

It makes sense to end India's nuclear isolation

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LONDON - President George W. Bush has taken a momentous step in shelving a U.S. policy that for three decades cast India as a nuclear pariah-state and isolated the world's largest democracy from nuclear commerce, even for the peaceful purpose of generating electricity.

In Washington a fierce debate has erupted over the impact on the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

The U.S.-India deal conforms to the treaty by ensuring that nuclear commerce remains in the civil realm. But critics say it jeopardizes the treaty by legitimizing India's nuclear deterrent. Supporters counter that India's weapon is a long-standing fact, that India has used nuclear technology responsibly and that it is time to close ranks with a democracy.

Before the Bush initiative, two truths coexisted uneasily. First, the nonproliferation regime is one of history's great diplomatic achievements. Since its inception in 1970, the treaty has kept the number of nuclear-armed nations under 10.

Episodes of non-compliance have shown the treaty's value. After the first Gulf War revealed Iraq's covert nuclear efforts, the treaty regime gained strength as the International Atomic Energy Agency acquired new detection capabilities and broader authority for its inspectors. Treaty inspections "caught" both North Korea and Iran, and have spurred collective diplomacy against these violations.

A second, less convenient truth is that the treaty was, from the outset, unfair to India as a great nation. The treaty drew a line in time, recognizing only the UN Security Council's five permanent members as "nuclear-weapon states." Thus, when India became the world's sixth nuclear power in 1974, it faced Hobson's choice: Disarm or remain outside the treaty.

For reasons of principle and strategic interest India remained outside, declaring that it would eliminate its small deterrent as soon as the five favored "weapon states" fulfilled a treaty pledge to dismantle their own much larger nuclear arsenals.

Indians went on, for three decades, to become proud developers and careful custodians of their own sophisticated nuclear technologies. To supply power for economic growth, India now plans to build hundreds of reactors by mid-century, even without the new agreement.

The Bush initiative would accept India's reality. Critics complain that the accord leaves India's military program "unconstrained." Advocates counter that India's civil power reactors will fall under inspection safeguards.

This debate is sterile. Inspections on India's civil facilities cannot affect its military program. But neither will civil nuclear trade with India spur an Asian arms race. India's leaders have no motive to abandon India's long-standing policy of maintaining minimal nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis Pakistan's smaller nuclear force and China's larger one.

Although legal under the nonproliferation treaty, the deal will require change in a U.S. law enacted in 1978 that made treaty membership a condition of nuclear trade. In 1992, the Nuclear Suppliers Group of nations embraced the same coercive approach. Now these countries are set to follow the U.S. lead, with only China expressing resistance.

The new policy would revert - in the unique case of India - to the basic treaty requirement of confining nuclear trade to the civil realm. It would also welcome India as a partner in world nuclear trade controls and collaborative projects to develop nuclear technology.

Some say that ending India's nuclear isolation sends a dangerous message to potential proliferators. This charge does not withstand analysis. How will the ambitions of Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan be inflamed by the principle now being affirmed?

The principle is this: In sensitive nuclear technology, we will trade legally - and with nations that have earned the world's trust. As a practical matter, no nation appears likely to "proliferate" because India is allowed civil nuclear commerce.

Thus has the new policy been endorsed by Hans Blix and Mohamed Elbaradei, the IAEA leaders entrusted over the last quarter century to oversee the nonproliferation regime.

Nuclear cooperation with India offers some economic opportunity - and potentially enormous environmental value. India has recognized the urgency of a worldwide clean-energy revolution if humankind is to avoid unleashing devastating climate change.

The U.S.-India deal promises a partnership between the two largest democracies to deliver this environmental benefit - within India and to a wider world - on a scale that can make a difference.

With a strong legal, strategic and environmental rationale, this is a Bush initiative that has gained a broad coalition of support abroad.

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