

## **December 28, 1998**

### **Letter, Strobe Talbott to Jaswant Singh**

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#### **Summary:**

Talbott writes to Jaswant Singh about India's nuclear policy.

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United States Department of State  
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The Deputy Secretary of State  
Washington, D.C. 20520

December 28, 1998

Dear Jaswant:

First, let me once again congratulate you on your elevation (or, as I've learned to say, *induction*) as Minister of External Affairs. You've heard also from Madeleine in this regard. She and I talked about you shortly before she departed to Colorado on a vacation with her family, and she's looking forward to working with you on the whole range of issues where the U.S. and India can bring their energies and influence to bear in furtherance of common interests.

Let me also say that, since sending you a brief kudos December 6 when I learned of your posting, I've seen several references in the Indian press to the exception you've made to protocolary practice by agreeing to keep the portfolio of our dialogue, in addition to all the others that burden you. On a professional level, I welcome this decision, and not just because changing interlocutors in mid-stream would further complicate what is already, for both the U.S. and India, a daunting task. On a personal level, I'm also gratified. In work like ours, it's all too rare that one is able, while seeking to advance interests of state, also to develop a genuine friendship.

The President, the Secretary and the rest of us appreciated the tone and content of the Prime Minister's remarks in his statement to Parliament on December 12. In addition to his reaffirmation of the positions he set forth when addressing the United Nations in September, we noted his reference to the views of Indian scientists regarding CTBT as well as his clear statement that "the US and other interlocutors are interested in understanding our position and policies better." Indeed we are.

The Honorable Jaswant Singh

Minister of External Affairs,  
Government of India.

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As you know better than I — but as I have come to appreciate — there was a time, not too long ago, when the very fact of a dialogue such as ours would have occasioned a political firestorm in New Delhi. If nothing else, this kind of discussion is now becoming a normal part of U.S.-Indian discourse. This in itself is an important step forward in our relations.

All in all, we feel that the Prime Minister laid the basis for a good meeting when Joe Ralston and our team arrives on January 29. As of now, we plan to arrive in New Delhi at about 7:30 a.m.. That's the earliest we can get there because of an obligation that Joe has here in Washington, but it should give us a chance to freshen up and have a preliminary meeting with you and your team before we present ourselves — Joe in his uniform, I in mine (pinstripes) — for the Beating Retreat ceremony.

Since you, as I, will no doubt be spending some of the intervening five weeks preparing for that meeting, I thought it might be helpful if I were to write you about how I see the challenges we face, and also to solicit your own view of the road ahead.

As with the earlier two letters I sent you, on July 13 and August 4, I'm aware that, once again, I'm departing from the forms and tactics of traditional diplomacy. When you and I first met last June, we agreed that we were going to tackle our assignment in the spirit of working together to solve a mutual problem. We laid out to each other as clearly as we could the irreducible requirements of our respective national interests and goals; we identified fixed points on the landscape as well as potential areas of flexibility. Since then, we have sought, in effect, to draw a map that takes us to our destination while bypassing the immovable obstacles, and respecting the landmarks, along the way.

To put it differently, ours has been an exercise in reverse-engineering: starting from recognition and accommodation of each other's bedrock principles, we've agreed to design a set of measures — some on your side, some on ours — that serve our common purpose.

It was with that approach in mind that I worked within my government to extract from the dozen or so P-5/G-8 benchmarks the four that constitute the U.S.'s bottom line in the non-proliferation/security/arms-control sphere: 1) CTBT, 2) *multilateral* fissile material moratorium, 3) *unilateral* strategic restraint, and 4) export control. With definitive progress on those four, we can get past sanctions and get on with a new phase in the relationship; without such progress, we can't.

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As for the Indian bottom line, I've tried hard to understand both *what* it is and *why* it's where it is. My principal source in this inquiry has been yourself, although I've also listened carefully to others and read a great deal of material provided to me by Dick, Rick and other colleagues. My sense is that the essence of your position, like ours, breaks down into four components:

1. **Sovereignty.** India will do what it feels it must for its own security; it won't take orders or submit to pressure from anyone else.
2. **China.** India has security concerns beyond what it sees as the threat from Pakistan. Specifically, it feels it must be prepared to deter a possible future threat from China.
3. **Nukes.** India is going to keep its nuclear weapons, and it is going to do so in numbers and disposition sufficient, in the Prime Minister's words, "to maintain a minimum deterrent, but one that is credible" and that will reassure all countries about the purely defensive nature of India's nuclear capability.
4. **Missiles.** India will acquire ballistic missiles, will carry out developmental and testing activities sufficient to ensure their credibility, and will — once again, as the PM said — locate its missile "assets in a manner that ensures survivability and capacity of an adequate response."

As you know, on the first point, there's absolutely no disagreement between us; on the second, we see the China factor somewhat differently, but not in ways that question India's right to define and deal with the challenge by its own light.

On the third and fourth points — "fismat" and missiles — there is a basic disagreement between us. The nub of your view, as I discern it, is that India not only needs nukes and missiles, but has a *right* to them that flows from the first principle of sovereignty. A corollary of this view is that the NPT in general and American policy in particular are discriminatory. The nub of our contrary view is that, rights aside, all states, including India, have an interest in promoting regional and global non-proliferation and disarmament. We believe that India's decision to test and proclaim herself as nuclear-weapons state, even though within her sovereign rights, ran contrary to that interest.

These are the disagreements that you and I are trying to find a way not so much to *resolve* as to *manage* in a fashion that allows us to resume positive momentum in the bilateral relationship. Even if we succeed in that — even if we get to our village — there will still have to

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be certain constraints to our relationship, primarily in the area of nuclear cooperation. We will continue to have obligations to the NPT and the NSG that will limit how far we can go with you in certain areas. But, with the kind of breakthrough we've been aiming for, the U.S. would nonetheless be able to move toward the sort of bilateral relationship we have envisioned. On our side, we would hope to do that by lifting the Glenn sanctions, by beginning in earnest the Strategic Dialogue (with capital letters) that was sidetracked by the tests, by developing certain forms of energy cooperation, by pursuing an agenda for strengthened economic trade and investment, by rebuilding our science and technology relationship, perhaps starting with the S&T Forum, and in other ways as well making good on the hopes that both our leaders have expressed for the tone and content of U.S.-Indian relations at the outset of the next century.

I would ask you and your colleagues to take full account of three aspects of our position — two, as it were, “soft” and the other very, very hard.

The first soft aspect is the extent to which we, the U.S., have gone to understand and accommodate, though not formally accept, what we recognize as the immutable, non-negotiable basics in the Indian position, as I've summarized them above. We believe that our four non-proliferation bottom lines should be compatible with yours — or at least they would be, if you could translate the generalities of your stated position with regard to nuclear weaponry into the specifics of your defense posture.

This consistency between our proposals and your doctrine is, as I say, no accident. We intended and designed our position with that consistency in mind. That's why, in laying out a pathway for removing the sanctions regime, we acknowledged that India will not find it possible to adhere in the near or even medium term to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapons state or to eschew further missile tests. It's why the nonpaper we gave you in Delhi in July contained suggested measures for *India to take on its own* — and measures that fit what we continue to regard as India's defense and deterrence needs *as India herself has defined them*. It is our assessment that the Prime Minister has, in his carefully chosen (and carefully read) words to the Parliament, set forth a position that is not necessarily at odds with the concepts that you and I have discussed. I look forward to a detailed discussion of this topic when we meet.

The second aspect of our position that I hope you will fully understand is the way in which we have sought to alleviate sanctions in

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recognition of, and in response to, the Prime Minister's statement of  
intention with regard to CTBT. The President moved quickly this fall to  
use the authorities permitted by Congress (the Brownback Amendment)  
to restore the EXIM and OPIC programs that tangibly benefit India's  
economy (a circumstance not shared by your neighbor) and IMET.

We've done this for two reasons: first, because we feel the  
political courage — and, I might add, the strategic wisdom — of the  
Prime Minister's announcements on CTBT merit it; but second, because  
we understand the importance of our moving — and being seen to move  
— *together*, i.e., in a synchronized, step-by-reciprocal-step fashion.

In this respect, let me emphasize that we are acutely aware that in  
our interaction with your country, we're dealing with a vigorous  
democracy, in which the government must build a base of support for its  
policies both in parliament and in public opinion. That means that we,  
on the American side, must take special care not to create the  
impression that we're issuing pronouncements which we expect India  
to obey (i.e., "sovereignty-violative suggestions," to borrow your  
terminology). In your own December 16 speech to the Parliament  
(which in several respects I found deft and — to use one of our favorite  
words, "constructive"), you took us to task in this regard. In reply, I  
would simply say that we have, in the three months since the PM's  
speech at the UNGA, gone to some lengths to meet India halfway in the  
sense of matching progress on the non-proliferation front with  
sanctions-relief. While it may not be widely recognized in New Delhi,  
securing passage of the Brownback Amendment was not easy. There  
was, to put it mildly, no groundswell of support for Brownback. The  
opponents of sanctions relief on the Hill fought back hard. India's many  
friends in this town were instrumental in the ensuing deliberations, but  
their efforts — and the Administration's — while successful in the near  
term, will prove unavailing over the longer term if we do not make  
substantial progress in the months ahead. If we fail, the Brownback  
authorities will lapse automatically and the relationship will seek a  
lower level.

The Indian response to sanctions-relief has been mixed. There  
has been a good deal of official comment and press commentary —  
much of it that seems to be officially inspired — to the effect that the  
U.S. has been miserly and unreasonable on the issue of sanctions. Not  
only does this sort of complaint underestimate the forthcoming nature of  
what we've done, and undercut our efforts to build support for our  
policy within our own equally vigorous democracy, but — and this is  
the point I wish most to stress — it also seems often to be based on the  
impression in India that CTBT is the only salient and legitimate issue on

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the agenda of our dialogue; and, accordingly, that American "harping"  
(as it's sometimes characterized) on fismat and restraint constitutes  
unacceptable meddling in India's strategic affairs.

This brings me to what I think is the Gordian knot that I hope we can cut when we meet in New Delhi. It also brings me to the "hard" aspect of the U.S. position: we can't settle for less than definitive movement, and *soon*, on *all four* benchmarks. I press the point because, to be frank, I sensed in Rome that there may be a belief on your side that Indian "patience," or "firmness" will "pay off" by inducing further American "concessions" (you'll understand why I put all four phrases in quotation marks). In other words, there may be a working assumption on the part of some on your side that we, your American interlocutors, don't entirely mean what we say about the four legs of the elephant being truly necessary for the animal to walk (at least with us on board); that perhaps the beast can be mobile on two legs (CTBT and export controls).

If there is such an assessment or expectation on your side about what the U.S. is, or will be, willing and able to do by way of further unreciprocated movement, then it is quite wrong.

Frankly, Jaswant, there is, on the American side, a growing doubt about whether India is "ready" to engage fully on all four parts of the non-pro agenda. That skepticism arises when our embassy in Delhi cannot get a clear answer on the role of the Prithvi missile in your recent exercises. I can imagine that there might be those who would say that this is none of our business. I would hope, however, that the countervailing and prevailing view would be that it *is* a legitimate subject for the kind of dialogue you and I have sought to develop, since the role of the Prithvi is surely a litmus test of how the Prime Minister's statements about Indian defense apply to the realities of military posture and activity.

Another example of our difficulty in truly and fully engaging has been on fissile material. Here the U.S. has indeed come halfway, and we await your meeting us there. As part of our effort to bring our bottom lines into alignment with yours, we made an important adjustment to our position: namely, we suggested that India state its willingness to join a moratorium on production *in the context of other states that have tested making the same commitment*. Yet considerable time elapsed before your spokesmen even acknowledged that we were not talking about a unilateral step by India. The response, when it came, was "serious attention to any negotiated multilateral initiatives in the course of FMCT negotiations." This formulation does not fill me with

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optimism, although I will continue to hope that India will see a real opportunity for leadership in the area of disarmament without cost to its strategic interests. India could call for a moratorium by all those states that have tested nuclear weapons, with its own participation conditioned on all the others doing likewise. Those states that continued to produce would be exposed as recalcitrant; and, unless they changed their position, India would likely continue its current practices.

By the way, I am convinced, based upon the briefings that I have received from our experts on fissile material production capabilities in the countries concerned that a moratorium of the type we have discussed would advance India's national security as well as its diplomatic interests. I hope we can discuss this subject in greater detail next month.

My general point, Jaswant, is that without mutual satisfaction on strategic restraint and fissile material, we're not going to get to the kind of outcome we both want. I've explained why that is before, but let me repeat it here: CTBT and export control, by themselves, constitute necessary but *insufficient* assurance that India is willing to define its nuclear-deterrence policy in a way that brings it into accord with what we see as the *minimum* requirements of international responsibility in the area of non-proliferation and disarmament.

If India feels it must continue to produce fissile material in an open-ended and unfettered fashion, *no matter what other states do or promise not to do in this regard*, and if it feels it must keep open all options in terms of the development, testing, and deployment of missiles, then CTBT adherence loses much of its strategic and political significance. It gains significance only through the synergy of self-restraint in all four areas: the testing of weapons, the production of explosive material for the weapons, the acquisition and disposition of delivery means for those weapons, and the export of dangerous technology that might allow others to develop such weapons.

From India, so far, we have heard general pledges about restraint but not the sort of specific assurances or plans that could give us, your neighbors, or the international community, confidence that India is genuinely committed to limiting its strategic capabilities and avoiding a nuclear and missile race. Indeed, public statements by Indian officials (for example, regarding the sea-based Danush missile) suggest the opposite: that India is intent on keeping open the widest possible range of strategic options.

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That's why I hope that when our team comes to Delhi in late January, we can finally have a good and detailed discussion of Indian thinking about strategic restraint.

In that connection, I want to underscore a point I have made before: when we suggest restraint in India's defense posture, we are *not* seeking a bilateral agreement between our two governments. We know, as the Prime Minister told the Parliament, that "India will define its own requirements," and that it will do so "on its own assessment of the security environment." What we are looking for, therefore, are unilateral expressions of Indian policy that are sufficiently in harmony with American thinking about what constitutes restraint for the U.S. to be able to undertake unilateral steps of its own (including un-doing steps it felt compelled to take last May).

It is also worth reiterating that we do *not* expect India to commit itself to permanent limitations of its defense posture. As you pointed out succinctly on December 16, India's approach is "dictated by and determined in the context of India's security environment. There is no fixity. Therefore, as our security environment changes and alters and as new demands begin to be placed on it, our requirements, too, are bound to be re-evaluated." We fully appreciate this and, consequently, we are asking for Indian assurances that would apply *under present security conditions* (e.g., that in the current security environment, India not flight test missile types other than the land-based Prithvi and the newly-modified version of Agni). Should the security environment deteriorate in the future, India would naturally have the right to alter its plans.

In addition to hoping to pursue these subjects with as much as specificity and candor as you feel possible, we will also come to New Delhi prepared to elaborate — with comparable specificity — ways of sequencing and coordinating American and Indian movement toward the village. We know that India cannot and will not take — or appear to take — steps in the hoped-for direction under duress from us or anyone else. We trust you see with equal clarity that we cannot take further steps on our side without both the appearance and the reality of real movement on your part. Hence the idea of the roadmap for the next phase of the journey that we are taking together. We'll come with a full kit bag. We will be prepared to discuss those steps we would take as India takes ones of its own toward the benchmarks, as well as those that might follow later, in the context of what we hope would be a successful Presidential visit.

So here's hoping we can, together, take a quantum leap forward in New Delhi. Otherwise, the prospects will dim, at least in American

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eyes, of ever squaring our bottom lines. In that unhappy but quite possible contingency, then I think we — both of us — will need to think quite differently about the challenge of the year ahead; we'll need to lower our sights; instead of aiming for maximization of mutual advantage, we'll need to work together on managing our mutual disappointment. I stress *mutual* disappointment: for our part, we would be disappointed at the prospect of India's insistence, despite its doctrinal rhetoric to the contrary, on keeping all its strategic options open; you would be disappointed at the equally open-ended continuation of sanctions and other impediments to enhanced cooperation; and we'll both be disappointed that a promising opportunity has been lost for fulfilling the vast, and alas long-frustrated, potential of U.S.-Indian relations.

Given that fairly stark choice, there's little doubt in our mind what you and your Prime Minister would like to see happen in 1999 — and I assure you that my President and Secretary have the same hope.

Let me close by taking the occasion, with the full endorsement of Brooke, to wish you and your family the best possible new year. I understand that December 31 is celebrated with some enthusiasm in India. You, and our common undertaking, will be very much on my own mind as that midnight approaches. I will hoist a glass of the appropriate adult beverage (probably one with bubbles) in your direction, and I will give priority on my list of New Year's resolutions to a determination to do everything in my power to ensure the success of our venture.

Very best regards,



Strobe Talbott