

142

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IMPLICATIONS OF AN INDIAN NUCLEAR WEAPON TEST

If India conducts a nuclear test explosion during the next few months, the test will have serious consequences for U.S.-India relations, including the triggering of sanctions required by current U.S. law. The impact of such a test in South Asia, however, will probably be much greater. Pakistan's leaders will come under great domestic political pressure to respond in some way, either by detonating a nuclear test explosion or by taking some other major step to demonstrate a significant nuclear weapon and/or missile capability. Such action by Pakistan, in turn, will probably result in an Indian response, launching an escalation scenario that will be extremely difficult to halt. In view of the high level of tension between the two countries, the danger of their stumbling into another war cannot be ruled out.

A nuclear arms race in South Asia, moreover, may well spill over to other states. If India and Pakistan become declared nuclear-weapon states, and there appears to be no restraint in their nuclear arms buildup, some of their neighbors may reconsider their adherence to the NPT, and the global trend toward the establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zones will probably be slowed, if not stopped, particularly in the Middle East. Similarly, our hopes of capping and reducing the level of Chinese nuclear arms will be substantially diminished.

U.S. leverage alone is probably insufficient to head off this gloomy scenario. It is possible, however, that strong, concerted intervention by all the major states could deter India and Pakistan from embarking on this dangerous course. It would require vigorous U.S. leadership to mobilize the worldwide effort required to persuade India and Pakistan that their long-term national security interests can best be served by joining, rather than obstructing, the global movement toward nuclear disarmament. To succeed, the major states would need to give the effort top priority in their dealings with South Asia. Moreover, the chances of success will be greater to the extent that the nuclear-weapon states demonstrate significant progress of their own toward global nuclear disarmament.

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