

US and India forge a strategic partnership with globally disruptive nuclear treaty

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Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukerjee and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice signed the Indo-US civilian nuclear cooperation treaty last month, concluding a three-year drive on the part of their countries' respective elites to take Indo-US bilateral relations to "a new level."

The treaty and associated changes in the rules of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) grant India *de facto* recognition as a nuclear-weapons state and gut the four decade old international nuclear regulatory framework that the US was largely responsible for creating.

Only the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—the US, Russia, Britain, France, and China—have hitherto been internationally recognized nuclear-weapons states; and only they and other states that have signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (pledging thereby not to develop nuclear weapons) have been allowed to engage in civilian nuclear trade.

Under the Indo-US nuclear treaty, India will be able to import civilian nuclear technology and fuel from the US as the IAEA and NSG removed their prohibitions on civilian nuclear trade with India in August and September under heavy pressure from Washington.

India had been barred from nuclear commerce under a US-led global embargo that was imposed in 1974 in response to New Delhi's exploding a nuclear device. In 1998 however, India staged a further series of explosions, formally proclaiming itself a nuclear-weapons state.

The Bush administration has sought to answer criticisms that it has fundamentally rewritten rules governing nuclear trade by claiming that allowing India to engage in such trade and having parts of India's nuclear program subject to IAEA safeguards will actually strengthen nuclear non-proliferation.

The reality is that the Indo-US nuclear treaty is driven by the predatory strategic ambitions of Washington and New Delhi, undermines the world nuclear regulatory regime, and dangerously disrupts the balance of power on the Indian subcontinent and across Asia.

The pivotal importance that the US elite attach to the treaty is underscored by the manner in which the US Congress adopted it. The legislation was rushed through congress while in the midst of the Wall Street meltdown and the former's frantic and tension-filled deliberations on the \$700 billion bank bailout.

The US Senate ratified the nuclear treaty by a vote of 86 to 13, with the leadership of both parties giving it strong support. Those voting in favor included Republican presidential candidate John McCain, Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, and Joe Biden, Obama's running mate and current Senate foreign relations committee chairman.

India's ruling elite were no less determined to conclude the treaty. To rapturous applause from India's corporate media, the United Progressive Alliance government virtually staked its existence on the treaty's

implementation. Last July, the UPA broke with the Left Front, which had sustained it in office for four years, and narrowly won a parliamentary confidence vote on proceeding with the treaty. The Stalinist-led Left Front has opposed the nuclear deal on the grounds that Washington intends to use it to chain India to its global strategy.

Harnessing India to US ambitions

Elements in and around the Bush administration have described the Indo-US nuclear treaty as the most important foreign policy initiative of the president's second term. Some have gone so far as to compare it to Richard Nixon's playing of the "China card," which ultimately led to a US-Chinese diplomatic alliance against the USSR and the opening up of China to foreign capital.

Rice and other US officials have touted the civilian nuclear deal as a means for the US to "help" India become a "world power." They have also spoken of it as cementing a "global" strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi.

In short, the US geo-political establishment recognizes the Indian bourgeoisie's rising ambitions and also its obvious vulnerability as a result of India's technological weaknesses and dependence on foreign oil, which the US seeks to use to its advantage. Its aim is to bring India increasingly into the US's strategic orbit, through burgeoning economic, scientific-technical and military ties, and thereby make India a US ally in countering China and furthering US interests in Central Asia and the Middle East.

This strategy involves the offer of material and geo-political benefits to India, accompanied by quid pro quos that will both enrich US big business and make India more dependent on the US.

The lifting of the US embargo on civilian nuclear trade also involves the lifting of associated bans on the export of technologically advanced military equipment. US military contractors hope to make tens of billions of dollars in arms sales over the next decade, as a result of India's aggressive expansion and modernization of its armed forces. Furthermore the Pentagon, which has organized several dozen joint-missions with the Indian military over the past decade, is intent on promoting inter-force operability between the two militaries.

Washington has further whetted New Delhi's ambitions by indicating that it wants to partner with India in overseas missions with promises to allow India to play a major role in policing the Indian Ocean. India is currently constructing a "blue-water" navy, on the grounds that a large navy is needed to defend its burgeoning trade ties, including oil imports, which would allow the country to play a major role in world affairs.

The US's wooing of India has gone alongside demands that it heed Washington's wishes. US officials and Congressman repeatedly tied the

nuclear treaty to New Delhi's support for the US stance against Iran in the IAEA. The Henry Hyde Act, which amended the 1954 US Atomic Energy Act such that the Bush administration could conclude the nuclear treaty with India, specifies that the president must certify on an annual basis that India is supporting US nuclear non-proliferation efforts.

(The Indo-US nuclear treaty underscores the utter hypocrisy of Washington's attitude toward nuclear non-proliferation and to such a degree that some voices in the US establishment opposed it on the grounds that it would weaken the US's efforts to rally international support for action against Iran. Whereas the US has just amended the rules of world nuclear trade to give India a unique, privileged status—although India developed nuclear weapons in opposition to a US-led embargo and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—Washington is seeking to prevent Iran from exercising its rights, as an NPT signatory, to develop a civilian nuclear program.)

The bellicose thinking that underlies the Indo-US nuclear treaty is encapsulated in a 2005 report written by Andrew Tellis for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Tellis is among a group of high-level US strategists who rotate between top governmental positions at the State Department and the National Security Council and various Washington think-tanks. An American of Indian descent, he went on to play a leading role in the negotiation of the Indo-US nuclear treaty.

In his 2005 report, titled *India as a New Global Power: An Action Agenda for the United States*, Tellis explained the motives behind the Bush administration's "new thinking" regarding India and its nuclear program:

"First, the administration had come to realize that India would not give up its nuclear weapons so long as various regional adversaries continued to possess comparable capabilities. The fact that the administration initially viewed both of India's antagonists—Pakistan and China—with considerable suspicion only made senior US officials more sympathetic to New Delhi's predicament."

"Second, the administration was now of the understanding that India's nuclear weapons did not pose a threat to US security and the United States' larger geopolitical interests, and *could in certain circumstances actually advance American strategic objectives in Asia and beyond*. The administration's own antipathy to nuclear arms control agreements such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (which happened to dovetail with Indian interests on these issues), coupled with its strong expectation of an eventual renewal of great-power competition, allowed both realist and neoconservative factions within the administration to take a more relaxed view of New Delhi's emerging nuclear capabilities."

India's dangerous gambit

The Indian elite view its *de facto* admittance to the "nuclear club" as a major step toward achieving its world-power ambitions. At the very least, the nuclear treaty puts paid to the US's Cold War practice of treating India and Pakistan as equivalent powers.

"This agreement," declared Foreign Minister Mukherjee at the Oct. 10 signing ceremony, "is one more visible sign of the transformed partnership and relationship our two countries are building together."

The Indian military is—as alluded to previously—eager to procure advanced US military equipment. Indian big business, meanwhile, hopes the lifting of prohibitions on advanced technology trade will enable it to benefit from new partnerships with US firms and also that the involvement of foreign firms in India's civilian nuclear industry, including privately-owned US nuclear companies, will lead to further

privatization of India's energy sector.

But New Delhi's push to secure the treaty has been driven above all by its determination to be rid of the 34 year-old nuclear embargo. The embargo has seriously hobbled India's ambitious nuclear program, including its "strategic," i.e. nuclear weapons, component.

In spite of spending extraordinary sums of money and effort, India's civilian nuclear program is hampered by frequent breakdowns due to the use of inferior domestically-made parts, a poor safety record, and a shortage of fuel. (India's domestic uranium reserves are small.)

With India now permitted to purchase uranium on the world market for the 14 nuclear reactors it has placed under IAEA supervision, it will be able to divert its domestic uranium reserves to enhance its nuclear arsenal. Similarly, the technical aspects of the weapons program will get a boost for two reasons. First, India will be able to concentrate its nuclear program on military applications. And secondly, civilian nuclear trade will provide India's nuclear establishment with the opportunity, albeit in violation of the IAEA safeguard regime, to reverse engineer imported advanced dual-use technology.

The Congress Party-led UPA government has angrily denied claims that India's burgeoning alliance with the US is directed against China or any other power. In this respect it has been quick to point to France and Russia's enthusiasm for lifting the nuclear embargo and their eagerness to sell nuclear reactors to New Delhi.

India has good reason not to seek confrontation with China, with which it fought a brief border war in 1962 and which continues to be a strong ally of Pakistan. In keeping with this geo-political posture, New Delhi has been seeking closer ties with Beijing, while seeking to revive India's decades-long close partnership with Russia.

With the Indo-US nuclear deal, India's government and geo-political leadership have tilted closer to the US so as to take advantage of Washington's offers of support. But they do so hoping to navigate the growing fissures in world geo-politics—and not because they have accepted that the US should have a say in, let alone determine, India's relations with China—a very high risk strategy indeed.

While India's geo-political establishment no doubt considers itself much wiser in the ways of the world than its ham-fisted US counterpart, the weight of economic, military and geo-political power rests overwhelming with the US, notwithstanding its historic and quickening decline.

Thus when Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh came to Washington in late September, it was he who grovelled before Bush—thanking the president for his purported leading role in freeing India from "nuclear apartheid."

"The people of India love you," Singh told Bush.

In their rush to conclude the nuclear treaty before the current president leaves office, Washington and New Delhi have left a number of important issues unclarified. These include whether the US would automatically suspend civilian nuclear cooperation with India should New Delhi stage another weapons test and if and when India will gain access to advanced US fuel-reprocessing technology.

But it is quite certain that Washington, having demonstrably supported India's great-power ambitions, views New Delhi to be greatly in its debt. It expects and will demand repayment. Should India balk, Indo-US relations will, at the very least, go into a tailspin.

And should India comply, as it already has with respect to Iran, it will find itself serving Washington's aggressive global agenda and risk being sucked into its military adventures.

An Asian arms race?

The US's courting of India and support for its nuclear weapons program is already seriously destabilizing Asia.

China had long hoped that the Indo-US nuclear deal would unravel, either from domestic opposition in the two countries or from other states fearing the treaty and its attendant changes to the rules of the IAEA and NSG. When the deal ultimately came before the NGA in September, China mounted a furious campaign to prevent its actualization. Only the threat of a grave rift in its relations with India, that is the prospect that its opposition would drive India into the US's embrace, caused China to pull back. (See "Nuclear Supplier Group gives India unique 'waiver,' but only after row between Delhi and Beijing")

Pakistan, whose sovereignty the US now routinely violates, has repeatedly protested against the Indo-US nuclear deal, warning it seriously undermines the balance of power on the Indian subcontinent and could trigger an arms race. Following the conclusion of the Indo-US nuclear treaty Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani declared: "Now Pakistan also has the right to demand a civilian nuclear agreement with America. We want there to be no discrimination. Pakistan will also strive for a nuclear deal and we think they will have to accommodate us."

Iran, which has been hounded and threatened with war by the US over its nuclear program, has criticized the special treatment accorded to India. Mohammad Sedi, the deputy head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization warned such double standards "endanger" the NPT and "will create new crises for the international community."

The strong bi-partisan US support for the reactionary Indo-US civilian nuclear treaty is yet further evidence that regardless of who is elected president on November 4th, the incoming administration will pursue the same basic aggressive and incendiary world strategy in defense of the interests of American big business.



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