The world community is nearing an unavoidable fork in the road. We will soon have to decide whether or not to continue with existing policies regarding nuclear weapons, policies that have potentially far-reaching proliferation consequences. Are we resigned to living in a world where nuclear weapon proliferation may occur on a wide scale and we merely attempt to manage this process, or are we ready to move decisively toward the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons? Should the world’s future security be based on nuclear weapons, or on an international treaty regime aimed at strict control and eventual abolition of these weapons? Can we really manage to go on indefinitely as we have in the past? India’s nuclear tests and Pakistan’s response have made it clear that continuing with existing policies risks leading the world in the direction of widespread proliferation. With the end of the Cold War and the rapid diffusion of technology, we can no longer have our cake and eat it too; a small group of states can no longer possess large numbers of the ultimate weapon and deny it to everyone else.

ASTRIDE THE NUCLEAR FENCE

The world has remained astride the nuclear fence with regard to nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament longer than prudence permits. Despite significant arms control progress and the indefinite extension of the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the perceived political value of nuclear weapons remains far too high. The price of global indecision regarding the future of nuclear weapons is rising. The inconsistent behavior of the nuclear weapon states (NWS), which claim to support disarmament while clinging to nuclear arsenals, has now spread to include India and Pakistan, creating a new nuclear equation that endangers both South Asia and the global nuclear nonproliferation regime. If security is to be possible in the future, the path toward the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons must be chosen and vigorously pursued. If the NPT regime is to remain viable, the nuclear weapon states cannot ignore their disarmament obligations and all the nations of the world must work toward the goal of the NPT, a world ultimately free of nuclear weapons.

Significant Progress

The last decade has been characterized by arms control progress more rapid than anyone would have predicted even a few years ago. Goals long believed beyond reach have been achieved: the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) has been signed, and an initial reversal of the superpower arms race has been negotiated through the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) process. The NPT has been strengthened and made permanent, while South Africa, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Algeria, Argentina, and Brazil have all forsworn nuclear weapons by becoming parties to the NPT. Although they do not constitute disarmament in themselves, these achievements demonstrate that the control and renunciation of nuclear weapons and programs to develop them are possible, if we choose to make them happen.

The Spirit of New York: Nonproliferation is Disarmament

Diverse contributions from many states, all acting to support the common understanding that more nuclear

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weapon states would be detrimental to international security, contributed to the indefinite extension of the NPT in May 1995. President Clinton committed the United States to “lead the charge” for a permanent nonproliferation regime, and countries such as Australia, Canada, and Japan contributed significantly to that effort. A worldwide diplomatic campaign sought to bring every country in the world, on the basis of its own security interests, into the NPT. This campaign also aimed to convince every NPT state party to join a coalition supporting indefinite extension without conditions.

During the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference at the United Nations in New York, a number of countries assumed significant international leadership roles. South Africa, supported by President Mandela’s unique global stature, its natural role as a bridge between the developed and the developing worlds, and the fact that it was the first country to dismantle a nuclear arsenal, led many nations in Africa and elsewhere into the coalition supporting indefinite extension. This extension of the NPT was part of a package that included a Statement of Principles and Objectives for Non-Proliferation and Disarmament and an enhanced review process for the treaty. Subsequently, Indonesia further bolstered the already strong majority for indefinite extension by linking the Principles and Objectives Document to the enhanced review process, establishing that the enhanced review process would, among other things, monitor compliance with the commitments made in the Principles and Objectives document.

The indefinite extension of the NPT, without conditions and without a vote, was a victory for all of the states parties to the NPT. In deciding to extend the treaty indefinitely, these states reaffirmed their commitment to the basic bargain of the NPT, in which both nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) work together toward the ultimate objective of a world free of nuclear weapons. At the New York Conference, the states parties to the NPT explicitly linked permanent nuclear nonproliferation to nuclear disarmament. As United Nations Undersecretary General Jayantha Dhanapala, who presided over the conference, observed: “[a]ll wanted concrete steps taken toward nuclear disarmament and were emphatic that the indefinite extension of the Treaty was not a carte blanche for the nuclear weapon states to retain their monopoly over the possession of these weapons forever.” Although the NPT Review and Extension Conference did not set a timetable for nuclear disarmament, as some had wished, the NPT is unmistakably a treaty that mandates the ultimate abolition of nuclear weapons.

### High Political Value of Nuclear Weapons Continues

Despite this clear commitment to work toward nuclear disarmament, the United States and the other NWS parties to the NPT have for too long contributed to the inappropriately high political value attached to nuclear weapons. The United States retains plans for the use of nuclear weapons, continues to deploy nuclear weapons beyond its shores, and debate persists in Washington about whether nuclear weapons should be used for new roles, such as the explicit deterrence of chemical or biological attack. The possibility of nuclear weapons assuming new roles is often considered without reference to the adverse effect such actions would have on U.S. nuclear nonproliferation efforts. The more the United States relies on nuclear weapons to solve security problems, the harder it will be to convince other states that they do not need nuclear weapons for the same reasons.

The United States itself may have made a particularly powerful contribution to India’s perception of the value of nuclear weapons during the early 1970s. Because of the importance it assigned in U.S. grand strategy to the famous opening to China, the Nixon administration allowed global politics to dictate its policy toward India. During the 1971 war between India and Pakistan that resulted in the independence of Bangladesh, the United States sent a nuclear-capable naval task group into the Bay of Bengal and used the direct communications link to the Soviet Government—the so-called “hotline” created after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis—for the first time. These signals may have been interpreted in India and elsewhere as suggesting that nuclear weapons were determining factors—and nuclear weapon states the only real players—in international crises.

Nuclear weapons do not make the United States, or any other nation, strong. It is the power of the U.S. economy and the United States’ vast superiority in usable conventional forces, including advanced technologies, that make it a world leader. Tens of thousands of nuclear weapons did not save the former Soviet regime from dissolution. Nuclear weapons do not hold the Atlantic Alliance together; common culture and institutions do. Nuclear arms are not effective tools for dealing with the most immediate threats to international security to-
day, such as terrorism or ethnic conflict. Nuclear weapons remain necessary to deter their use by others, but this role justifies the retention of only a very small number of weapons. The nonproliferation price we pay for not reducing existing nuclear arsenals to the lowest numbers necessary is high and must be recognized.

At the fork in the road that the world is approaching, continued excessive reliance on nuclear weapons will undercut nonproliferation efforts. If nonproliferation is to be effective, it must be understood that the only legitimate purpose of nuclear weapons today is what the U.S. National Academy of Sciences has termed the “core function of deterring nuclear attack, or coercion by threat of nuclear attack.” Any state that declares nuclear weapons have broader utility cannot reasonably expect others to reach a different conclusion. To assign any larger role to nuclear weapons in national strategy in effect promotes nuclear proliferation.

THE RISING PRICE OF INDECISION

If the international community is unwilling to take a clear, affirmative decision to abandon reliance on nuclear weapons, the number of states possessing nuclear weapons will probably increase dramatically in the next decade or so. Stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons, even to non-state actors such as terrorists groups, will become increasingly difficult. The window of opportunity for reducing the likelihood of these scenarios is closing.

India’s Decision to Test: Hypocrisy Loves Company

In some senses, India has been right that the NWS parties to the NPT have used the treaty to perpetuate a double standard. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had a point when he observed, at the fiftieth anniversary of his country’s Atomic Energy Commission in August 1998, that “[a] few nations are sitting on huge stockpiles of nuclear weapons,” and concluded that their policy of “insisting on collective restraint on the part of the rest of the world is an inherently unstable proposition.” The belief that the nuclear weapon states are committed to an indefinite monopoly of these weapons, in order to enhance their prestige and power at the expense of other states, contributed to the Indian decision to resume testing. Now both India and Pakistan have added themselves to the number of states claiming to seek a nuclear-weapon-free world while retaining nuclear arsenals.

The addition of the world’s sixth and seventh declared nuclear arsenals has exacerbated pressure for proliferation. This is not only because more states now openly contend that nuclear weapons are vital to them, but also because these additions threaten the integrity of the NPT regime, which is designed, however imperfectly, to accommodate only five nuclear weapon states.

Although both the 1974 and 1998 Indian nuclear explosive tests were conducted primarily for domestic political reasons, both were explained by the Indian Government with language taken from the NPT. In 1974, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi carefully emphasized that India’s first nuclear test was a “peaceful nuclear explosion” permitted under Article V of the NPT. Similarly, when Prime Minister Vajpayee declared, following the May 1998 tests, that “India is a nuclear weapon state,” his use of treaty terminology affirmed the centrality of the NPT to the existing international security environment as surely as his country’s action undermined the regime.

Contrary to Prime Minister Vajpayee’s assertion, India can never be a nuclear weapon state. This legal term is defined in Article IX of the NPT as a state having detonated a nuclear explosive prior to 1967. Prime Minister Vajpayee’s claim to this legal term is an anachronism, as is the notion that India has attained some sort of “nuclear status” by exploding nuclear weapons. The age of the “nuclear club” is at an end. Any distinction India thinks it has achieved in crashing the gate will be washed away if its actions help usher in an age of the “nuclear rabble,” in which many states and some substate actors have nuclear weapons.

The NPT regime is the international community’s best tool for limiting nuclear proliferation and moving toward nuclear disarmament. The regime is not perfect. Frankly speaking, the NWS should do much more to live up to their Article VI disarmament obligations, such as negotiating deep cuts in nuclear arsenals and agreeing not to use nuclear weapons first. Such actions would help discredit the assertion that the NPT is discriminatory. India itself railed against this perceived inequality for twenty-eight years, but its recent decision to surrender the moral high ground by declaring itself a nuclear weapon state threatens the NPT regime and its goal of eventual nuclear disarmament.
Pakistan’s Response

After India’s nuclear tests in May, the world held its breath. When Pakistan conducted its own nuclear tests, Prime Minister Vajpayee claimed “we are now vindicated,” as if a Pakistani wrong could right an Indian wrong. India was not vindicated but rather confirmed in a destructive path. On May 28, 1998, the idea of a nuclear proliferation chain in South Asia stopped being a speculation and became a sad reality. The other shoe dropped. But it is now frighteningly clear that the “other shoe” may not be the last. We have seen a clear demonstration that nuclear proliferation is self-perpetuating; and the fact that these new potential nuclear combatants stand, as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has observed, “cheek by jowl ... creates a uniquely dangerous situation.”

Although India has denied parity between itself and Pakistan, strategic nuclear parity is the condition that nuclear proliferation in both states has produced. India is much larger and, in economic and conventional military terms, much stronger than Pakistan. However, with nuclear weapons on both sides, India’s enormous military advantage is somewhat neutralized, as then U.S. Ambassador to India Patrick Moynihan expressed to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi following India’s “peaceful nuclear explosion” in 1974:

India has made a huge mistake. Here you were the No. 1 hegemonic power in South Asia. Nobody was No. 2 and call Pakistan No. 3. Now in a decade’s time, some Pakistani general will call you up and say I have four nuclear weapons and I want Kashmir. If not, we will drop them on you and we will all meet in heaven. And then what will you do?

The fundamental effect of the other shoe dropping is that South Asia has just moved closer to the edge of a regional nuclear war that could claim the lives of many millions. As Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi told the Conference on Disarmament in June 1998, “The nuclear sword of Damocles is now hanging over the region by a slender thread.”

Beyond the short-term strategic instability South Asian nuclear arsenals may generate, nuclear proliferation on the subcontinent threatens to destroy the NPT regime on which the rest of the world bases its security. When the NPT is again reviewed by its parties in 2000—the first Review Conference incorporating the enhanced review process agreed upon in 1995 in New York—its performance in preventing proliferation and encouraging disarmament will be assessed critically. If the South Asian nuclear tests result in forcing open the door to the “nuclear club” and India, a longtime declaratory proponent of nuclear disarmament, joins the ranks of those states that rely on the threat of using nuclear weapons for their security, the continued viability of the NPT will be in serious question. If the states parties to the NPT see the world moving more and more in the direction of declaratory reliance on nuclear weapons for security, they will be pressured to adopt a policy of such reliance them-
selves and be more reluctant to rely on the NPT regime.

An even greater threat lurks behind the possible dissolution of the NPT regime. Its collapse could trigger the emergence of a “nuclear rabble,” increasing the threat of nuclear terrorism. There is no reason to believe that India and Pakistan will be immune from the protection, control, and accountability problems that have faced other states with nuclear arsenals. Even if other states do not follow India and Pakistan’s example, more weapons and weapon-usable material, stored in more locations, and accessible to more individuals, increase the likelihood that nuclear weapons will be used accidentally or without authorization, or that weapons or materials will be diverted or stolen. While a number of states currently possess weapon-usable nuclear material, further acquisition of nuclear weapons by India, Pakistan, and possibly other states can only exacerbate this problem.

In the early 1960s, some predicted that there would be 20 to 30 nuclear weapon states by the end of the 1970s. Fortunately, the international community saw the dangers of nuclear proliferation and chose to work toward the only viable alternative, a world ultimately free of nuclear weapons, by negotiating the NPT. The NPT has served as the principal bulwark against widespread nuclear proliferation, and no state declared a new nuclear weapon capability during the first twenty-eight years of its operation. But India’s recent actions, coupled with inaction by the NWS, have placed this essential tool in acute danger. If the NPT begins to unravel or even collapses, the most terrifying predictions of the past may not be bad enough to describe the future. If security is to be possible, it must be chosen and pursued actively.

### CHOOSING SECURITY

To continue as we are, blundering down a path that leaves the door open to widespread nuclear proliferation, may be disastrous for world security. It is imperative that the community of nations turn away from this path, but that will require a conscious choice to take decisive action. Nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament is a vital global process that will require the efforts of all who aspire to international leadership roles in the twenty-first century. Such leadership, however, must take an appropriate form.

### Proliferation Will Not Lead to Disarmament

Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee has declared “[o]ur status as a nuclear weapons power, we believe, enables us to pursue the goal of speedy nuclear disarmament with greater vigor and success.” What could enable India to be a leader in the pursuit of a world ultimately free of nuclear weapons is the fact that it is, as Vajpayee has also said, “an ancient nation of close to one billion people,” not its nuclear weapons. As Praful Bidwai notes:

Nothing exposes New Delhi’s nuclear desperation more starkly than the fact that its foreign policy agenda, once broad, complex and resilient, has been largely reduced to one point: damage control. India’s high functionaries and diplomats have done little more in the past three months than attempt to limit the negative consequences of nuclearisation at the political, economic, and disarmament diplomacy level.

By exploding nuclear weapons, India has done great damage to its credibility and stature within the community of nations, the very tools most necessary to assume an international leadership role on the prohibition of nuclear weapons. If nuclear disarmament is important to Prime Minister Vajpayee, he has dropped the ball.

Jasjit Singh, director of the Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses, offers a more honest interpretation of the effect of India’s acquisition of nuclear weapons on its disarmament efforts: “[h]aving acquired nuclear weapons in a ... credible manner we can afford to be somewhat more relaxed about the need for universal disarmament since we would have the capability to protect ourselves against a nuclear threat.” C. Raja Mohan, editor of The Hindu, takes proliferation honesty one step further, observing: “[a]ll that baggage of universal disarmament has been dropped, it has been made clear that the only consideration is national security.” These comments demonstrate that, at least to some, proliferation is viewed as a substitute for disarmament. This is the true effect of India’s leadership this spring. It is an example the world will see and understand: more than one-sixth of humanity chose this May to put its faith in nuclear weapons for security. The effect of India’s nuclear proliferation is that the perceived value of nuclear weapons, already too high, has been increased. India has just declared itself to be an obstacle to rather than an advocate for nuclear disarmament.

It is essential that the larger community of nations condemn the Indian and subsequent Pakistani decisions to rely on nuclear weapons for security. To reverse the
spread of nuclear arms, however, the world community must also urge the nuclear weapon states to take measures aimed at realizing the obligations they assumed under the NPT. The international community should continue to take responsible action aimed at nonproliferation and disarmament, rather than permit the derailment of a functional, if imperfect, nonproliferation regime. The question is not whether India, Pakistan, or any country is irresponsible. The question is whether behavior directly aimed at the destruction of an agreement vital to the national security of the vast majority of the world’s nations can be countenanced.

Despite cross-cutting political pressures, the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests have generated international condemnation, including statements by the G-8 at the Birmingham summit, NATO foreign ministers, 46 members of the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, and the United Nations Security Council.21 The tests have also harmed India and Pakistan’s international standing. U.S. Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs John Holum recently observed: “India’s decision-makers expected nuclear detonations to open the door to a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council; instead the door is now locked, bolted and barred.”22

It is unfortunate that Prime Minister Vajpayee has let his perceived need for nuclear weapons lock what he observes is “a country that represents one sixth of humanity and is the world’s largest democracy and a founder member of the United Nations” out of consideration for permanent membership on the Security Council.23 However India’s newfound exclusion will probably not be limited to the United Nations. It has been observed that nuclear proliferation “would be a major blow to India’s claim to leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement, which has made global denuclearization one of its fundamental goals.”24 India has been a great civilization for millennia and it is momentarily marginalizing itself by taking action contrary to the security interests and popular will of the world, as expressed through the NPT by every national government in the world save four.

A New Generation of Leaders

Negotiated international security arrangements only work when they recognize and build on the strengths and interests of the negotiating partners. International security regimes must be based on reality; they should seek to recognize, expand, and reinforce existing areas of agreement. India, this spring, did not have the strength to resist the temptation of meeting domestic political objectives by detonating nuclear weapons. India and Pakistan chose to define themselves in opposition to the global nonproliferation regime, an indispensable tool for future security, and for this reason they cannot at this time be leaders in the global nuclear disarmament effort. Others may have to try to take up the slack until India and Pakistan, and the five nuclear weapon states, play their central parts to reduce the global nuclear danger.

If the NWS continue to lag in fulfilling their NPT disarmament obligations and are themselves unable, for whatever reason, to lead the world toward nuclear disarmament, other states must pick up the slack and a new generation of leaders must come to the fore. South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, Egypt, Ireland, Sweden, Slovenia, and New Zealand have already demonstrated their willingness to do so by forming the New Agenda Coalition, and many more, including Japan, Germany, Canada, Australia, and Argentina could join their ranks. Non-state actors including non-governmental organizations can and do contribute as well. Furthermore, regional solutions, especially treaties creating nuclear-weapon-free zones, can move the disarmament process forward even when it is stalled at the global level.

Contrary to some claims, India’s nuclear restraint was not penalized by the NPT. Instead, the NPT offers India an opportunity to have its restraint recognized by the world community. South Africa, for instance, confirmed its status as an international leader not only because it dismantled the nuclear arsenal of the apartheid government. It also played a key leadership role in the negotiations that led to the indefinite extension of the NPT, and the subsequent conclusion of the Treaty of Pelindaba, which created the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone. Nor is South Africa alone. United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan commented on the Brazilian ratification of the NPT and the CTBT with the following words:

At a time when events in South Asia have resurrected the prospect of the nuclear arms race, Brazil and other major Powers of the region have rightly been held up as beacons of maturity for abstaining from vying for membership of the nuclear club.25

South Africa, Brazil, and the other members of the New Agenda Coalition have the right idea. Nuclear non-
proliferation and disarmament are the responsibility of every nation, because every nation has security interests that would be threatened in a world in which nuclear weapons are held by many.

India’s Opportunity

There are constructive steps that India and Pakistan can take even now. Most importantly, both countries should agree to non-weaponization and non-deployment of nuclear weapons. These are critical steps necessary to control what must be regarded as a continuing crisis. Next, India and Pakistan should look beyond regional confidence-building measures and take measures to promote nuclear disarmament. Among these should be unconditionally signing the CTBT and facilitating the conclusion of a fissile material production cut-off treaty. Ultimately, India and Pakistan should sign the NPT and reverse their nuclear weapons programs, following the example of South Africa. If we regard this outcome as desirable, the rest of the world must act with the understanding that such an outcome is probable only if there are drastic, negotiated nuclear weapons reductions by the five nuclear weapons states.

CONCLUSION

Proliferation cannot be a substitute for disarmament. The path toward a more secure world lies in reducing both the political value and the actual numbers of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons cannot be the foundation of international security. If some states continue to regard them as such, this will create pressures for their proliferation to other, possibly dangerous actors, some being national governments, some perhaps not. It is the duty of all state parties to the NPT to repair the damage done to the NPT regime. We are nearing a fork in the road of all state parties to the NPT to repair the damage done to the NPT regime. We cannot avoid making this choice much longer.

7 The full text of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons is available at the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency web site (http://www.acda.gov/treaties/npt1.htm).
10 Kux, India and the United States, p. 305.
15 “It has also been reported that India has been unable to account for a significant quantity of plutonium at the Tarapur reprocessing plant, highlighting the difficulties that may be encountered in maintaining positive control over some nuclear assets” (“Nuclear Weapons and South Asian Security,” Report of the Carnegie Task Force on Non-Proliferation and South Asian Security [Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1988], p. 67).
16 “India Says Committed.”
17 Ibid.
20 Ibid.