*

A Study Produced Under Intelligence Community Staff Auspices
for the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

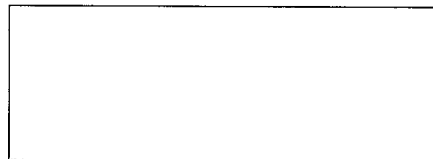
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POST-MORTEM REPORT

An Examination of the Intelligence Community's
Performance Before the Indian Nuclear Test of May 1974

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. In the months prior to India's 18 May nuclear test, the intelligence community failed to warn US decision makers that such a test was being planned. This failure denied the US Government the option of considering diplomatic or other initiatives to try to prevent this significant step in nuclear proliferation.

2. The intelligence community had long known that India was capable of producing and testing a nuclear device. It had also estimated as far back as 1965 that India would "in the next few years" detonate a nuclear device. Its inability to predict the actual event was due essentially to two factors: inadequate priority against an admittedly difficult target, and lack of adequate communications among those elements of the community, both collectors and producers, whose combined talents were essential to resolving the problem.

3. [redacted]

[redacted] But [redacted] production, which had been of considerable value up to 1972, fell sharply in the 20 months before the test. The few reports which did provide indications of Indian intentions were given scant attention by the production analysts and were inadequately followed up by the collectors. Compounding this lack of priority was the general assumption by [redacted] collectors that the other guy was primarily responsible for producing hard evidence of Indian intentions.

4. The proper collection strategy against the nuclear proliferation target will necessarily differ from one nth country to another. It can be determined only by integrated analysis conducted by representatives of all collection modes and by both technical and political analysts. Once determined, it must be reviewed and reinforced by continuing close communications among all concerned.

5. Most importantly, success against the nth country intelligence problem will require that the community accord it a higher priority than it has received to date.

6. Specific recommendations are provided in paragraphs 34-38.

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IC STAFF POST-MORTEM REPORT

An Examination of the Intelligence Community's
Performance Before the Indian Nuclear Test of May 1974

I. THE TEST

1. India's first nuclear test of 18 May 1974 was a very simple affair. Only a small number of people were actually involved, perhaps only a handful of technicians and government officials. There was little instrumentation. And, [redacted] the site is simplicity itself. [redacted]

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II. INTELLIGENCE PRODUCTION PRIOR TO THE EVENT

Estimates

2. For nearly a decade, the intelligence community has believed that the Indians were producing enough plutonium of weapons grade to build a nuclear device any time they decided to do so. In 1965, Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 31-1-65, "India's Nuclear Weapons Policy," stated that "we believe that within the next few years India probably will detonate a nuclear device and proceed to develop nuclear weapons." This judgment, though premature, was the strongest statement ever made by the community concerning India's nuclear intentions.

3. SNIE 31-72, "Indian Nuclear Developments and Their Likely Implications," published in early August 1972, provides the community's most recent, full-scale treatment of the issue.* A reading of SNIE 31-72, particularly in light of the actual Indian test, reveals the validity of several major judgments: "If India does conduct a test, it would almost certainly be conducted underground and probably will be secretly ordered and prepared." The estimate also made a prediction about the capability of intelligence to provide advance warning: since only a relatively small number of people need be involved in a test, and since "security could be very tight . . . a test could come as a surprise, both to most Indians and to the outside world." That, indeed, was what happened.

4. But SNIE 31-72 was less definitive in other respects. It gave India the capability "of detonating a nuclear device within a few days to a year of a decision to do so," but it qualifies this judgment with a trailing parenthetical sentence: "(Actual time required would depend on how far preliminary work had gone, and there is at present insufficient evidence on this question.)"

5. The problem seems to have been that, while the intelligence community knew that India was continuing to produce and stockpile weapons grade plutonium, there was no hard evidence that Indian scientists had actually embarked on a program to develop an explosive nuclear device. But there was [redacted] intelligence which pointed in this direction. Indeed, SNIE 31-72 was written primarily in response to a spate of [redacted]

[redacted] during late 1971 and well into 1972. Of the [redacted] relevant reports received during this period, all but four indicated either that India would soon test a device or that, while the government had not yet made a decision, India was already technologically prepared to do so. Thus, with the intelligence at hand during mid-1972,

*This SNIE was part of the effort undertaken in connection with NSSM 156. Action on the latter was completed and forwarded to the Under Secretaries' Committee in September 1972. NIAM 31-73, "India's Likely International Role and Its Implications for the United States," dated 3 October 1973, has four paragraphs dedicated to "The Issue of Indian Nuclear Weapons," but they represent a summary drawn from SNIE 31-72.

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the community could have been braver and provided a more explicit estimate of just where Indian capabilities stood between "a few days and a year."

6. SNIE 31-72 highlighted the fact that politics and not technology would determine India's future nuclear course. But it was far less bold in estimating India's likely intentions than its predecessor in 1965. It states in its conclusions: "The chances are roughly even that India will conduct a [nuclear] test at some time in the next several years and label it a peaceful explosion." But, surprisingly, the arguments which the paper cites as favoring a test are longer and stronger and more persuasive (even without benefit of hindsight) than those which suggest the contrary. The odds thus do not really seem "roughly even" but more on the order of 60-40 for.

7. After citing several factors which would weigh against a test, the estimate concludes that "most of the arguments against . . . have to do with foreign reactions, and these are becoming of less importance to India." In contrast, the estimate counts as "the strongest factors impelling India to set off a test" the Indians' belief that "it would build up their international prestige; demonstrate India's importance as an Asian power; overawe its immediate South Asian neighbors; and bring enhanced popularity and public support to the regime which achieved it." [redacted]

[redacted] Further, "India will never forgo the option; at any given moment, the decision will not be between 'no' versus 'yes' but between 'yes' versus 'not now.'"

Current Intelligence

8. Current intelligence publications did not provide any warning of India's underground nuclear test. [redacted] (in the DIA INTSUM of 23 January 1974) treated Indian nuclear weapons [redacted]

[redacted] This piece did not provide warning of an impending Indian nuclear test, but it stated for the first time in a national-level intelligence publication that India might already have a nuclear device on the shelf.*

9. The DIA article, entitled, "India: A nuclear weapons program will not likely be pursued in the near term," drew on an Embassy New Delhi assessment of "India's Nuclear Intentions," dated 19 January 1974. But there was an important substantive difference between the DIA piece and the State cable. The latter expressed an Embassy opinion that India probably would not test a *device* in the short-term.** DIA did not make a judgment on that issue. What it did say

*DIA has stated this since 1971 in reports limited to distribution within the JCS. The last such report was dated March 1974.

**This assessment was made despite the Embassy's admission that it knew "little about relevant internal government debate on nuclear weapons and test policies—or even if the issue is currently active."

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is that Indian officials had claimed in 1973 that for a variety of reasons—high cost, reduced security threat, and “psychological opposition”—the government was not planning to develop nuclear *weapons*. But the article also pointed out that India had left its options open by not signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty and that Prime Minister Gandhi (in November 1973) had not ruled out “peaceful underground explosions.” Finally, the article stated, “[India] may already possess . . . a nuclear explosive.”

10. This certainly did not constitute warning of an impending test. It did, however, call attention to the rhetorical distinction between nuclear weapons development and a so-called peaceful nuclear explosion, and noted that, while publicly abjuring the former option, the Indians had left open the latter.* Unfortunately, the intelligence community appeared not to have focused on this important distinction, but rather accepted uncritically the New Delhi Embassy's assessment which downgraded the possibility that India would explode a nuclear device.

*This observation was not novel to the intelligence community. Several years earlier in the *Central Intelligence Bulletin* of 24 December 1971, CIA called attention to this rhetorical distinction.

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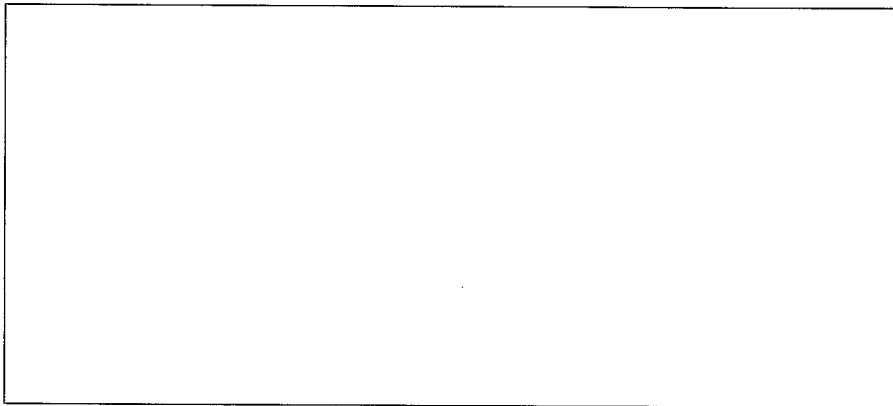
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III. COLLECTION AND REQUIREMENTS

11. Little raw intelligence traffic dealt with the Indian nuclear question in the year or so before the test. The heavy [redacted] reporting on the subject during 1972 dropped to a trickle in 1973. And, oddly enough, there seemed to be no urgency concerning the question after the publication of SNIE 31-72 in August 1972. This was the case despite the estimate's clear identification of certain key intelligence gaps—e.g., concerning how far India had gone in developing a device and what people (other than Indira Gandhi) would be politically and technically involved in a test program. With the exception of a [redacted] [redacted] program, no special efforts seem to have been made in the intelligence community to examine or collect against these gaps.* There was no real follow up, moreover, on the meager information which was collected during the period.

[redacted]

12. Between August 1972 and the event in May, there were [redacted] reports of note (other than the January New Delhi cable referred to above) on the subject of India's nuclear intentions. [redacted] The first was a cable from the American Consulate in Bombay, dated 4 April 1973, which summarized the opinion of Dr. Pinajian, the AEC Science Representative in India at that time. After being promised and then denied access to both the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Trombay, Pinajian decided that the Indians were hiding something. He knew they were "doing extensive work in the field of plutonium" and learned from his sources in Trombay that it was highly compartmented. Since Pinajian believed that both the Tata and the Bhabha research complexes were likely sites for the development of a device, he concluded that the government of India "could very well be working on a nuclear device to demonstrate peaceful applications in the not too distant future. . . ." Summary comments made by the Consul stated that Pinajian's conclusions were "subjective and impressionistic" but also logical.

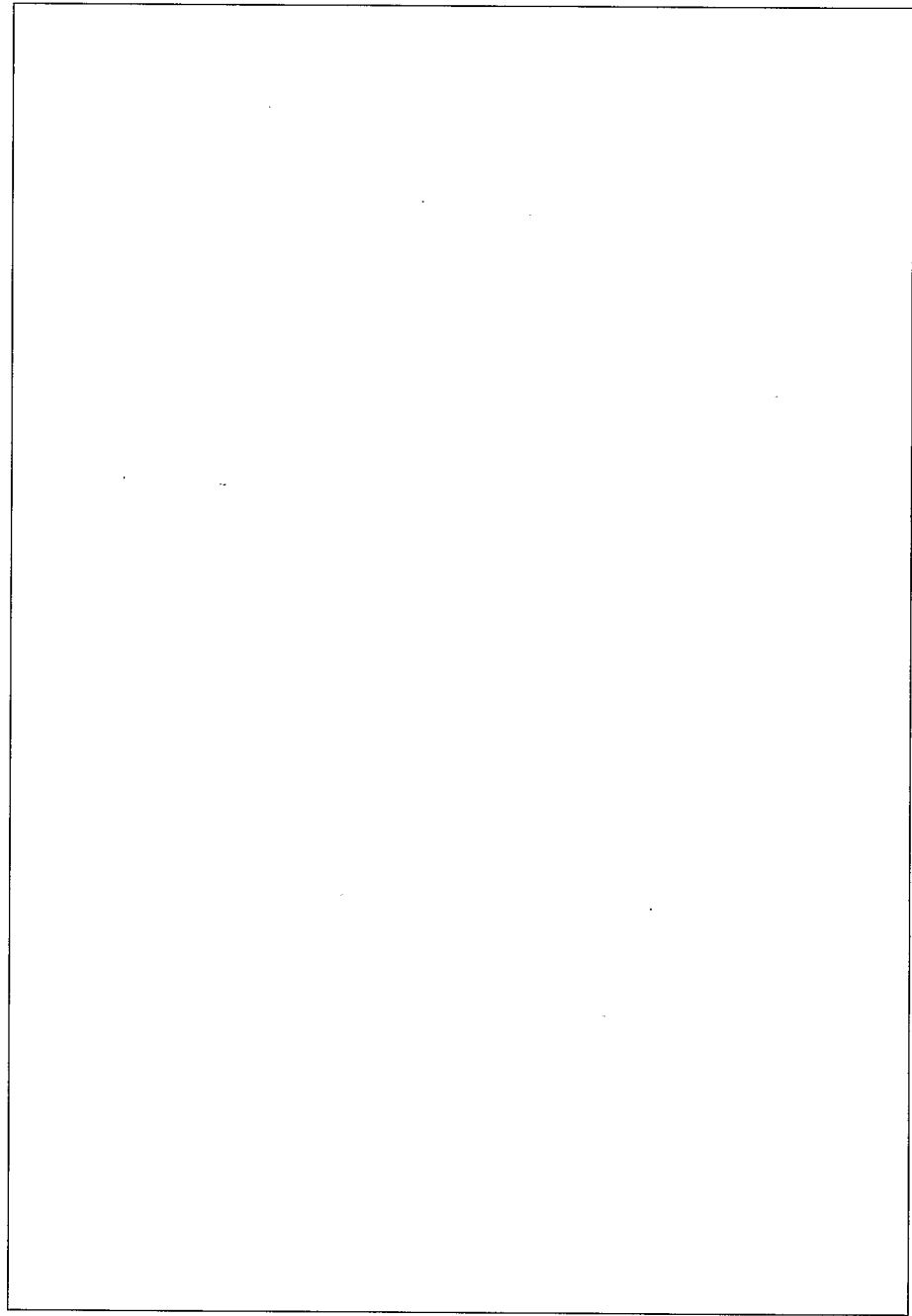


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[redacted]

19. The character of these [redacted] requirements, and the lack of any sense of urgency associated with them, suggest that few in the community viewed the problem with great interest. Perhaps this simply reflected the attitudes of the policy makers. More important for our purposes, the content of the requirements themselves suggests that the framers of requirements and the collectors did not know of, or understand, the gaps identified in SNIE 31-72 and in the January State cable from New Delhi. Collection emphasis was not on intentions but on capabilities. This is probably easier to target and to use once the information is gathered. [redacted]

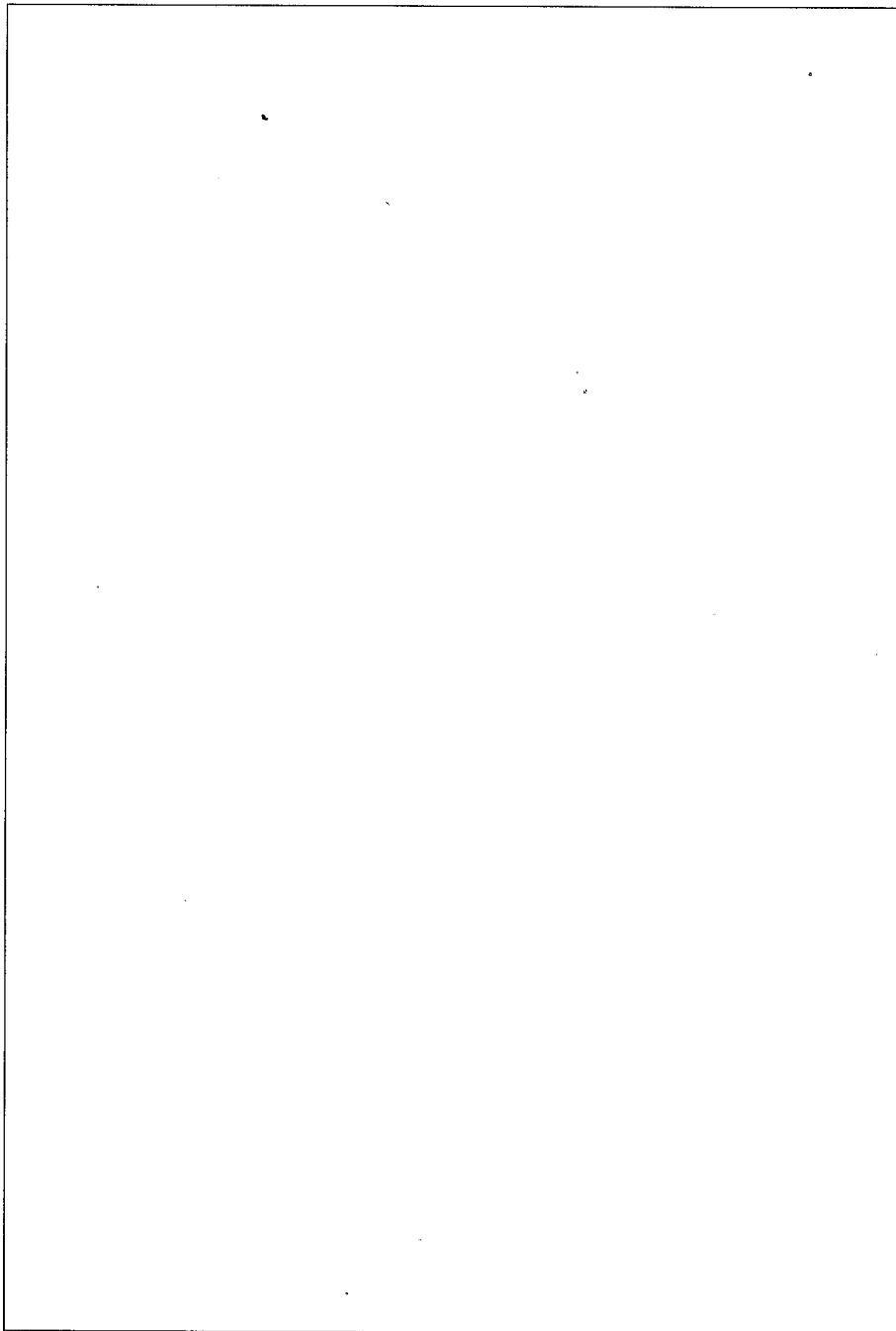
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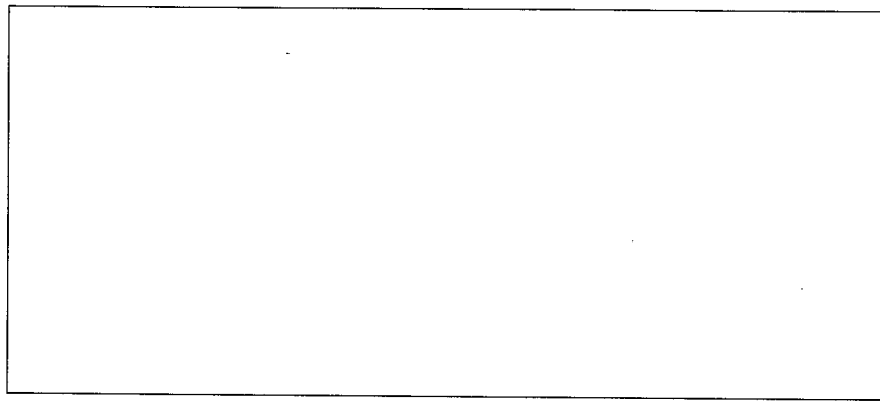
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IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

27. For some years prior to the 18 May nuclear test, the intelligence community knew a lot about Indian nuclear capabilities and knew, specifically, that the Indians were capable of developing a nuclear device. Some of this knowledge was based on overtly acquired information. [redacted]

28. The intelligence community did not know, however, that India had made a decision to develop and test a nuclear device. [redacted]

29. But [redacted] produced only a trickle of reports during the 20 months or so before the test. The few reports which did suggest that India intended to produce a nuclear device were given scant attention by the intelligence community.

30. The community did not really address the issue of India's nuclear intentions as an integrated intelligence problem. [redacted]

[redacted] Communication between technical and political analysts and between technical analysts and [redacted] collectors was not adequate to surface this basic misunderstanding, let alone resolve it.

31. SNIE 31-72 represented an effort to produce an integrated assessment. It was marred by waffled judgments, occasioned by at least a partial failure to meld the technical and non-technical intelligence available at the time, and by compromises arising from efforts to satisfy disparate community points of view.

32. Nevertheless, SNIE 31-72 was a valuable paper, one which identified intelligence deficiencies and called attention to a problem of national concern. Lamentably, there was little follow up within the community.

33. Indeed, there was a sharp falloff in evidence relating to India's nuclear intentions after late 1972. Taskers, collectors, and analysts seemed reluctant to follow up on the meager leads they had. Clearly, the community was not focusing on the issue; other problems held a higher day-to-day priority.

Specific Recommendations

34. The proliferation issue is a significant one for the US Government. The nth country intelligence problem should be given much higher priority than it seems to have enjoyed to date.

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35. HUMINT is clearly the key to determining nth country intentions in the nuclear field, although SIGINT, PHOTINT, and other technical means of collection might, for certain countries, play a more significant role [redacted]

[redacted] The most effective collection strategy for any one country can be determined only by an integrated analysis of the particular circumstances of that country by both collectors and analysts. We recommend the establishment of an ~~inter~~agency task force with appropriate representation from both collection and production elements of the community to develop collection strategies for each of the nth countries.

36. The failure of production elements to ask NPIC to exploit photography that had been specifically requested from the National Reconnaissance Office suggests a weakness in the imagery requirements system. We recommend that the Committee on Imagery Requirements and Exploitation (COMIREX) be tasked to review this issue and propose remedial action to ensure effective synchronization of imagery collection and readout requirements.

37. Technical analysts should provide strong and continuing support to HUMINT collectors. Indeed, the scope and political significance of an nth country's nuclear program might warrant the permanent assignment of a technical specialist to that country to backstop the community's collection efforts and ensure in particular that HUMINT collectors understand the relationship of their role to those of SIGINT, PHOTINT, and other technical systems. At a minimum, we recommend that such specialists periodically visit nth countries for these purposes.

38. We also recommend that a variety of analytical approaches be examined to see what new insights they might bring to bear on the problem. A study of Indian decision-making processes and of selected Indian elite groups, for example, might have been generally helpful to all-source analysts and might have helped to provide focus for human source collection on the nuclear problem as well.

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