

Indo-US nuclear accord approved by key US Congressional committees

Deepal Jayasekera
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Two key US congressional committees have given overwhelming support to the Bush administration's nuclear accord with India. This means it is highly probable that by mid-August the US Congress will have made virtually all the requisite legal changes for the nuclear accord to come into force.

The accord—which rewards India with a unique position within the world nuclear regulatory regime—represents, and is being touted by the Bush administration and the US foreign policy establishment as constituting, a fundamental shift in Indo-US relations and world geo-politics.

On June 27, the House of Representatives International Relations Committee voted 37-5 in favor of legislation amending the US Atomic Energy Act of 1954 so as to allow US civilian-nuclear technology and fuel exports to India, even though India refuses to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in 1998 tested nuclear weapons in defiance of the NPT. Two days later, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted 16 to 2 in favor of a similar bill.

Under the accord, which was finalized during President Bush's visit to India in early March, India has agreed to place 14 of its 23 existing or soon-to-be operational nuclear reactors under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regulation. The US, for its part, has agreed to press for India to be given special status within the international nuclear regulatory regime, so that the US and the other 44 member-states of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group can export civilian nuclear technology and fuel to India.

Last week's congressional committee vote indicates strong bipartisan support for the nuclear accord, which the Bush administration has promoted as critical to the US forging a strategic partnership with India.

There are many reasons that the US ruling class is aggressively courting India. Because of an abundance of cheap labor, India has become a magnet for the offshore, IT-enabled operations of US-based transnationals. US civilian nuclear and defence companies calculate that the accord will pave the way for them to snare billions, if not tens of billions, of dollars worth of Indian contracts over the next quarter century. An overstretched US military hopes to contract out policing parts of the Indian Ocean region to India and, through an alliance with India, Washington hopes to bolster its drive for geo-political dominance in oil-rich Central Asia.

But, and this is frankly admitted by elements in and around the Bush administration, far and away the most important reason that the US is seeking a strategic partnership with India is so as to be

able to mould the South Asian state into an economic, geo-political and military counterweight to China.

Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee and co-author of the Senate bill facilitating the nuclear accord with India, termed the partnership with India the “most important strategic initiative” undertaken by the Bush administration. Embodying “a long-term outlook,” the nuclear accord will strengthen the US, said Lugar, by providing it with “new diplomatic options.”

Tom Lantos, the ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Relations Committee and co-author of the House version of the bill amending the Atomic Energy Act, likewise emphasized the critical importance of the accord for US geo-political strategy in the decades to come: “In terms of the impact of this legislation on the new geo-strategic alignment between India and the United States for the balance of the 21st century, the importance of this legislation cannot be overstated. We are about to see a sweeping strategic realignment of India's global policies for the 21st century.”

It had been anticipated that the nuclear accord would encounter considerable congressional opposition, since it represents de facto recognition of India as a nuclear weapons state and since the Bush administration, by so brazenly rewriting the nuclear regulatory rules for an ally, is undermining the nuclear regulatory framework Washington has long made a cornerstone of its foreign policy. Indeed, at the very moment that the US is seeking to create an exemption for India, which developed nuclear weapons in defiance of the US, it is seeking to prevent Iran, an NPT signatory, from exercising its right under the NPT to develop all facets of a civilian nuclear program.

“The NPT has been knifed by executive action,” proclaimed Republican House committee member Jim Leach. “Anyone who wants to present this as a happy day is making a serious mistake.”

But Leach's was a rare dissenting voice. Over the last three months, as last week's committee votes attest, opposition to the nuclear accord almost completely evaporated in both parties. Six of the eight Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, including the bill's co-sponsor Joe Biden and John Kerry, the party's presidential candidate in 2004, voted to amend the Atomic Energy Act.

Administration officials have repeatedly urged quick passage of the legislation needed to implement the accord, arguing that it represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to effect a major

shift in world geo-politics. “[W]e must be sure that amendments or delays on the U.S. side do not risk wasting this critical opportunity,” declared Vice-President Dick Cheney in a June 22 speech to the US India Business Council. “Our strategic partnership with India gives rise to a broad and ambitious agenda.”

At last week’s congressional committee meetings, amendments that would have required re-opening the deal because they placed some new requirement on India which India had identified as deal-breakers were systematically rejected. These included demands that India cease production of fissile material and nuclear weapons and regular US presidential certification that India is not diverting nuclear fuel to its nuclear weapons program.

The amendments that were passed are meant to bolster the fiction that the Indo-US nuclear accord will not have an impact on India’s nuclear weapons program—in fact, by providing India with access to international nuclear technology and fuel the accord will allow India to concentrate the resources of its domestic nuclear program more fully on nuclear weaponry. The approved amendments include an affirmation that the US is not supporting either directly or indirectly India’s nuclear weapons program, and a clause that would require the Bush administration to assure Congress that should India break its voluntary ban on nuclear-weapons testing other countries will not continue to supply India with nuclear fuel.

That the US ruling elite plans to use its increasing economic, nuclear, military and geo-political ties with India to gain leverage over New Delhi’s geo-political posture was underscored by a non-binding clause in the House bill that says the Bush administration should “secure India’s full and active cooperation” in its campaign against Iran over the its nuclear program.

In his address to the Senate foreign relations committee, Lugar lauded India’s Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government for having already fallen into line with Washington’s efforts to bully Iran. “India’s votes at the IAEA on the Iran issue last September and this past February demonstrate,” said Lugar, “that New Delhi is able and willing to adjust its traditional foreign policies and play a constructive role on international issues.”

While some sections of India’s national security establishment are concerned that through the nuclear accord, increased military cooperation and sales of advanced military equipment the US is seeking to ensnare India in a dependent relationship, India’s corporate elite is ecstatic at the nuclear accord. It sees the ending of the three decade embargo on civilian nuclear exports to India and Washington’s offer of a “global” partnership as constituting a major advance towards realizing its goal of making India a world power. Access to advanced nuclear technology will enable India to pursue its aim of reducing India’s massive dependence on foreign energy imports (70 percent of India’s oil is imported) through the expansion of its civilian nuclear energy program.

So as to secure the nuclear accord with the US, New Delhi has repeatedly bent to the US’s wishes and not only over Iran. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh did not take up an invitation from the Russian- and Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization to join the presidents of Iran and Pakistan as observers at its recent summit meeting. Instead Singh sent Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram, thus emphasizing the SCO’s

economic, as opposed to its regional security and geo-political mission.

The UPA government is acutely aware of the US elite’s intentions of using India as a counterweight to China, but believes that it can avoid this fate by simultaneously pursuing closer relations with the European Union, China and Russia. It is seeking to exploit India’s position as what the CIA has termed a key “swing state” in the world geo-political order. But this is a dangerous game. As the Indian bourgeoisie seeks to enmesh India ever more tightly into the world capitalist economy and geo-political order, it is becoming inexorably sucked into the struggle among the great powers for markets, oil and other resources, and geo-political advantage.

In an increasingly volatile world situation, India will find it ever-more difficult to sustain its posture as a friend of all the major powers and foe of none. And while the US did retreat on some of its demands on the specifics of the nuclear accord, it has repeatedly shown over Iran and other issues that it is determined to use it as leverage in pursuing its predatory ambitions on the world stage.

Pakistan, India’s historic rival, has meanwhile angrily denounced the Indo-US nuclear accord, saying it will trigger an arms race in South Asia and will fatally undermine efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation.

Pakistan, which has long had close relations with China, has responded to Washington’s embrace of New Delhi by seeking still closer relations with China, including enhanced military and civilian nuclear cooperation.

There is thus a growing danger that the Indo-Pakistani conflict will become overlain by and entangled with the geo-political rivalry between Beijing and Washington.

In an attempt to mollify Pakistan, the Bush administration, to India’s chagrin, last week approved a \$5 billion weapons deal with Islamabad, including an option to buy 18 new F-16s.

It has been reported that the US will seek to have the coming G-8 summit in Russia endorse its request that the Nuclear Suppliers Group allow civilian nuclear fuel and technology sales to India. Such a move would be aimed at isolating China, which is not part of the G-8 and which has, not surprisingly, raised concerns about the impact of the US’s attempts to secure India a special position within the world nuclear regime on the NPT.

Russia and China, as evidenced by the emergence of the SCO, have a common interest in seeking to limit US influence in Asia. But Russia is eager to revitalize its longstanding close military and geo-political relations with India and hopes to profit handsomely from the expansion of India’s civilian nuclear program. Within days of the Indo-US nuclear accord, Moscow was citing it in justifying striking a deal with India to supply it with nuclear fuel.



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