

The truth behind the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal

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Global Research, July 29, 2005

The Hindu 29 July 2005

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

In opening the door to nuclear commerce with India, Washington has confirmed how much an alliance with New Delhi is worth to it. But is anybody on the Indian side doing the math?

IN THE fullness of time, last week's nuclear agreement between India and the United States will be seen as one of those decisive moments in international politics when two powers who have been courting each other for some time decide finally to cross the point of no return. The U.S. and India have 'come out', so to speak, and the world will never be the same again.

Every world order needs rules in order to sustain itself but sometimes the rules can become a hindrance to the hegemonic strength of the power that underpins that order. Following India's nuclear tests in 1998, the U.S. had two options: continuing to believe the Indian nuclear genie could be put back, or harnessing India's evident strategic weight for its own geopolitical aims before that power grows too immense or is harnessed by others like Europe or China. The U.S. has chosen the latter option, and the joint statement released by President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on July 18 is the most dramatic textual manifestation of what Washington is attempting to do.

India too, had a choice. It could use its nuclear weapons status as a lever to push for a multipolar world system as well as for global restraints on the development of weapons of mass destruction. Or it could use its status as an instrument to help perpetuate an order based on the production of insecurity and violence in which it eventually hoped to be accommodated as a junior partner. The erstwhile Vajpayee Government was never interested in the former option and longed desperately for the latter. The fact that Dr. Singh has managed this is the real source of the BJP's bitterness, not the fact that India's nuclear weapons capability is to be capped (which it is not).

Those in India who marvel at how Mr. Bush could blithely walk away from 40 years of non-proliferation policy do not understand the tectonic shift that is taking place in the bilateral relationship as a result of increasing fears in U.S. business and strategic circles about China. Giving India anything less, or insisting that it cap or scrap its nuclear weapons, is seen by Washington's neo-conservatives as tantamount to strengthening China in the emerging balance of power in Asia. "By integrating India into the non-proliferation order at the cost of capping the size of its eventual nuclear deterrent," Ashley Tellis argued in a recent monograph, "[the U.S. would] threaten to place New Delhi at a severe disadvantage vis-à-vis Beijing, a situation that could not only undermine Indian security but also U.S. interests in Asia in the face of the prospective rise of Chinese power over the long term" ([India as a New Global Power: An Action Agenda for the United States, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005](#)). [This, then, is the real value of the deal in American eyes and the Indian public should be aware of it.](#)

Predictably, critics in the U.S. have raised objections of one type or another. The non-proliferation lobby argues that President Bush's decision to sell nuclear technology and equipment to India will encourage other countries to go down the nuclear path. Not so say the advocates. Mr. Tellis — a former RAND Corporation analyst who served as an advisor to Robert Blackwill when he was U.S. Ambassador to India — is most forthright. He acknowledges the contradiction between the two goals of U.S. foreign policy — building India up as a counter to China and upholding the non-proliferation regime — but says the circle can be squared. His solution: don't jettison the regime "but, rather, selectively [apply] it in practice." In other words, different countries should be treated differently "based on their friendship and value to the U.S." With one stroke of the Presidential pen, India has become something more than a 'major non-Nato ally' of the U.S. It has joined the Free World. It has gone from being a victim of nuclear discrimination to a beneficiary. India is not alone. Israel is already there to give it company.

From a strategic perspective, one of the most puzzling aspects of the joint statement was the inclusion of a reiteration by India of its unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing without the U.S. making an explicit reciprocal commitment to abide by its own 1992 moratorium. At stake is not a formal question of protocol but the very real danger that the U.S. might go down the path of testing at some point in the future.

The [2002 Nuclear Posture Review](#) was quite explicit on this point: "The United States has not conducted nuclear tests since 1992 and supports the continued observance of the testing moratorium. While the U.S. is making every effort to maintain the stockpile without additional nuclear testing, this may not be possible for the indefinite future." Stockpile safety is, of course, a ruse, given the fact that the U.S. is running active research programmes on a new generation of smaller and 'smarter' nuclear weapons like 'mini-nukes' and deep earth penetrators. Earlier this month, in fact, [the U.S. Senate voted to keep alive the bunker-buster programme](#) in the face of demands that it be scrapped.

The development of deadly new nuclear weapons by the U.S. should be a matter of great concern to India for their eventual deployment will degrade the security environment in the world and Asia. The same is true of the U.S. missile defence programme, which India, regrettably, will continue to remain engaged with. The Pentagon's goal in developing a missile shield is '[full-spectrum dominance, including the weaponisation of space](#). Preventing this has been a major goal of most countries at the Conference on Disarmament (CD), with China insisting [that a treaty on the prevention of an arms race in outer space \(PAROS\) is as important as the fissile material cut-off treaty \(FMCT\)](#), which would place no effective constraint on the U.S. or Russian arsenal because of their huge stockpiles of fissile material. In agreeing to "work with the U.S." on an FMCT, India has accorded primacy to this treaty over PAROS and other long-standing Indian goals at the CD such as negative security assurances and comprehensive disarmament where the U.S. is dragging its feet.

Hidden costs

Of all the misgivings present in the public mind, it is the fear of a quid pro quo on some other front that the Prime Minister most needs to dispel. Mr. Tellis, whose report on India-U.S. relations formed a valuable input to the Bush administration's thinking, argued, inter alia, that allowing India access to U.S. nuclear material and equipment would make New Delhi more likely to help further American strategic goals in the region. "[It] would buttress [India's] potential utility as a hedge against a rising China, encourage it to pursue economic

and strategic policies aligned with U.S. interests, and shape its choices in regard to global energy stability... “

When it comes to “global energy stability” are India’s interests in alignment with those of the U.S.? Clearly not. It is not a coincidence that the two “American concerns” a Wall Street Journal editorial demanded the Prime Minister address during his visit were India’s relations with Myanmar and Iran. Both these countries have gas reserves that are vital for our energy security. Addressing the Africa-Asia summit in Jakarta in April this year, [the Prime Minister had said](#): “While our continents include both major producers and consumers of energy, the framework within which we produce and consume energy is determined elsewhere. We must end this anomaly.” And yet, in baldly stating that no international bank would want to underwrite the Iran gas pipeline, Dr. Singh would appear to have strengthened the very outside “framework” he once spoke against.

In addition to facing pressure on Iran, India is likely to be asked to let its Navy operate more frequently alongside the U.S. Navy in Asia. The purpose of these joint operations is essentially military and the U.S. wants India to also sign up for the Proliferation Security Initiative. Mr. Tellis’s report had predicted that a nuclear deal would “increase [India’s] enthusiasm for taking part in counter-proliferation activity in the Indian Ocean.” The joint statement makes no direct mention of such cooperation though it speaks of a new “U.S.-India Disaster Relief Initiative that builds on the experience of the Tsunami core group.” The real purpose of this initiative is revealed by the apparently inappropriate sub-heading under which it finds mention: ‘For Non-Proliferation and Security.’

All told, the deal signed in Washington raises a number of questions about the Manmohan Singh Government’s policies in the field of nuclear energy, disarmament, ‘promotion of democracy,’ energy security and strategic stability in Asia. No doubt the Government has answers. Spinning euphoric reports in the mass media is not the way of providing them. The Government owes it to the people to provide a detailed account of its nuclear policy in the form of a White Paper. Let the details of the Strobe Talbott-Jaswant Singh negotiations be made public. Let the Government place on record its estimate of how much the proposed separation of civilian and military nuclear facilities will cost and what the benefits of last week’s agreement will be. And let it say openly that nuclear deal or not, India will continue to work for global disarmament and has no desire to play the role of a ‘hedge’, fence or ‘tether’ in the U.S. plan to contain China.

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