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A DEVELOPMENT MONTHLY SINCE 1957

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Sujan Chinoy



Security, Sovereignty, Statesmanship

Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee's strong commitment to sovereignty and territorial integrity is also reflected today in decisions taken by the government. He visualised India as a great power long before its economic growth rates made this a realistic possibility.



The nation is commemorating the 100th birth anniversary of the late Prime Minister *Bharat Ratna* Atal Bihari Vajpayee. He was a colossus and a statesman who strode Indian politics for decades, both in and out of office. He was a rare mix of an intellectual, poet, philosopher and, of course, a politician too. Left to himself, he might perhaps have described himself as a poet. He never allowed political considerations to colour his outlook. National interest and the welfare of the people of India were at the heart of his policies. He was a powerful orator, capable of

mesmerising an audience with the magic of his words. When he differed with others, his critique was always against an idea, or thought, or policy, but never against an individual. Even his opponents appreciated this.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had recognised the potential of a young Atal Bihari Vajpayee early on, declaring that he was a leader to watch out for.

Vajpayee's political and parliamentary career began in the 1950s and spanned over five decades. He proved to be one of the most respected and enduring

The author is the Director General of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses and Member of the High Level Committee of the Ministry of Culture to commemorate the 100th Birth Anniversary of Late Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Email: dg.idsia@nic.in



During a rally in Delhi in August 1971, Vajpayeeji, as president of the Jana Sangh, called for the Indian government to promptly recognise Bangladesh

figures in Indian politics. He served as a Member of Parliament (MP) for ten terms in the Lok Sabha and two terms in the Rajya Sabha.

First elected to Lok Sabha in 1957 from Balrampur, Uttar Pradesh, representing the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), the ideological precursor to the BJP, Vajpayee was always interested in issues related to India's national security. He had very strong views about the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty. He frequently criticised the then PM Jawaharlal Nehru's foreign policy as overly conciliatory and indecisive towards Pakistan, particularly on issues related to Kashmir, Tibet, and the boundary dispute with China.

Barring the two years when he was the External Affairs Minister (EAM) between 1977 and 1979, Vajpayee was an opposition MP for about forty years beginning in 1957.

There are a few key strands that can be discerned from Vajpayee's public speeches and policies in the realm of defence, national security and foreign policy.

Territorial Integrity of India

In his speech on 15 May 1957 in the Lok Sabha

Debate on the President's Address, Vajpayee lambasted Nehru's Kashmir policy. During this period, both as a member of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha between 1957 and 1967 and as the Bharatiya Jan Sangh parliamentary spokesperson, Vajpayee made multiple speeches decrying Nehru's handling of Pakistan-related issues, including the government's stance on the 1965 Indo-Pak War and the ongoing Kashmir issue. He viewed Pakistan's actions as aggressive expansionism. He urged full integration of Kashmir and rejection of UN-mediated solutions that legitimised the occupation by Pakistan of a part of Kashmir—what we now call Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK).

Similarly, regarding the border incursions by China in the late 1950s, he repeatedly urged the government to develop India's military capability and take serious note of the Chinese actions. Pointing towards China's construction of the road through Aksai Chin (G219 linking Xinjiang to Tibet), he consistently urged the government to make efforts to recover the occupied territory.

In June 1962, as tensions with China intensified, Vajpayee termed India's China policy as "ludicrously

unrealistic and ineffective". He proposed that, as a realistic reorientation of India's China policy, India should first sever diplomatic ties with China. Second, that all diplomatic and defence policies and postures vis-à-vis China should clearly be directed towards the early recovery of lost territory. Third, that conscious and concerted efforts should be made at international fora and in India's neighbourhood to expose China's expansionist policies against India.

Contrary to the then Nehru government's position, Vajpayee called for the improvement of defence preparedness to protect India's borders. He also suggested establishing diplomatic relations with Taiwan, which called itself the Republic of China (ROC) and claimed to be the sole representative of all of China.

As we have seen, he was unwilling to compromise on his views regarding the country's territorial integrity. This was evident from the strong positions he took against aggression committed by Pakistan and China. His speeches in the Rajya Sabha during the 1965 Indo-Pak War emphasised the robust defence of Indian territory, particularly Kashmir. While pressuring the government of the then Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri to be even more decisive in countering Pakistan's aggression, he did not, at the same time, hesitate to call for the opposition to unite and rally behind the government during the 1965 war.

Tibet and Taiwan

On the issue of Tibet, he urged the Indian government to actively support the Tibetan cause by virtue of India's own struggle against imperialism and colonialism. In 1959, when the internal Khampa rebellion against Chinese occupation reached its peak with the Dalai Lama seeking refuge in India, Vajpayee criticised India's silence in the UN debate over Tibet in the Parliament. Highlighting Tibet's importance to India's security, he had urged the government not to accept Chinese claims on Tibet. It did not help matters since the major powers had never supported the Tibet cause even when the Chinese PLA had occupied Tibet in October 1950.

Vajpayee was farsighted about the adverse implications of the People's Republic of China replacing Taiwan (the so-called Republic of China) as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Criticising the government position that membership of the UN could temper the aggressive tendencies of the People's Republic of China, he had pointed out that Beijing could

well use the veto and its diplomatic influence to thwart India's policy objectives and disseminate unfavourable narratives about India.

In hindsight, one can say that Vajpayee's apprehensions were well justified, as the unfolding events of succeeding decades revealed after Beijing replaced Taipei in the UN Security Council in 1971. China, thereafter, held up for a while recognition of newly independent Bangladesh and later continued its support for self-determination for Jammu and Kashmir on the basis of the so-called UN Security Council resolutions. China's veto power has continued to dog India's interests.

The most recent examples are China's blocking of the listing of Pakistan-based terrorist networks and individuals under the relevant provisions of the UN Security Council and dilution of references to 'The Resistance Front' in the UN Security Council statement of 25 April 2025, which condemned the terrorist attack in Pahalgam.

It is clear that in his early years as a parliamentarian, Vajpayee emerged as a hardcore realist. Later, one can say that he veered towards greater pragmatism, but without abandoning his core beliefs about sovereignty and territorial integrity.

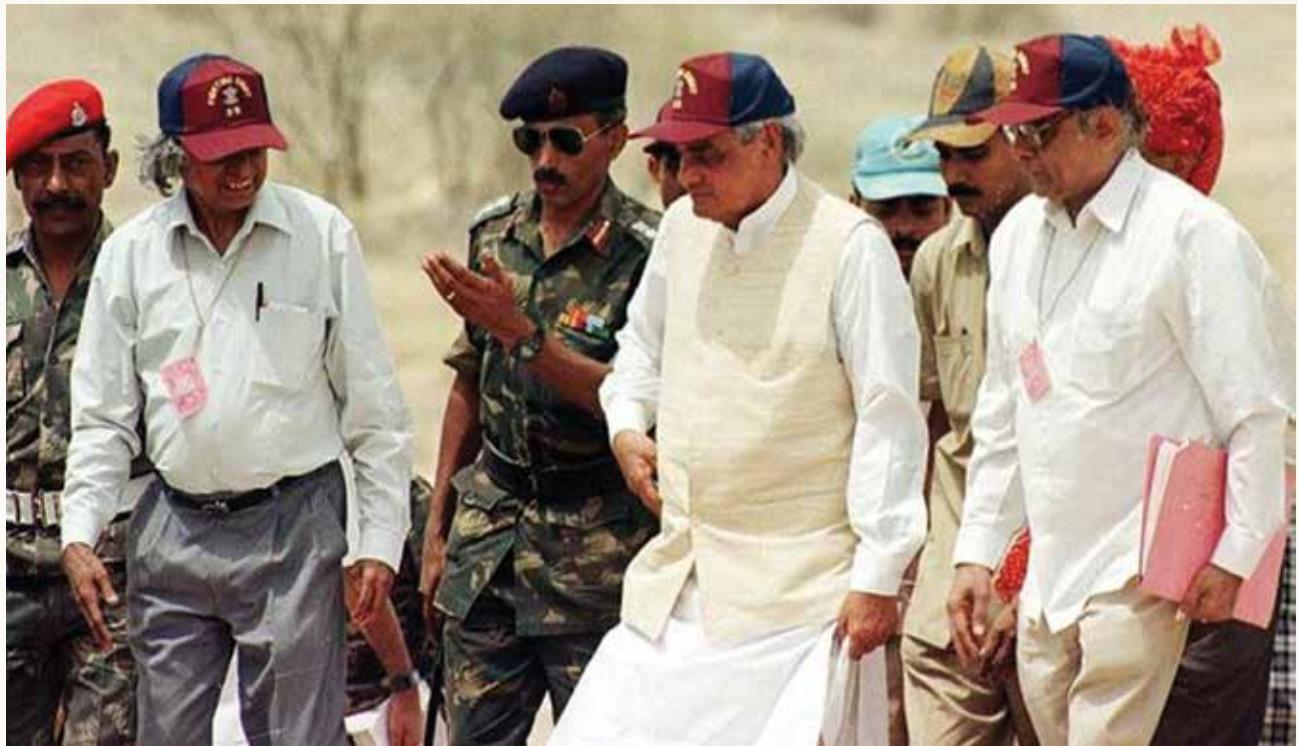
Building on Unfinished National Task

The second aspect is that Vajpayee was quick to take forward the unfinished national task of India becoming a nuclear-weapons state. He firmly believed that India should possess nuclear weapons to bolster its national security. He believed that peace lay in strength.

Vajpayee had long dreamt of India as a nuclear weapons state. During discussions in the Rajya Sabha on 22 December 1964, Vajpayee raised the issue of nuclear tests carried out by China in October of that year. He urged the government to discuss the issue of India developing the nuclear bomb with an 'open mind'. He cited the example of the US dropping an atomic bomb on non-nuclear Japan, asserting that had Japan possessed nuclear weapons, the US would not have dared to use an atomic bomb against that country.

For Vajpayee, the development of nuclear technology was a matter of self-reliance. He firmly believed that the possession of nuclear weapons would enhance India's strategic autonomy as well as deterrence capability.

Vajpayee had predicted that China's possession of a nuclear bomb would change the military balance of the



Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the Pokhran test site in 1998, with Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, the DRDO Secretary and Chief Scientific Adviser to the PM, who later became the 11th President of India

region to the detriment of India. It was in this context that, despite being on the opposition benches, Vajpayee had welcomed India's Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE) on 18 May 1974, convinced as he was that it was in the national interest.

According to Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, in May 1996, the then PM P V Narasimha Rao, had asked him to prepare for conducting nuclear tests. However, when the Congress government fell in the 1996 national election, Rao asked Dr Kalam to share details with Vajpayee, the incoming Prime Minister. According to Vajpayee's media adviser Ashok Tandon's book *'The Reverse Swing'*, at Vajpayee's swearing-in ceremony in 1996, Rao quietly passed the former a 'chit' that said "Now is the time to accomplish my unfinished task".

It was well known that P V Narasimha Rao, as Prime Minister, had virtually decided to carry out the nuclear tests but was forced to withhold action under US pressure. However, the Vajpayee government in 1996 proved short-lived and lasted a mere 13 days. India had to wait for some more time.

In 1998, India faced a harsh external environment. The China-Pakistan nexus in missile production and in the nuclear domain was at its peak. And there was reason to believe that the US was deliberately ignoring these

developments. It was in this context that Vajpayee acted decisively when he returned to office for the second time that year. India conducted three underground nuclear tests on 11 May 1998 and two underground tests on 13 May 1998 in quick succession. Vajpayee declared that the decision was "based on the same policy tenets that guided India for five decades, due to an underlying national consensus". He magnanimously presented it as a continuation of the policies set into motion by the previous administrations. Further, he ensured that India would stand firm and resist global pressure to sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Pragmatic Realist

Another dimension of interest was Vajpayee's pragmatic realism, something that had defined his political career over the years. While the decision to carry out the nuclear tests in 1998 was driven by realistic security considerations, the decision to impose a self-imposed moratorium on further testing was founded on pragmatism.

Earlier, during the 1971 war, Vajpayee had transcended party lines and pledged support to the then government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This demonstrated the value he attached to pragmatic

nationalism and his commitment to prioritising national unity over opposition politics.

Even as EAM in the Janata Party government under Morarji Desai in 1977, Vajpayee the 'realist' had pragmatically tempered his strong views about China and Pakistan. It is no wonder that Vajpayee is equally remembered today for his peace overtures to both these countries as for his firm stance against them on issues of national security.

In 1978, he became the first Indian Foreign Minister to visit Pakistan in over a decade, meeting with General Zia-ul-Haq during the latter's military rule. Normalisation of ties was high on his agenda. He pushed for enhanced trade, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people ties, famously proposing a bus service between Delhi and Lahore—a vision that would materialise two decades later under his Prime Ministership.

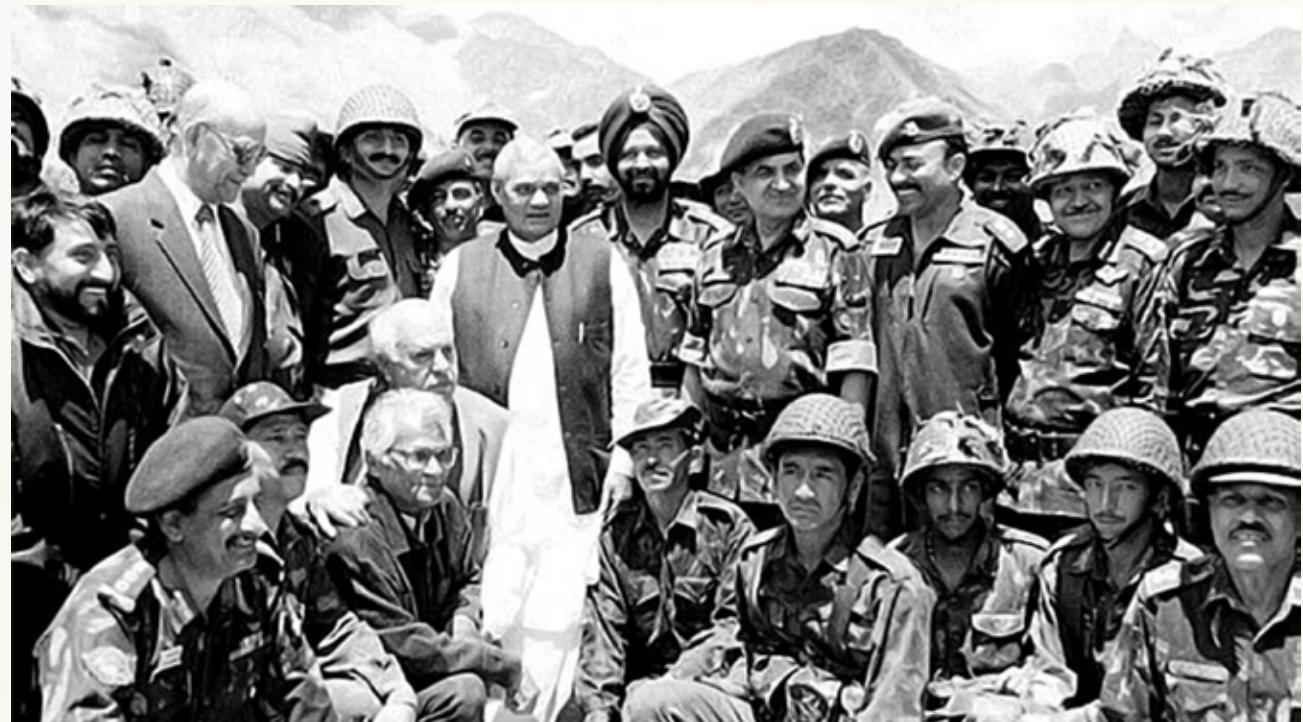
As the EAM, he also welcomed normalisation of diplomatic ties with China. In an effort to revive high political contacts with India's northern neighbour, Vajpayee undertook a visit to that country in February 1979. The two sides agreed during the visit to develop bilateral relations while continuing the dialogue to resolve the boundary question.

Though he raised with the Chinese side serious security issues like China's support to Pakistan on Kashmir and the assistance to Naga rebels, he also endeavoured to build a better relationship with China through pragmatism and mutually beneficial cooperation.

This phase, as the EAM between 1977 and 1979, highlighted the Vajpayee brand of diplomacy, blending idealism with realism. He emphasised that neighbours could not change geography, advocating dialogue to resolve issues. This was amplified when he became Prime Minister. As PM between 1998 and 2004, Vajpayee once again took a number of steps to normalise ties with Pakistan and China.

Outreach to Pakistan and China

After India's Pokhran II nuclear tests in 1998, Vajpayee resorted to normalising relations with Pakistan. During the 1999 Lahore Bus Yatra, when he personally travelled to Pakistan, he signed the Lahore Declaration with Nawaz Sharif (the then Pakistan Prime Minister). It committed the two sides to implementing the Simla Agreement in letter and spirit, reducing the risk of accidental or unauthorised use of nuclear weapons and resolving all issues, including the issue of Jammu & Kashmir.



During the Kargil conflict in 1999, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, accompanied by Defence Minister George Fernandes (seated third from left), Jammu and Kashmir Governor Girish Chandra 'Gary' Saxena (standing second from left), and Army Chief General Ved Prakash Malik (fourth from right), met with the troops on the front lines

Tragically, this olive branch was betrayed by Pakistan's intrusion in the Kargil region of the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir in 1999. Vajpayee responded decisively, authorising forceful military eviction while refraining from crossing the Line of Control (LoC). The decision showcased a calibrated escalation. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001, Vajpayee flexed India's military muscle to warn Pakistan. The massive troop mobilisation under Operation Parakram in 2001-2002 brought the nuclear-armed neighbours onto the brink. At the same time, it was Vajpayee's restraint that stayed India's hand and averted war.

As regards China, he visited that country again in June 2003, this time as Prime Minister. Until then, China had a long-standing policy of showing Sikkim as a separate country. It had never formally accepted Sikkim's merger with India in 1975. During his term as Prime Minister, Vajpayee convinced Beijing to recognise Sikkim as an integral part of India and to reprint their maps accordingly. The process took some time. Premier Wen Jiabao stated during his visit to India in 2005 that China regarded Sikkim as an 'inalienable part of India' and that Sikkim was no longer an issue in India-China relations. PM Vajpayee stated in Parliament that the Joint Statement signed by the two sides explicitly refers to 'Sikkim State of the Republic of India'. He informed the House that the Chinese side had officially handed over a revised map showing Sikkim as within the international boundaries of India.

PM Vajpayee's visit to China also catalysed a rapid rise in bilateral trade and investment ties. The period from 2000 to 2005 coincided with the author's term as the Consul General of India in East China, based in Shanghai. It was one of the most optimistic phases in bilateral economic ties, with major Indian IT companies establishing their campuses across China, along with pharmaceutical majors and some manufacturing companies as well.

Notably, during his 2003 visit, Vajpayee addressed the first-ever conference in Shanghai focussed on bilateral cooperation in the Information Technology (IT) sector. He called for a strategic alliance between Indian and Chinese IT companies, urging them to combine their respective strengths. Today, this idea may appear idealistic, given the several areas of differences



US President Bill Clinton (centre), with daughter Chelsea Clinton (immediate right) after receiving ceremonial welcome at Rashtrapati Bhavan, accompanied by President K R Narayanan (extreme left) and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (extreme right) in March 2000

that continue to cast a shadow on India-China relations. At the same time, it is relevant to note that the thaw in bilateral relations in 2025 has been accompanied by Beijing's calls for cooperation between India and China in diverse fields, including in global norm setting in artificial intelligence.

Boundary Dispute with China

An important aspect of the China visit in 2003 was the decision to fast-track the talks on the boundary dispute by initiating the framework of the Special Representatives (SRs) of the two Prime Ministers. Broadly speaking, the SR dialogue mechanism has survived, with some gaps in between, and has contributed, along with other dialogue mechanisms, to the recent disengagement and reduction in tensions in the border areas caused by the Galwan incident of June 2020.

It is pertinent to note that the exercise of clarifying and confirming the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the basis of the bilateral border agreements of 1993 and 1996 acquired salience after Vajpayee was elected as PM for the third time in 1999. The maps showing either side's perception of the LAC in the Middle Sector were exchanged, informally in 2000 when this author was the Head of the Indian Side in the India-China Diplomatic and Military Expert Group and later, formally, in 2002. However, the Chinese side refused to go ahead with a similar exercise for the Western and Eastern Sectors, where the differences are much larger as compared to the Middle Sector.

Multipolarity and India's Rise

Atal Bihari Vajpayee had strategic foresight. He visualised India as a great power long before its economic growth rates made this a realistic possibility. He said that he could not "imagine that any future

paradigms or arrangements for security in the region can be effective if it does not include India".

He saw India's security, stability, and prosperity as central to security, stability, democracy and prosperity in Asia. He wanted an "Asia where power does not threaten stability and security" and rejected an Asia in which some would dominate and crowd out the others.

In today's parlance, he was seeking a multipolar Asia. His vision was prophetic. Today, the world recognises that India is indispensable for a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Engaging the United States

In a sense, Vajpayee was also the architect of the close strategic partnership between India and the US following the end of the Cold War. Vajpayee was clear, though he did not articulate it directly, that India must not only 'engage' with the US but also move away from the beaten path and forge good relations.

Notwithstanding stringent US sanctions after the Pokhran II tests, Vajpayee readily initiated the nuclear dialogue with the US. He surprised Washington by coupling his nuclear defiance with the declaration that India and America were 'natural allies'.

In June 1998, Vajpayee sent veteran politician Jaswant Singh to New York and Washington to explain India's strategic motives and to assess the situation. Diplomatic



Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee meets with the Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan at his office in New Delhi on 22 July 2000

negotiations began the same month, with the Indian side represented by Jaswant Singh, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission and later the EAM, and the US side led by Strobe Talbott, the Deputy Secretary of State.

By 2000, the tensions generated by the Pokhran tests had eased. It paved the way for the first US presidential visit in 22 years. The last visit before Bill Clinton's visit was that of Jimmy Carter in 1978. Notably, Clinton's visit took place less than two years after the nuclear tests.

In 2004, the two countries announced the 'Next Steps in Strategic Partnership' (NSSP) agreement. It was heralded as a breakthrough in India-US strategic collaboration because it committed both countries to working together in four key areas—civilian nuclear

energy, civilian space programme, high-technology trade, and missile defence — where India's possession of nuclear weapons had previously made meaningful cooperation all but impossible.

Atmanirbharta and Atmaraksha

There are notable aspects of Vajpayee's strategic thinking that remain relevant today as India navigates a world in flux, characterised by major power conflict and the weaponisation of trade and technology.

The first is Self-Reliance or *atmanirbhata*, including in the defence sector. It may be recalled that Vajpayee



Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (right) speaks to the US Secretary of State Colin Powell during a meeting in New Delhi, India on 28 July 2002

wanted India to strive for self-sufficiency in the strategic domain, as evident in his address to the nation following the test-firing of the Agni II missile in 1999. In another address, at the 24th Conference of DRDO directors on 6 August 1999, Vajpayee congratulated the DRDO for the indigenous development of a spectrum of disciplines ranging from missiles, electronics, aircraft, tanks, armaments, and ship-related technologies, among others. Vajpayee firmly believed that indigenous development of science and technology and the defence sector would help the country overcome challenges of technology denials and control regimes enforced by the developed world.

Today, India, under PM Narendra Modi, has given a new salience to *atmanirbharta* in defence manufacturing, critical technologies as well as supply chains. India is endeavouring to build domestic capacities as well as to forge cooperation with trusted partners. For e.g., PM Narendra Modi spoke of a national mission to build an indigenous fighter aircraft engine on the occasion of the 79th Independence Day. Operation Sindoor highlighted the success of indigenously manufactured weapons and platforms in a network-centric war.

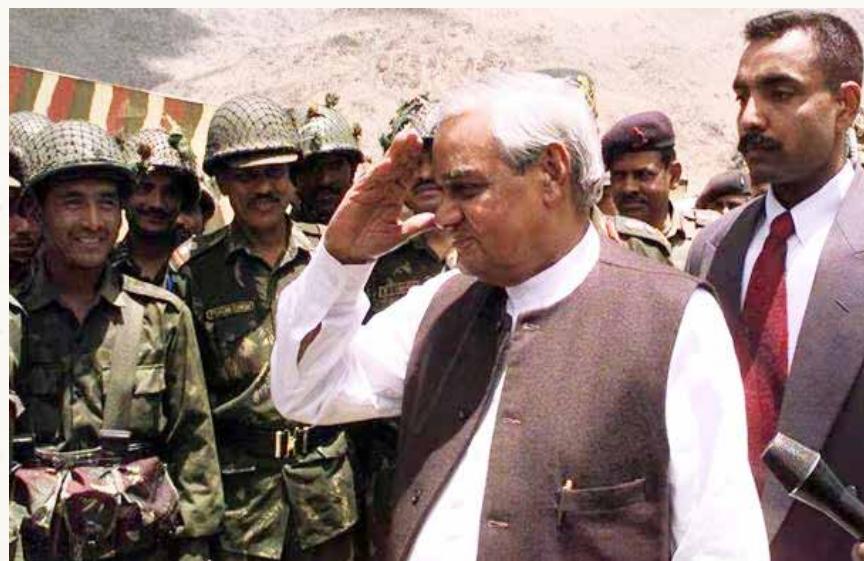
Vajpayee also decisively directed the Kargil War under a nuclear overhang. He unleashed the full might of the Indian armed forces on the intruding Pakistani forces in Kargil in 1999, even though both countries were declared nuclear weapon states by then. PM Modi too decisively used the Indian armed forces to carry out cross-border strikes in 2016, 2019 and more recently during Operation Sindoor after the Pahalgam terrorist

attack, despite Pakistan's bluff about its nuclear weapons. The key difference is that India's approach has evolved since the Vajpayee era and is even more forceful today. From conducting cross-border surgical strikes by Special Forces in 2016 after the terrorist attack on an army camp in Uri to using the Indian Air Force to bomb a terrorist target in Balakot deep inside Pakistan after the terrorist strike on a paramilitary convoy in Pulwama in 2019, India's military doctrine has now set a new benchmark.

Vajpayee was clear that the Indian military would not cross the LoC in Kargil. On the other hand, India today has clearly demonstrated that it will carry out punitive missions against terrorist infrastructure well inside Pakistan. In fact, the 'New Normal' since Operation Sindoor is that a terrorist attack carried out from Pakistani soil would invite a robust military response against terrorists as well as their supporters in Pakistan.

At the same time, PM Modi, like Vajpayee before him, has also exhibited a capacity for pragmatism and realism in his foreign policy. A desire for regional peace and stability and a strong belief in *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas* for the region have guided his approach. PM Modi reached out to Pakistan soon after taking office in 2014. In fact, he invited then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his oath-taking ceremony along with other South Asian leaders. In December 2015, like Vajpayee before him in 1999, Modi visited Lahore to promote peace. Like Vajpayee, he too was let down by Pakistan.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee's strong commitment to sovereignty and territorial integrity is also reflected today in decisions taken by the NDA-2 government. In fact, the Modi government has gone a step further in actually fulfilling the nation's long-standing commitment to India's sovereignty and territorial integrity by revoking Article 370 of the Indian Constitution in 2019. This has enabled Kashmir to become part of the mainstream of national progress. Moreover, PM Modi's government has shown firm commitment to the recovery of Indian territory that is still under adverse possession. □



Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee with the Indian Armed Forces in Kargil in 1999