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POINT OF VIEW / Zia Mian, M.V. Ramana, Frank von Hippel  
Feeding potential for South Asia's nuclear fire

The Asahi Shimbun

The United States and India have agreed to the terms of a deal to exempt India from U.S. laws and international rules that for almost three decades have sought to prevent states that are not parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty from using commercial imports of nuclear technology and fuel to aid their nuclear weapons ambitions. In December 2006, President George W. Bush signed legislation changing the relevant U.S. nonproliferation laws to make an exception for India.

But to bring the U.S.-India deal into force also requires a decision by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) of countries. Since the Group works by consensus, each of the 45 NSG members (including Japan) must agree to change its rules and allow nuclear sales to India. Countries which claim to be strong nonproliferation advocates, like Japan, must decide if they want to go along with a deal that may make money for their nuclear technology companies but would also bolster India's nuclear weapons capabilities and push Pakistan to build up its nuclear arsenal.

From the perspective of the Indian nuclear establishment, the deal will help it realize its ambitions for a large modern nuclear power sector. India's Department of Atomic Energy expected to have over 40,000 megawatts of nuclear power by the year 2000. But today, it has only about 3,300 megawatts of nuclear capacity. This relies on small, 220-megawatt nuclear reactors based on an almost 40-year old Canadian design. India hopes to buy large, new nuclear reactors from countries such as Russia, France, Japan and the United States to meet its new target of 20,000 megawatts by the year 2020.

India also wants to import uranium to relieve an acute fuel shortage for its existing nuclear reactors. Soon after the U.S.-India deal was announced, an Indian official told the

BBC: "The truth is we were desperate. We have nuclear fuel to last only till the end of 2006.

"If this agreement had not come through we might have as well closed down our nuclear reactors and by extension our nuclear program," the officials said.

Several reactors are already running at reduced capacity. India is counting on the deal to allow it to import uranium for the reactors it puts under safeguards.

However, importing uranium will free up more of India's domestic uranium for its military program. The former head of India's official National Security Advisory Board argued that "Given India's uranium ore crunch, it is to India's advantage to categorize as many power reactors as possible as civilian ones to be refueled by imported uranium and conserve our native uranium fuel for weapons grade plutonium production."

As part of the deal, India's government has offered to open some of its nuclear facilities for IAEA monitoring. But many facilities, including two reactors dedicated to making plutonium for nuclear weapons and nine power reactors, including a plutonium breeder reactor that is under construction, will be outside international safeguards.

A report for the International Panel on Fissile Materials (an independent group of nuclear experts from 15 countries) has shown that all of these facilities could be used to add significantly to India's stock of nuclear weapons.

India already has about 500 kilograms of weapons grade plutonium, sufficient for roughly 100 nuclear warheads. It also has a stock of about 11.5 tons of reactor grade plutonium produced in the spent fuel of its power reactors. Under the terms of the deal, this stock of plutonium, too, would be kept out of safeguards.

India would continue to operate its Dhruva reactor, adding about 20-25

kg a year—equivalent to four to five nuclear weapons a year to India's weapon stockpile. It has offered to shut down an older, smaller plutonium-production reactor in 2010 but there are plans to replace it with a larger reactor that could produce at least as much plutonium for weapons as Dhruva.

India would also keep out of safeguards its Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor, which is scheduled to start in 2010. It is to be fueled with reactor-grade plutonium and will produce weapons-grade plutonium. This would result in a roughly four-fold increase in India's current weapons plutonium production rate.

By substituting imports for domestic uranium and expanding existing uranium recycling efforts, India also might be able to produce up to 200 kg a year of weapon grade plutonium in its unsafeguarded power reactors.

Pakistan has expressed its fears about the U.S.-India nuclear deal. Pakistan's National Command Authority (NCA), chaired by President Pervez Musharraf, has declared that "In view of the fact the [U.S.-India] agreement would enable India to produce a significant quantity of fissile material and nuclear weapons from unsafeguarded nuclear reactors, the NCA expressed firm resolve that our credible minimum deterrence requirements will be met."

This suggests that a dramatic acceleration in the nuclear arms race in South Asia may be triggered by this deal. Such a development would be both dangerous and costly, and set back the efforts for peace and development in South Asia.

The NSG should consider the U.S.-India deal in the light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1172 (6 June 1998). The Resolution, which was passed unanimously, calls upon India and Pakistan "immediately to stop their nuclear weapon development programs, to refrain from weaponization or from the deploy-

ment of nuclear weapons, to cease development of ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons and any further production of fissile material for nuclear weapons."

The Resolution also "encourages all States to prevent the export of equipment, materials or technology that could in any way assist programs in India or Pakistan for nuclear weapons."

Rather than foster a potentially large expansion of the South Asian nuclear arms race, the Nuclear Suppliers Group of countries should seek to support the United Nations Security Council Resolution. They should try to strengthen the longstanding international effort to end all production of highly enriched uranium and plutonium to make nuclear weapons.

A first step would be for them to insist that the U.S.-India deal be conditioned on an end to further production of fissile materials for weapons purposes in South Asia.

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