

India's playing with fire

Last week India made its first successful launch of a medium-range missile. The Agni — Hindi for fire — lofted a one-ton test payload 1,500 miles over the Indian Ocean. A payload, neighbors within the Agni's range unhappily noted, that can also carry a sizable nuclear warhead.

Such news may startle people used to thinking of India as a land of ox carts and beggars. But poverty and decrepitude are only one face of Mother India. A far more important one is India's steady emergence as a technological and military power — as this column has been recording for some time.

India is by now the world's leading producer of computer programming. Its computer industry is growing fast. India manufactures jet fighters, missiles, radars, ships and tanks. The navy already has one nuclear attack sub and is due to receive four more. The addition of at least two new 30,000-ton aircraft carriers will turn India's already sizable fleet into a world-class navy.

In fact, Indian strategists openly discuss India's sphere of influence extending as far south as the coast of South Africa and east to Australia. Critics of India, and there are many, grumble that the Indians are bent on restoring the old British Raj — a sort of Pax Hind — over the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean.

India's growing power has alarmed not only New Delhi's neighbors but the Americans, as well. President George Bush has just launched a major new initiative to stop Third World nations from getting access to western or Soviet missile technology. Welcome to the latest media flap: The medium-range missile proliferation crisis. The U.S. is now leaning on India to halt its missile program.

Washington is also putting a great deal of pressure on India to stop its not-so-secret development of nuclear weapons.

India's response, so far, has been to tell the U.S. to go jump in the Bay of Bengal. We are a great power, 790 million people strong, say the Indians. Why can the Yanks or Soviets or Brits have

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"I want something that reeks of money."

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nuclear weapons and missiles and we can't? Who came down from Mt. Sinai and said only light-skinned folk can carry the big stick? Our often menacing neighbor China has lots of nuclear weapons. Pakistan is going nuclear. We have every right to defend ourselves and to acquire the weapons that give a great power prestige.

Well, I agree with the Indians. They have just as much right and need for nuclear weapons, missiles and the like as the great powers. So does smaller Pakistan, which feels itself menaced by an aggressive India. It's time the West accepted India — at least into the anteroom of the great power club.

But being a great power also demands responsible behavior. Unfortunately, India has been doing just the opposite of late. Little Nepal, scrunched atop the Himalayas between India and China, has just been subjected to a punishing Indian trade blockade. India regards Nepal as a protectorate and expects the Nepalese to jump when New Delhi calls the tune.

In recent years, Nepal has been improving relations with China. The Chinese even built a road into Nepal from Tibet, an act that set off alarm bells in the Indian defence ministry.

Indians are hypersensitive about the small Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim — the latter of which was invaded and annexed by India. When Nepal made a deal to buy some Chinese anti-aircraft guns, New Delhi reacted by imposing a blockade on Nepal's imports, including fuel, 99% of which comes in from India.

The Nepalese, after much discomfort and a sizable scare, are backing down on their independent stance. But India's neighbors, who worry greatly about New Delhi's growing assertiveness, have been deeply upset by India's crude bullying of little Nepal. Fears that India is intent on assuming the self-appointed role of policeman of West Asia have sharpened.

India has, in recent memory, invaded Portuguese Goa, fought a war with China and four or so wars with Pakistan, invaded East Pakistan, occupied part of Ceylon and annexed Sikkim. Such muscle-flexing is not what many foreigners expect of the land of the great Mahatma Gandhi.

Now it is Nepal's turn.

Who, the neighbors are asking, is next?

Probably Pakistan. Skirmishing has broken out again high up on the Siachen Glacier between the two old enemies. Trouble is also brewing in the India state of Kashmir, where the Moslem majority wants to join Pakistan. If India keeps throwing around its newly acquired weight, these irritants could well turn ugly.

New Delhi needs caution and restraint even more than new missiles. Bullying will not earn India the kind of respect it so ardently desires.