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India declaration threatens global system of nuclear controls

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India's declaration that it has the "capacity for a big bomb" threatens to unravel the entire international system for curbing the threat of nuclear weapons.

That system, codified in the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, was based on the understanding that the five countries testing nuclear devices before 1967 would be the only ones permitted to hold such weapons.

The five self-declared nuclear powers - the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China - in turn agreed to prevent the spread of such technology to other countries.

But India, which never signed the non-proliferation treaty, has now pushed its way into the nuclear club.

"India is now a nuclear weapons state," Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was quoted as saying in an interview with India Today magazine. "We have the capacity for a big bomb now."

Politically, Vajpayee's announcement is potentially a bigger bombshell than India's five underground nuclear tests. Indian officials have been careful to differentiate between their tests and weapons, saying only "devices" were tested at a desert range this week.

By declaring itself a nuclear state, India is in effect arguing that it now holds the same status as the big five nuclear powers - even if it is not internationally recognized.

The implied message is that if the United States and the others want India to disarm, they must talk about the future of their own arsenals. The risk is that if India gets away with its gamble, other countries may follow.

"This may well trigger a new wave of proliferation, the likes of which have not been seen since the end of World War II," said Paul Leventhal of the Nuclear Control Institute, a Washington think tank. "One has to assume that Iran is watching closely, as is Iraq. One also has to wonder what Japan and Germany will be thinking down the line."

The international community has known India could produce a nuclear bomb since it exploded a "peaceful nuclear device" in 1974. Several other countries, including Israel, Pakistan and Iran, are believed to have nuclear bombs or the ability to produce them relatively quickly.

But no country beyond the five self-declared nuclear powers - who also are members of the U.N. Security Council - had publicly admitted having the bomb.

India and other developing nations have long complained that the international nuclear control agreements are flawed because they permit the five powers to keep their weapons.

India argued this position in trying to block the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which the U.N. General Assembly approved in 1996. The treaty, signed by the five nuclear powers, bans test explosions.

But the Indians insisted during negotiations that the five nuclear states should agree to negotiations on the status of their existing arsenals.

Levanthal speculated Vajpayee may be trying to provoke neighboring Pakistan into testing its own device, giving India an excuse to resume testing. He said nuclear experts believe India needs a few more tests to build a hydrogen bomb.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Robert Reid has been the chief AP correspondent at the United Nations since 1995.