

US Senate endorses Bush's nuclear accord with India

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The United States Senate voted 85 to 12, November 16, to exempt India from the nuclear-trade restrictions currently in place under the US Atomic Energy Act (USAEA), thereby overturning longstanding US nuclear non-proliferation policies.

The USAEA prohibits US institutions and companies from trading nuclear equipment, materials, and technology with countries that have not signed the 1974 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). For more than three decades India—which first tested a nuclear device in 1974 and proclaimed itself a nuclear weapons state in 1998—has been subject to a US ban on nuclear fuel and technology exports.

Last summer the House of Representatives approved, by a similar overwhelming 359 to 68 margin, a like bill exempting India from the provisions of the USAEA.

The votes constitute congressional endorsement of the agreement that US President Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh signed last March to bring some Indian nuclear facilities under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) supervision in return for the US securing for India a unique position in the world nuclear regulatory regime.

Under the accord, India will gain access to US and other foreign civilian nuclear technology and fuel, enabling it to reduce its heavy dependence on foreign oil and natural gas imports and to devote the resources of its indigenous nuclear program to its nuclear weapons program. The accord is also meant to pave the way for large US arms sales to India, which has embarked on an ambitious military build-up.

There are differences between the Senate and House bills, differences which will have to be reconciled in a congressional conference before the bill can be submitted to both houses of Congress for final approval and forwarded to Bush for his signature. If the bill is not finalized during the current lame-duck session of Congress, the legislative process to revise the USAEA will have to be restarted from the beginning.

The Bush administration has proclaimed the Indo-US nuclear accord the centerpiece of its geo-political strategy in Asia and made no secret of the fact that its aim in assisting India in becoming a “world power” is so that it can serve as a counterweight to a rising China.

Through the accord and an associated web of growing economic, military and geo-political ties, Washington hopes to

make India increasingly dependent on the US and therefore amenable to US aims in Asia and around the world.

This strategy is being energetically countered by China. Chinese President Hu Jintao recently offered India a multi-faceted cooperation agreement, including wide-ranging economic relations and civilian nuclear cooperation and hinted that China might be prepared to support India's bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. (See: “China woos India to parry US containment strategy”)

The strong bi-partisan Senate vote in support of the Indo-US nuclear accord points to an emerging consensus within the US political and geo-political establishment in favor of using India to contain China, even if the accord undermines US claims to be the upholder of an international nuclear regulatory regime aimed at preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Critics of the accord, including the *New York Times* and various nuclear and foreign policy think-tanks, have warned that the fashioning of special rules for India could encourage other countries to develop nuclear weapons and undermines the US claim to be upholding nuclear non-proliferation when it threatens North Korea and Iran over their nuclear programs.

Coming little more than a week after the Republicans suffered stunning reversals in the congressional elections, the Senate vote was also a signal from the Democrats of their readiness and eagerness to work with the Bush administration in pursuing the global interests of US imperialism.

India, which had feared the change in the makeup of the Congress might impede the Senate's passage of the bill, mounted a major lobbying effort in the run-up to the November 16 vote, including enlisting the support of the pro-Israeli American Jewish Committee.

There was no shortage of euphoric statements issued by Bush administration officials following the Senate's de facto endorsement of the Indo-US nuclear accord.

George Bush was quoted as saying “The United States and India enjoy a strategic partnership based upon common values. Today, the Senate has acted to further strengthen this relationship by passing legislation that will deliver energy, non-proliferation, and trade benefits to the citizens of two great democracies.”

The US Ambassador to India, David C. Mulford, exclaimed

that the Senate vote represented “an historic day in the long relationship between the United States and India, perhaps the best day ever between the two countries.” Mulford lauded his boss, President Bush for his “vision” in assisting “India in emerging as a world power by removing the isolation that India has been living under for the past 30-plus years in this important area.”

Richard G. Lugar the outgoing Republican chairman of the Senate foreign relations committee said the vote was “one more important step toward a vibrant and exciting (Indo-US) relationship” and praised the nuclear accord as “the most important strategic initiative undertaken by President Bush.” The incoming Democratic chairman Joseph Biden, meanwhile, hailed the Senate vote as “a giant step ... to approving a major shift in US-Indian relations.”

The Bush administration is urging US corporations to move quickly to cash in on the deal. A delegation of over 200 US corporate executives is expected to meet next month with officials of the state-owned Nuclear Power Corporation of India, in the hope of snaring some of the \$100 billion India is expected to spend over the next ten to fifteen years on nuclear projects.

India, by contrast, has reacted with caution to the Senate vote, for it considers some of the conditions contained in the bills passed by the two houses of Congress to be objectionable.

Under heavy pressure from the Bush administration, the Senate rejected a number of amendments to the bill that India had identified as deal-breakers. One of these would have required the US president to certify that India had agreed to cap the production of fissile—i.e., nuclear bomb-making—material.

While expressing cautious optimism over the eventual adoption of the Indo-US nuclear accord, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi said celebrations should wait the final wording of the legislation amending the USAEA.

The bill passed by the Senate does contain a provision requiring the US president to declare that India has joined multinational efforts to contain Iran’s nuclear program. If this language remains in the final bill, it will create difficulties for the Indian government, which, despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, has vehemently denied that the US is using the accord as leverage in bullying India to support it in the International Atomic Energy Agency’s deliberations over Iran’s nuclear program.

The Senate’s approval of the Indo-US nuclear accord exposes the utter hypocrisy and aggressive character of US foreign policy. The US political establishment heaps praise upon a country that not only has refused to sign the NPT but openly violated its spirit, while diplomatically hounding and militarily threatening Iran—a signatory to the NPT that to date has followed the treaty’s legal and technical obligations—accusing it without evidence of concealing an intent to develop nuclear weapons.

And while Bush and the Democratic Party leaders tout the accord as a contribution to non-proliferation on the spurious grounds that it will bring some Indian nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards, the truth is that the accord will facilitate the rapid expansion of India’s nuclear arsenal and threatens, thereby, to trigger an arms race between both India and Pakistan and India and China.

Paradoxically, it was India’s so called “peaceful nuclear explosion” of 1974 that prompted the US to rush through the NPT and to form the Nuclear Suppliers Group so as to prevent countries other than US, Russia, China, France and Britain—designated “Nuclear Weapons States (NWS)”—from utilizing their civilian nuclear power production facilities to develop nuclear weapons.

Although the NPT was widely promoted by the US, with the aid of the western corporate media, as a treaty for the peaceful uses of nuclear power it has been utilized by the US to selectively prevent countries that it considers hostile from acquiring nuclear weapons. The US and the other NWSs have also not taken a single meaningful step to eliminate their own nuclear arsenals, although the NPT demands eventual universal nuclear disarmament. In fact, the Bush administration has moved to develop a new generation of smaller nuclear weapons with the aim of making them more readily usable in combat.

Nevertheless, Washington’s readiness in one fell-swoop to effectively overthrow the NPT, the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation policies of successive US administrations over the past three decades, so as to create special rules for its new ally India—like the earlier US decision to repudiate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—is highly destabilizing and underscores that in pursuit of its global interests the US elite is ready to take the most reckless and provocative actions.



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