



When Intelligence Made a Difference

— POST COLD WAR —

Denial and Deception in the Indian Nuclear Test

by Robert M. Clark JD PhD

Many of the articles in this series are about U.S. intelligence successes. This one is about the Pokhran nuclear test of 1998, where it was Indian intelligence that made a difference, and the victim was U.S. Intelligence. A fictional version of the story has been produced in the 2018 Hindi-language movie *Parmanu: The Story of Pokhran*. While it has a typical spy movie plot, the actual story is more interesting.

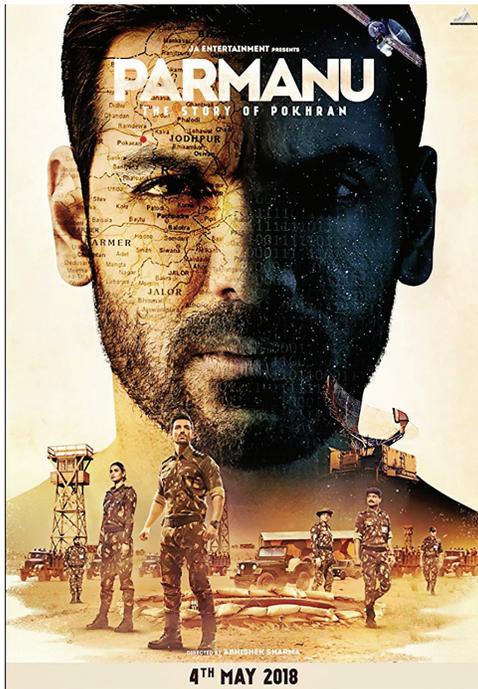


Figure 1 - Poster for the Movie *Parmanu*

POKHRAN I

During 1995, the government of India began preparations to conduct an underground test of a nuclear warhead at its Pokhran test site in its north-western desert province of Rajasthan. In December

of that year, U.S. intelligence analysts observed the test preparations in satellite imagery and provided a warning of the impending test.

For the U.S., a nuclear test was unacceptable; it would provoke a nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan, with a destabilizing effect on the Indian sub-continent. U.S. ambassador to India, Frank G. Wisner, consequently presented a demarche demanding that the Indian government stop the test preparations. The Indians responded by demanding why the U.S. thought that they were going to conduct a nuclear test. In response, the ambassador showed the Indian government satellite imagery of Pokhran, demonstrating the movement of vehicles and test equipment that presaged a test.¹

The Indian government agreed to suspend its test preparations, but it had learned a valuable lesson – though not one that the U.S. wanted to convey.

POKHRAN II

Three years later, in 1998, a Hindu nationalist government led by prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee took power with a platform that included building a nuclear weapons capability. It secretly began preparations for a nuclear test, aided by an elaborate deception plan. On May 11, 1998, it conducted three nearly simultaneous underground nuclear tests at Pokhran, first detected by the seismic monitoring stations shown in figure 2. This time, the tests came as a complete surprise to the U.S. government.

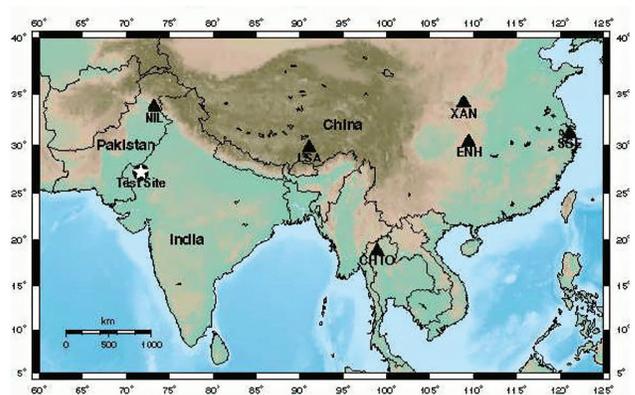


Figure 2 - Pokhran and some of the Seismic Stations that Detected the Nuclear Tests. [Source: Integrated Research Institutes for Seismology (IRIS), a partnership with the US Geological Survey for the Global Seismographic Network.]

Using knowledge they gained from the demarche, the Indians were able to plan an elaborate deception

1. Tim Weiner and James Risen, "Policy Makers, Diplomats, Intelligence Officers All Missed India's Intentions," *New York Times*, May 25, 1998.

campaign to conceal preparations for the 1998 tests. The campaign was many-faceted, aimed at protecting the operation from COMINT, HUMINT and IMINT, making it a particularly good example of multi-INT deception.

THE DECEPTION PLAN

In the previous issue of *Intelligencer*, the article on the “Soviet Deception and the Cuban Missile Crisis” observed that a deception plan must have four elements. First, the plan must be based in some part on truth, to show some appearance of legitimacy. And, there must also be denial, deceit, and misdirection, to lead the opponent away from the full or actual truth toward a false picture (in deception terminology, the “story”) of what is happening.² The Pokhran deception had all four elements.

The Pokhran deception succeeded, in part, because the U.S. apparently relied primarily on imagery for a warning of likely test preparations, and the Indians were successful at denying other intelligence sources that might have provided warning.

TRUTH

Pokhran was a known test site. That was a fact that the Indian government had to deal with. Clearly, the U.S. would continue to monitor Pokhran with its imagery assets. But India had another truth to work with, and it turned out to be essential for the deception. They were aware that the U.S. also closely monitored ballistic missile tests at the Chandipur missile test range, on the country’s East coast.

DENIAL

The denial effort was aimed at three most likely sources of U.S. intelligence:

HUMINT. The effort was protected by extensive secrecy measures within the Indian government. Few knew of the plan; the decision to test was not disclosed even to senior cabinet ministers.

IMINT: The demarche for Pokhran I gave the Indian government an excellent understanding of the keys that U.S. imagery analysts used to detect test preparations. So those preparations were executed without “triggering” any of the keys. Work at Pokhran

2. Robert M. Clark and William L. Mitchell, *Deception*, (Los Angeles: Sage/CQ Press, 2019)

was done at night. Heavy equipment was returned to its previous parking spot at dawn. Camouflage netting hid evidence of shafts; sand and native vegetation hid sensor cabling.³

COMINT: Indian intelligence was aware of the likelihood that U.S. COMINT resources were targeted on the Pokhran range. They imposed a codeword system on range communications to disguise test preparations. For example, one shaft was named “White House” or “whisky”; another shaft had the code name “Taj Mahal”.⁴

DECEIT

Scientists who had to travel to Pokhran did so in small groups, departing on the pretext of attending a conference or seminar. They traveled to different locations using false identities. Upon arrival, they would quietly leave for Pokhran. While at the range, they wore fatigues so that they would appear in imagery as military personnel charged with maintenance of the test range. After completing their assignment at the site, they would return, retracing their path. Another group then would leave for the range, using a similar travel means to do their share of the work.

Finally, the Indian government issued several public statements just prior to the test, designed to reassure Washington that no nuclear test was contemplated. Indian diplomats also categorically told their U.S. counterparts that “there would be no surprise testings.”⁵

MISDIRECTION

The final step in the deception was misdirection – to focus U.S. attention away from Pokhran – and it apparently succeeded. If India could make their Chandipur missile test range a subject of high intelligence interest for a short time, they reasoned that it would likely draw attention – and satellite imagery targeting – away from Pokhran, more than a thousand miles away. Indian leaders knew that a ballistic missile test at Chandipur would do that, but they apparently did not want to stage such a test at the same time as the Pokhran test. The range, though, was also used for surface-to-air missile tests. They could stage a test of

3. Weiner and Risen

4. Sambhav Ratnakar, “Parmanu, the true story of Pokhran: How India ‘fooled’ CIA with historic nuclear test,” May 28, 2018, <https://www.dailyo.in/technology/india-fooled-cia-parmanu-john-abraham-historic-nuclear-test-pokhran-ii/story/1/24488.html>.

5. Weiner and Risen

their Trishul surface-to-air missile, but it was not a high-interest item for U.S. intelligence. So the Indians began preparations for a Trishul test, but they moved additional equipment into the test range so that the preparations appeared to be for a test of the Agni intermediate range ballistic missile, which they knew would attract attention.⁶ As a result, U.S. reconnaissance satellites reportedly were focused on Chandipur, with little or no coverage of the nuclear test site.⁷

AFTERMATH

Could the deception have been detected? Probably. No deception, after all, is perfect. But analysts must keep in mind that deception is a possibility, and be especially vigilant for it in cases such as these:

- When you know that the opponent has detailed knowledge of your intelligence capability, look at it as a possible channel for a deception. After the démarche concerning Pokhran I, analysts should have been aware of the risk of relying heavily on imagery.
- As in the Cuban missile crisis, when a government assures the U.S. that it does (or does not) intend to do something, analysts should start looking for evidence of the opposite intent.

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6. "Strategic Deception at Pokhran Reported," *Delhi Indian Express* in English, May 15, 1998, 1.

7. Weiner and Risen