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India Needs The Bomb

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Despite its huge population, booming economy and growing nuclear arsenal, President Clinton, like his predecessors, refuses to show India the respect it deserves. He thereby perpetuates a needless estrangement between two natural allies.

This disrespect is most apparent on the nuclear front. In his address to the Indian Parliament on Wednesday, Mr. Clinton acknowledged many of India's concerns, but he did not give up his call for India to abandon its nuclear weapons. The administration wants India to sign both the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

India, however, refused to sign the nonproliferation treaty when it took effect in 1970 and refused again when the treaty was extended in 1995. India tested nuclear weapons in 1998 and has made it clear that it intends to build powerful nuclear forces.

The Clinton administration should stop opposing these moves and recognize that India is not going to give up its nuclear arsenal. India did not acquire these weapons for frivolous reasons, like misplaced pride or domestic politics, as some Americans believe. Rather, India, like the United States, had sound strategic reasons for wanting them.

Nuclear weapons are an excellent deterrent against aggression, and India lives in a dangerous neighborhood. Since gaining independence in 1947, it has fought three wars with Pakistan and has come close to war with Pakistan three other times. India also fought a losing war with China in 1962 over the still-contested Sino-Indian border. Moreover, both Pakistan and China have their own nuclear weapons, and over the next two decades, China will move to develop a much larger arsenal. India would be foolish to allow China to gain a nuclear advantage over it.

The Persian Gulf war of 1991 and the Kosovo war in 1999 also hardened India's determination to possess nuclear weapons. The United States easily beat Iraq and Serbia by exploiting its enormous advantage in conventional arms. Had either foe possessed nuclear weapons, the United States might not have gone to war. This lesson was not lost on India.

Finally, as President Clinton acknowledged on Wednesday, American hypocrisy on nuclear issues rubs Indians the wrong way. The United States allows itself to have

nuclear weapons for its own security but says India should not have them for the same purpose. We expect India to sign the test ban treaty even though the United States Senate rejected it.

The Clinton administration should reverse course and recognize that India is a legitimate nuclear state, like Britain and Russia, not a dangerous nuclear rogue like North Korea. It should allow India to keep its nuclear weapons and sign the nonproliferation treaty, with all the attendant rights and obligations.

As a start toward closer political ties, the administration could support India's membership in the United Nations Security Council. At the same time, however, the United States should not one-sidedly favor India against Pakistan when Pakistan has legitimate concerns. Instead, the United States should strive to be a fair broker when disputes arise.

A more realistic policy toward India would benefit both Asia and American interests.

First, the United States could do more to resolve the conflict between India and Pakistan over the territory of Kashmir. India adamantly refuses to allow the United States to mediate that 53-year-old conflict because it has long felt that Washington favors Pakistan. But if the United States demonstrated even-handedness, showing greater sensitivity to India's interests, India might conceivably welcome constructive mediation.

Second, a more realistic policy would promote nuclear stability on the subcontinent. For example, by dropping its prohibition on nuclear weapons, the United States could provide India and Pakistan modern command-and-control technologies that would make their arsenals safer and more reliable. It could also share valuable safety lessons it learned from its competition with the Soviet Union.

Third, in the not-too-distant future, the United States may need other Asian countries to help it contain China. It would be difficult to fashion an effective coalition of Asian countries without India as a central pillar.

Fourth, with its increasing economic power, especially in software and pharmaceuticals, India is becoming an important player in international economic groups like the World Trade Organization. The United States has an interest in making India a cooperative rather than a disruptive force in those institutions.

India and the United States are the world's two largest democracies, and they are both multicultural democracies to boot. It only makes sense for them to be on the same side. It is thus not only in America's economic and strategic interests to become closer to India, but fully in line with its principles and ideals.