

Bush administration presses for speedy adoption of Indo-US nuclear accord

Our reporter
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The Bush administration is moving with great speed to secure US Congressional approval of the nuclear accord that the US president and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced March 2.

The accord—which would give India special status within the world nuclear regulatory regime and de facto recognition as a nuclear weapons state—is viewed by the Bush administration as a way of binding India more closely to the United States with a view to having India serve as a geo-political counterweight to China in Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

White House-drafted legislation authorizing the president to exempt India from sections of the US Atomic Energy Act was introduced in both houses of Congress in mid-March, just two weeks after the Indo-US accord was finalized. On Wednesday, Nicholas Burns, the second highest-ranking official at the State Department, gave a closed briefing on the accord to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Next week, Burns' boss, Condoleezza Rice, will testify in public before the same committee, as the administration mounts a full-court press to secure congressional authorization for India gaining access to US and international civilian nuclear technology despite having developed nuclear-weapons in defiance of, and refusing to sign, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The US political elite is divided over the merits of the Indo-US accord, with sections of the Democratic Party, arms-control experts and the *New York Times* warning that it threatens to fatally undermine the international nuclear regulatory regime the US helped establish so as to maintain a traditional great-power monopoly over nuclear weapons.

Foremost in their concerns is the blatant incongruity between Washington's insistence that India, a self-avowed nuclear-weapons state, be given full access to advanced civilian nuclear technology, even as the US

threatens Iran with military action if it exercises the right accorded it as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to develop all stages of a civilian nuclear program.

There are also concerns about the blatant manner in which the Bush administration has identified the nuclear accord and its pursuit of a strategic partnership with India with its strategy for countering China.

Henry Kissinger, while endorsing the Indo-US nuclear accord in a *Washington Post* article, cautioned against trumpeting it as directed against China and suggested the Bush administration is overreaching in believing it can make India a US proxy. "Too often America's India policy is justified as a way to contain China," he wrote. "America's global strategy benefits from Indian participation in building a new world order. But India will not serve as America's foil with China, and will resent any attempts to use it in that role."

Burns, Rice and President Bush have sought to counter these criticisms by touting the accord as a significant contribution to nuclear non-proliferation since much of India's nuclear program will now be subject to International Atomic Energy Agency oversight. But this fits badly with another of their key claims—that India has an exemplary nuclear non-proliferation record.

They are also promoting the accord as in the US national interest since, in so far as India expands its civilian nuclear program, it will not be competing with the US for oil and natural gas on the world market. Unquestionably India is eager to find a means of reducing its extreme dependence on foreign energy imports, but a second key motivation behind its ambition to obtain foreign civilian nuclear technology and uranium is to free up resources within its indigenous nuclear program for nuclear weapons development.

Bush administration spokesmen have proclaimed the accord as a good business proposition, saying US

companies could win contracts to build two of the eight new nuclear-power generating facilities that India plans to build by 2012. US weapons manufacturers also stand to benefit handsomely, or so the thinking goes, since the nuclear deal and the closer strategic partnership it is meant to cement will pave the way for sales of advanced US weapons systems to the Indian military, which is currently involved in a massive expansion program.

Japan, France, Britain and Russia—all of which are leading members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and have ambitions of their own to sell India civilian nuclear technology—have endorsed the US plan to give India a unique status within the world nuclear regulatory regime.

Indeed to Washington's chagrin, Russia, in the wake of the announcement of the Indo-US accord, undertook to re-supply two US-built reactors at Tarapur, Maharashtra, with uranium. While Russia justified the shipment on the grounds that a shortage of fuel could pose a security risk, Washington protested saying that such exports should await the US and then the Nuclear Suppliers Group formally lifting the embargo on nuclear fuel and technology transfers to India.

China has voiced its concern about any deal which undermines the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—which the Indo-US accord clearly does—but is proceeding extremely cautiously, as it does not want to antagonize India and thereby drive it into Washington's embrace. New Delhi responded to the illegal US invasion of Iraq by pursuing closer ties with Beijing. Talks are now underway to resolve a decades-old border dispute and Indo-Chinese trade has exploded, with China emerging within a few years as India's second largest trading partner, behind only the US.

India's longtime rival Pakistan has shown no such circumspection in its response to Indo-US nuclear accord. Islamabad feels triply threatened by the accord: first because with it Washington has made clear just how eager it is to partner with India; second, because it will boost India's nuclear-weapons program; and third because it will add to India's already yawning economic advance over Pakistan.

Washington it should be added has been emphatic that there is no question of the US negotiating a similar exception for Pakistan. Instead it is offering Pakistan, whose dependence on foreign energy imports is similar to India's, help in developing wind and solar-power projects.

Pakistani-military strongman Pervez Musharraf has warned that the accord will upset the "balance of power"

in South Asia. His foreign minister, Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri, meanwhile warned in an interview with the *Financial Times* that the US decision to lift the embargo on civilian nuclear technology transfers to India would encourage other states to follow New Delhi's lead and develop nuclear weapons: "The whole Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty will unravel. ... It's only a matter of time before other countries will act in the same way."

"Nuclear weapons," continued Kasuri, "are the currency of power and many countries would like to use it [that currency]. Once this goes through, the NPT will be finished. It is not just Iran and North Korea. Brazil, Argentina and Pakistan will think differently."

Kasuri hinted that US policy could drive Pakistan closer to China. Islamabad and Beijing, in fact, have longstanding and growing ties. And while the US has balked at assisting Islamabad with its civilian nuclear program China has already built a nuclear reactor in the Pakistani province of the Punjab and offered to sell Pakistan two more nuclear power plants when Musharraf visited Beijing in the week before Bush's trip to South Asia.

Amongst the Pakistani political and geo-political elite there is great bitterness over Washington's embrace of India and open discussion about reconsidering their options. This was reflected at a recent Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad forum, where, according to the *Dawn*, the two principal speakers, one a retired general and the other security analyst Dr. Shireen Mazari, urged that Pakistan strike back by putting a "temporary brake" on full cooperation with the US in the war on terror.



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