

November 27, 1998
**Memorandum to General Ralston, VCJCS, from
Strobe Talbott**

Citation:

"Memorandum to General Ralston, VCJCS, from Strobe Talbott", November 27, 1998, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Case Number F-2017-13804, Doc No. B-00002119969, US Department of State Virtual Reading Room. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/301051>

Summary:

Talbott writes to General Ralston on a policy of "no-first-use" of nuclear weapons being promoted by NATO allies, the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI), and India and Pakistan. He summarizes his recent communications with Jaswant Singh.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan

FL-2017-13804 B-00002119969

"UNCLASSIFIED"
DECLASSIFIED

4/2/2023
~~SECRET~~

THE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE

November 27, 1998

MEMORANDUM TO GENERAL RALSTON, VCJCS

FROM STROBE TALBOTT

Joe, you're kind to have called me back on Tuesday. I hope you and your wife had a pleasant Thanksgiving.

As promised, I wanted to follow up on no-first-use and ESDI, since those topics will loom large, I suspect, during your visit to the UK; and also to give you a report on my talks with Jaswant in Rome, since we sketched out what we're calling a "roadmap" for a follow-up round in New Delhi in late January. I hope you'll consider it worthwhile to join me for that mission.

NO-FIRST-USE

During my visits to London, Paris and Rome last week, I found those three Allies both apprehensive about and tempted by the boomlet for no-first-use that has been gathering force in Canada and Germany. My hosts and I didn't get deep into this subject, but I found several occasions to lay down a marker that for the US, this is a deadly serious matter and we didn't think it would do the Alliance any good to have individual Allied officials speculating aloud about changes in a bedrock principle of deterrence. I said that we all recognized that the end of the Cold War has altered the strategic landscape in Europe. The new Strategic Concept will address these changes in various ways. However, some things haven't changed, including the need to keep a U.S. nuclear umbrella over our European Allies and an inextricable link between the American and Allied defenses. I also made the point that while old threats have receded in Europe, new ones have arisen elsewhere; specifically, WMD threats from North Korea, Iraq and Libya make it impossible simply to retire first-use as part of the detritus of the Cold War.

I trust these are the points you'd want us to be stressing with our Allies. Please let me know how the whole subject looks from the vantage point of the Chiefs — and in the light of your trip.

I look forward, perhaps at one of our Deputies lunches, to talking with you, John Hamre and Jim Steinberg about how best to pursue this whole subject interagency during the weeks and months ahead.

ESDI

Sandy Berger's counterpart from No. 10 Downing Street, John Holmes, will be in Washington next week for consultations on all this — and not a moment too soon,

Declassification Authority: Geoffrey W. Chapman, Senior Reviewer,
A/GIS/IPS 2/14/2023

~~SECRET~~

FL-2017-13804

B-00002119969

"UNCLASSIFIED"

4/26/2023

since I sensed in London and Paris that Blair and Chirac, when they meet on December 4, may say something public about a UK-French-German initiative of some kind.

My principal message during my trip was: a) no surprises! and b) while we're not opposed to ESDI in principle, we wouldn't want to see anything emerge under the rubric of those initials that in any undercut the Alliance's unity of command or the integral nature of the U.S. role.

INDIA-PAKISTAN

Round 7 of my dialogue with Jaswant in Rome was pretty rough going. He and his team came armed with plenty of arguments on why we should further relax sanctions. They barely acknowledged the President's decision to use Brownback authority to resume OPIC, Ex-Im, TDA, etc. Instead, they tried to guilt-trip us for holding up World Bank project loans and for publishing the list of Indian entities covered by the remaining sanctions. They also echoed, albeit sotto voce, Vajpayee's complaints about the IMF rescue package for Pakistan as "discriminatory" against India.

They were not prepared to move at all on the benchmarks. We wrangled yet again over a moratorium on the production of fissile material and self-restraint in the development and deployment of missiles and nuclear-capable aircraft. When pressed, the Indians engaged alternately (and sometimes simultaneously) in obfuscation, sweet-talking and stone-walling: they told us they are all for strategic restraint... someday, as a "futuristic measure."

In the here and now, they want us to accept India for what it has, as of May, declared itself to be: a de facto and even de jure nuclear weapons state, with legitimate security concerns and equally legitimate aspirations to be a full participant in, and beneficiary of, the international community. They want to keep all their military options open while trying to wear down our sanctions regime through a combination of cajolery in their direct dealings with us and end-running around us to our less stringent fellow P-5ers (principally the Russians and the French).

In short, the Indians want out of the dog house on their terms, not ours.

Naturally, we can't oblige them. Principals have agreed on several occasions that there must be a breakthrough — very much on our terms, not theirs — on all four security/non-proliferation benchmarks for us to provide further sanctions relief. Even then, India must pay an ongoing price for its refusal to adhere to the NPT. Otherwise, the NPT itself will be in jeopardy.

Had Round 7 been confined to the full-team plenaries, I would probably have concluded that the road from Rome leads nowhere.

However, I had two private sessions with Jaswant that indicate there may still be some hope for movement next year, and therefore I agreed to keep the process going for at least one more round, which will take place in New Delhi in late January — I hope with your participation.

FL-2017-13804

B-00002119969

"UNCLASSIFIED"

~~SECRET~~

Jaswant talked to me privately and with apparent candor about the internal dynamics on his side. What he said helps explain the absence of movement in recent months. Emphasizing that he was speaking confidentially, he laid out his own strategy for nudging his own government toward a new position by the time of Round 8 in New Delhi two months from now. He basically confirmed what we've sensed for some time: the Vajpayee government is mired in a combination of stubbornness, resentment, confusion, division and weakness. The BJP is expected to suffer several defeats in this week's state elections. The Congress Party, having attacked the BJP for testing in May, is now attacking Vajpayee for going soft on the CTBT. At the same time, defiant nationalists are ascendant in the BJP, and they are gunning for Jaswant.

On the second day of our talks in Rome, Vajpayee announced the creation of a National Security Council with Brajesh Mishra, Vajpayee's Principal Secretary (equivalent to chief-of-staff), as Sandy Berger's new counterpart. It has been apparent from the outset that Mishra is Jaswant's rival. He certainly plays bad cop to Jaswant's good cop. It is, I'm sure, no accident that Mishra has been designated to conduct with the French a "strategic dialogue"—in which civilian nuclear cooperation is explicitly and publicly on the table—in parallel to the one Jaswant is conducting with us.* Jaswant is a member of the new NSC, but so are the two fire-breathers, Defense Minister George Fernandes and Home Minister Advani. Other factors inherent in the new structure suggest the decision represents at least a tactical victory for the bureaucrats and the Hindu nationalists and conversely, a setback for Jaswant personally and for more creative approaches generally.

For all these reasons, Jaswant was, in Rome, still noticeably on the defensive. He has not recovered the self-confidence that was so striking when you and I saw him in Delhi back in July, although he is not quite as dispirited and passive-aggressive as he was in September, when you gave that good dinner for him in Washington. He did not rise to the bait of several opportunities I gave him to complain about any of his more conspicuously jut-jawed colleagues by name (Fernandes, Advani and, of course, Mishra); but he certainly wanted me to believe that he's fighting a rather lonely, uphill battle for what he calls "common sense within our government and reconciliation with yours."[†]

More specifically, Jaswant told me, point-blank, that he wants to use the next two months to use the NSC to produce the Strategic Defense Review (SDR) that he first told you and me about in Delhi in July. Jaswant said that he wants to see if he can

* I went through Paris on my way to Rome, largely so that I could beard the lions on their lily pad — I mean, in their den. It was a somewhat surreal encounter. They looked us in the eye and totally denied what we know they are doing: teasing the Indians with a Franco-Indian political and commercial relationship that will fill the vacuum created by U.S. sanctions and remonstrations.

† He said to me twice something that he has told others as well, including Tom Graham (former ACDA acting director, now a leader in the NGO field on arms control): "I want to help bring India back into the mainstream of disarmament and non-proliferation, which is her natural place."

~~SECRET~~

FL-2017-13804

B-00002119969

"UNCLASSIFIED"

~~SECRET~~
7/26/2025

get Vajpayee to agree to write into the SDR several self-limiting statements of military intent that would conform to what we're trying to get them to do under the rubric of strategic restraint. As you know, what we're looking for are such measures as: a ceiling on the number of missile types India develops (preferably holding at the two land-based types already underway and foregoing sea-launched ones that are on the drawing board); limits on the number of missiles produced; an undertaking not to "co-locate" missiles and their launchers and warheads (i.e., a meaningful translation into fact Jaswant's rhetorical endorsement of "operational non-deployment").

For that to happen, Vajpayee has to side with Jaswant in getting the Indian leadership to bite some bullets for which it currently has no taste. Not only does the government have to get serious about the SDR — it has to build public and parliamentary support for what would be seen as at least partial accommodation with us.* The Indians also have to get a clearer idea of what kind of benefits they can expect if and as they meet our benchmarks.

With all that in mind, Jaswant and I discussed what we are calling a "roadmap" for 1999. We would use the January meeting to do four things with as much specificity and as much mutual commitment as possible:

1. Set a year from now (fall 1999) as the target for getting U.S.-Indian relations back on track;
2. Specify what the Indians would have to do by then and what we would be prepared to do, including a Presidential trip toward the end of 1999[†];
3. Indicate that we are prepared to respond to interim progress on the benchmarks (e.g., signing the CTBT) with interim rewards (e.g., further relaxation of sanctions, greater mil-mil cooperation);
4. Describe a vision of the new bilateral relationship that would evolve in the wake of the Presidential visit.

I see an important JCS component in several parts of this plan. First, you can make — from the military standpoint — several key points about the dangers of the road down which India is now heading and about the security benefits of strategic restraint. Second, you can talk to areas for possible future mil-mil cooperation in the future, if we can reconcile our positions on the benchmarks.

If you agreed to come, I think it would be important for you to have your own meetings with Fernandes and their senior uniformed types. Also, I'd like to suggest that both of us do some "outreach" — i.e., speeches, media and seminars with think tanks

* Jaswant privately told me that the SDR might be finished in 6-8 weeks, i.e., before Round 8.

† I do not think we can prudently plan for a POTUS trip in the spring. There's simply too much work to be done. Also, the Indian government will be embroiled in a budgetary fight with the Parliament during the period when we were holding open a possible window — April-March — and that alone is likely to keep Vajpayee & Co. from making bold steps in the security field.

~~SECRET~~

FL-2017-13804

B-00002119969

"UNCLASSIFIED"

~~SECRET~~
4/26/2025

and media. I say that because I've found that there is a lot of popular (and parliamentary) misunderstanding in India about what exactly we are, and aren't, asking India to do near-term. The government has been fairly opaque, allowing the impression to build that we're "demanding" total rollback now — i.e., renunciation of nukes — as well as a flight-test ban on missiles, a unilateral fis-mat ban and other measures of that kind that in fact don't figure in our strategic-restraints paper.

I gave a speech at Brookings two weeks ago (text attached). It was reprinted in *The Times of India* and generated a lot of coverage and controversy, much of it, I think, basically helpful to our case. It's partly because of that experience that I think you and I should do some public-affairs work while we're there.

The New Delhi Round could, finally, produce a take-off in this diplomatic effort. I think there's enough chance of that to make it worth an all-out try, but I also think the odds are enough against us that we need to be fully prepared for more sputtering on the runway. That's better than a crash, but if it happens we'll need to have at the ready a strategy for managing another year or two of the kind of civil but basically unproductive dialogue we had in the plenary sessions in Rome.

I'm discussing with Sandy how to use the next couple of weeks to flesh out, inter-agency, our ideas for the roadmap. Starting Monday, we'll resume our daily meetings of the India-Pakistan team, in which you've been able represented by Larry. Here are several questions, objectives and guiding principles that I have in mind to pursue in our brainstorming.

- What is our own bottom line on sufficient progress on the benchmarks? In particular, what do we consider to be the must-have elements in the non-paper on strategic restraint that Bob Einhorn gave the Indians in July?
- What are the implications of various imaginable outcomes — including those that by our lights we might consider success — for other key relationships, particularly Japan and Korea? Those are two countries that have stayed on the right side of the line with respect to nukes. Any leniency with regard to India (and Pakistan) could lead them — Korea in the near term, Japan in the longer term — to rethink their position in ways that could cause a lot of problems for us and the world.
- What are the implications for our global non-proliferation policy if we don't succeed in getting India and Pakistan to accept our benchmarks?
- Even if our South Asian friends do accept our benchmarks, there's no way in the foreseeable future they'll accept the NPT. Therefore, we've said all along (although we've avoided this figure of speech in public) that we need to make sure that when we let them out of anti-NPT hell, we don't let them into NPT heaven; we've got to make for them a place in purgatory. What exactly does that mean? We need to refine our thinking in that regard.
- How can we develop further our thinking about military-to-military cooperation? (I hope you and others at DoD will give us plenty of input on this, with both ideas and cautions.)

~~SECRET~~

FL-2017-13804

B-00002119969

"UNCLASSIFIED"

~~SECRET~~
4/26/2023

- Should we broaden the scope of our thinking about additional ways that we might use to bring India into active participation in the cause of non-proliferation?
- We should make a clear distinction, both in our own minds and in our diplomacy with the Indians, between rewards-for-progress — i.e., steps we'd be ready to take *before* the Presidential trip — and the steps that might *follow* a *real* breakthrough and the POTUS trip.

In the first category might be a narrowing of the entities list and the expansion of high-level contacts; in the second, some loosening of restrictions on technology transfer.*

We have to be careful, and tough, about pushing back against the Indian penchant for trying to get us to front-load our concessions while they make theirs in the form of rhetorical flourishes and generalities. They are past masters at offering ambiguities and pocketing tangibles — at asking on a down payment before committing themselves to a final price or even to their willingness to sell. Our recent use of the Brownback waiver authority has left us with some additional sanctions relief, but it's now the Indians' turn to do something *concrete*.

- On the major benchmarks, "concrete" means closing off strategic options. We are not, as the Indians sometimes charge, "dictating" to them what they can and cannot do in developing their deterrent; nor are we negotiating a bilateral START-type treaty with them; nor, for that matter, telling them they have to negotiate one with Pakistan (or China). At the same time, we don't want them to present us with a fait accompli when their Strategic Defense Review comes out. We need them to factor our views into the SDR, along the lines of Bob's non-paper. So far the Indians have dodged and weaved, avoiding a serious expert-level engagement on the substance of the paper.† In short, we need to use January in New Delhi to launch a frank discussion of the timing and format of India's adoption of its unilateral strategic restraints in a manner that meets our benchmarks without appearing to knuckle under to American pressures.
- We will need help from other countries, especially China and France. We want the Chinese to be helpful by engaging directly with the Indians and by supporting a fissile material moratorium. We should consider moving this issue considerably

* We should look at the possibility of beginning talks on updating/replacing the 1984 MOU on tech transfer. That document was part of the Cold War framework for U.S.-Indian trade. It was intended to facilitate transfer of dual-use technology while meeting our concerns about possible diversion to the USSR. Indian performance on that score was rather good; however, we subsequently adopted an increasingly restrictive posture in our interpretation of the MOU because of our concern that India continued to develop missiles and nuclear weapons. The MOU is now OBE, and the Indians wish to use the process of updating it as a means of relaxing U.S. high-tech restrictions.

† The Pakistanis, by contrast, have engaged, if only for purposes of explaining to us in gory detail why our suggestions are unacceptable to them.

~~SECRET~~

FL-2017-13804

B-00002119969

"UNCLASSIFIED"

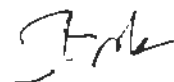
~~SECRET~~
4/26/2023

higher in our bilateral agenda with the Chinese, including at the Presidential level. We want the French to avoid getting into a bidding match with us for Indian affections.

I realize that this memo has been heavily tilted toward India. That's no accident. While we'll obviously use the Sharif visit to push the Pakistanis as fast and as far as we can, I remain convinced that, unlike in Aesop's fable, either the hare is going to have to lead the tortoise across the finish line, or both critters are going to keep going around in dangerous circles.

Finally, as I mentioned over the phone, Jaswant is hoping that we can be in New Delhi for the "Beating the Retreat" ceremony at the Red Fort, which Matt Daley, Frank Wisner and other South Asia wallahs tell me is one of the great military ceremonies on the face of the earth.

Safe travels — and I look forward to talking with you when you get home.

~~SECRET~~