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Q8(a)

India's reluctance to perceive any 'existential threat' inevitably made the multilateral path to nuclear security a 'default option' until it decided to cross nuclear Rubicon in 1998. Identify and analyze some of the major reasons behind this shift in India's position on the nuclear question

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 2 · 20 marks · Changing International Political Order

Changing International Political Order: Rise of super powers; strategic and ideological Bipolarity, arms race and Cold War; Nuclear threat; Non-aligned movement; Collapse of the Soviet Union; Unipolarity and American hegemony; relevance of non-alignment in the contemporary world.

Core demand of the question

- **Explain India's early nuclear path:** no existential panic, PNE 1974, NPT refusal, CTBT pressure
- Show why multilateral default (NPT, CTBT, NAM disarmament) ceased to look like security
- **Analyse the 1998 shift:** China, Pakistan, CTBT window, BJP politics, status
- Keep the 'reluctance then Rubicon' structure of the question

Revision summary

India's early nuclear path mixed scientific capacity with moral multilateralism and a recessed 1974 PNE.

NPT hierarchy, NSG sanctions and CTBT's closing window turned the default into a cage.

China's arsenal and Pakistan's weapons-plus-proxy mix supplied the security case for 1998.

Vajpayee's government supplied the political will; status mixed with deterrence.

1998 was admission that survival could no longer be outsourced to a disarming great-power club.

Introduction

- **India's nuclear story is unusual among great-power candidates:** a long **reluctance to treat the bomb as existential**, a **1974 PNE** that was not a doctrine, and a default faith that **multilateral disarmament** would eventually equalise the field. **May 1998** ended that default. The shift was not a mood. It was a reading that the multilateral path had become a **cage**.

Body**The default**

Nehru backed both a nuclear science estate and a moral campaign against big-power weapons. India stayed out of the **NPT (1968)** as a nuclear apartheid treaty, not because it was racing to test. The **1974** Pokhran explosion was called peaceful. Successive governments kept a **recessed capability: neither weaponisation at pace nor signature of the NPT. NAM and UN speeches treated general and complete disarmament as the real**

security. That stance was possible because, in Delhi's self-picture, no existential threat required a deployed arsenal - China 1962 was a humiliation, not a nuclear lesson fully taken, and Pakistan was not yet a nuclear peer.

Why the multilateral path failed India

The NPT locked a hierarchy. The **CTBT (1996)** threatened to close the test window without touching existing arsenals. The **NSG** after 1974 punished India's fuel cycle. Great powers preached non-proliferation and modernised their own warheads. After the Cold War, the promised disarmament dividend did not arrive. A default that depended on others' virtue became, in **K. Subrahmanyam's** realist school, a **strategic liability**.

Why 1998

China was a nuclear weapon state with a rising conventional punch. **Pakistan** had a weapons programme, A. Q. Khan's network, and a doctrine of covering jihad with a nuclear shield. The CTBT timeline said: test now or live forever as a threshold state under legal fire. The **BJP** government of Vajpayee had fewer inhibitions than Congress about breaking the sermon. Status - entry to a de facto nuclear club - mixed with security. The tests were followed by a doctrine of **credible minimum deterrence** and, later, the U.S. civil nuclear bargain that partially laundered 1998 into the order.

The 'existential' word in the question is the key. Until the 1990s India could tell itself that survival did not require a public bomb. China-Pakistan nuclear and missile coupling, and a closing test ban, made that self-talk look like **unilateral abstinence**. Crossing the Rubicon was the admission that multilateral default had failed the security test, not the moral one alone.

Flow diagram

Multilateral default -> NPT apartheid apartheid
Multilateral default -> CTBT window window
China-Pakistan -> 1998 tests
CTBT window -> 1998 tests
1998 tests -> Credible minimum deterrence

Conclusion

India delayed the bomb because it did not, for decades, read its threats as existential and because it bet on a disarming world. NPT, CTBT and the China-Pakistan pair killed that bet. 1998 was the security state catching up with a closed multilateral door.

Facts & figures

NPT 1968

India refused as a nuclear apartheid treaty that froze haves and have-nots.

CTBT 1996

India did not sign; the treaty was read as closing tests without disarming the P5.

Pokhran-II 1998

Declared tests and a turn to overt, then doctrinally minimum, nuclear deterrence.

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