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Rushing into the Wrong Future: The U.S.-India Nuclear Deal, Energy and Security

by Andrew Lichterman and M.V. Ramana / September 20th, 2008

In March 2000, the former President Bill Clinton called the Indian subcontinent the most dangerous place in the world. Today, on the other hand, the Bush administration is pushing ahead with a controversial nuclear deal with India that could make the most dangerous place even more dangerous. The latest saga in the story of the deal occurred on September 6 when the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which sets widely observed export controls on nuclear technology, approved a U.S.-India proposal to lift a ban on nuclear trade with India. The next stop is the U.S. Congress, which has to approve the deal before the United States can actually engage in nuclear commerce with India.

There is a sour irony in the NSG making such an exception for India. The NSG was formed largely in response to India exploding a nuclear device in 1974. Several NSG states felt that approving nuclear trade for India, a nuclear-armed country that has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, would undermine global non-proliferation efforts and further legitimize nuclear weapons. These countries put up considerable opposition to the deal, but they were stifled by the United States which engaged in what Jayantha Dhanapala, former

United Nations Under Secretary General for Disarmament Affairs, described as a campaign of “brutal and unconscionable pressure.”

Key to having the NSG approve the exception for India was diplomats agreeing to paper over key objections with vague language, particularly regarding the consequences if India conducts nuclear tests or takes advantage of greater access to nuclear materials and foreign technology to expand and refine its nuclear arsenal. To prevent further political difficulties at home for India’s government, the Bush Administration may attempt a similar strategy in Congress. It could seek a spare formulation that approves the U.S.-India agreement as negotiated, while remaining silent about provisions of prior U.S. law that place greater restrictions on technology transfer, and that would cut off trade in nuclear fuels and technology if India conducted a nuclear explosive test. Further, by ramming the deal through Congress in the waning days of its fall session, the Administration will leave little time for study or debate.

What the Administration will likely not mention is that the deal would actually allow India to expand its nuclear arsenal, permitting it to buy fuel for nuclear power reactors on the international market while using scarce domestic uranium in nuclear weapons production. It will further aggravate tensions with Pakistan, which has signaled that it would respond in kind to a more ambitious Indian nuclear weapons program. Thus, the deal could further fuel an arms race between nuclear-armed neighbors that have fought multiple wars. The last war between the two countries in 1999 featured at least thirteen indirect and direct nuclear threats.

Despite these dangers, advocates of the deal see an increase in India’s nuclear capabilities as positive. To quote Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment: “If the United States is serious about advancing its geopolitical objectives in Asia, it would almost by definition help New Delhi develop strategic capabilities such that India’s nuclear weaponry and associated delivery systems could deter against the growing and utterly more capable nuclear forces Beijing is likely to possess by 2025.” Such thinking only serves to legitimize the ultimate weapons of mass destruction, and to encourage the United States to ignore its nuclear disarmament obligations under the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and India to continue its nuclear weapons build-up.

Originally announced in July 2005 by President George Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the nuclear deal is part of a broader set of agreements centering on increased U.S.-India military cooperation and high-tech trade. In the United States an array of corporate interests led by the nuclear industry and arms makers are supporting the deal. They see the possibilities not only for nuclear trade but for big ticket weapons sales, as well

as selling other goods and services to India's elite, only a fraction of the population but a huge new market nonetheless. This emerging economic order, which systemically generates huge disparities of wealth both within and among nations, is itself a source of conflict. The answer envisioned by the military elites is to throw ever more sophisticated levels of high tech violence at these conflicts. Foreign policy pundits and officials in both countries extol the benefits of increased military cooperation, with the more enthusiastic on the U.S. side envisioning India as a junior partner for the U.S. military agenda in Asia. In the aftermath of wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, the prospect of U.S. military action in Asia is hardly remote.

Despite the future oriented rhetoric the deal has been wrapped in, what is most striking about it is its backward looking character. Nuclear power was the technology of the future in the 1950s. Half a century later, the promise of energy "too cheap to meter" remains an unfulfilled dream, the fundamental problems of catastrophic risk and long lasting highly radioactive waste still unsolved. With nuclear power construction having ground to a halt in wealthier countries, the industry has turned its sights to Asia, marketing nuclear technology as a climate friendly solution to the continent's burgeoning energy demand.

However, nuclear power cannot play a significant role in solving the energy needs of the vast majority of India's population, much less do so in a way that offers any net environmental gains. Nuclear plants today generate only three percent of India's electricity and less than one percent of its total energy needs. Even under the most optimistic scenarios nuclear power will only be able to double or triple its share of total electricity generation by the middle of this century. Nuclear power, the most expensive form of centralized electricity generation, is an inefficient way to deliver energy to India's vast unserved rural population. Investing the immense capital needed to construct nuclear plants, in ways that we describe below, offers far larger payoffs for reductions of carbon emissions.

The single most pressing "security" issue of the 21st century will be assuring the essentials of a healthy, dignified life for the billions of people who are left out of a global economy focused on delivering mass consumption items to urban middle classes, luxuries to wealthy elites, and weapons to enforce this inequitable status quo. In the rising global awareness of both global warming and limits on oil supplies, there is an opportunity for a different path of both technology development and trade. This path would emphasize environmental sustainability and equity, rather than profits and maximizing consumption. It would therefore focus on decentralized energy strategies and technologies, and rapidly increasing access to electricity and more efficient energy services for currently unserved populations. This approach to energy development has other positive consequences, e.g. improving public health by reducing open fuel burning for cooking and heat, slowing deforestation

where wood is used for fuel, and creating large numbers of jobs broadly distributed geographically and in skill levels, from technology development through manufacturing to widely distributed work installing equipment for decentralized energy generation and use.

Expanding use of decentralized, renewable energy technologies in India also would promote further innovation and bring down prices, encouraging their spread in the U.S. as well. Several virtuous, mutually reinforcing cycles can be created in this way: improving energy access, providing employment, and generally broadening the economic potential of areas left out of the current mode of corporate globalization, reducing both greenhouse gas emissions and oil consumption in the United States, and reducing as a consequence the need for access to foreign oil and gas that is a significant factor driving an aggressive U.S. foreign policy world-wide. This kind of approach, furthermore, can more easily be achieved incrementally, with constantly improving decentralized energy technologies being deployed a household, a village, a city at a time, without the kind of massive, one shot capital costs that commit entire regions to a narrow set of technologies and generating facilities for decades at a time.

This is what the 21st century could look like. In contrast, the U.S. India nuclear deal would build another set of institutional ties binding us to the power structures, both technical and political, of the last century, strengthening those who profit from centralized control of energy resources, a society that generates and tolerates great disparities in wealth, and a global weapons trade that further concentrates wealth while raising the risk of catastrophic wars from the local to the global. Nuclear power, nuclear weapons, and this nuclear deal are all bad risks for ordinary people everywhere, risks that humanity can no longer afford. It is time to chart a different future.

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