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A high-stakes nuclear gamble

By Leonard Weiss

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IMAGINE A WORLD with 20 or more nuclear weapons states. This was President Kennedy's dark vision in 1963. Were it to come to pass, the risk that terrorists could buy or steal nuclear bombs would rise significantly. Yet President Bush's recent proposal to provide nuclear energy assistance to India is a dangerous gamble that makes such an outcome more likely.

It could unravel the 1970 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which, though imperfect, has helped limit the number of countries able to make nuclear weapons. Congress should reject the proposal and require renegotiation to limit the Indian nuclear weapons program.

India's nuclear history reveals why the proposed deal would weaken U.S. national security.

In 1974, India exploded a secret nuclear device using plutonium from a Canadian-supplied reactor containing U.S. heavy water. Both the reactor and the heavy water were sold to India under agreements with a "peaceful use" requirement, which India violated.

In 1978, Congress enacted the Nuclear Nonproliferation Act. That required countries such as India who were not among the five nations recognized as nuclear weapons states under the nonproliferation treaty, and that wanted American nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, to submit to "safeguards," meaning inspections of all their nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency. India refused, and the United States ended all nuclear assistance to the country from that day forward.

Now, Bush has put forward a proposal that caves in utterly to India. It would not only allow India to keep its bombs, it would permit it to use all its own nuclear material for bomb making, while using nuclear fuel the United States would supply for its civilian power program. If India receives this favor, can Israel and Pakistan be far behind?

Such a radical proposal should be viewed within the context of the current negotiations with Iran and North Korea, two countries that signed the nonproliferation treaty but have been caught violating safeguards. Failure to stop them from producing nuclear weapons would be a serious blow to global stability.

Iran and North Korea are being offered reactors and guaranteed nuclear fuel supplies for peaceful

uses in return for a permanent shutdown of facilities for enriching uranium or separating plutonium, both of which have peaceful applications but enable the manufacture of nuclear weapons. Whether either will ultimately accept is unclear.

So let's compare the deals offered India and Iran:

India: Can build as many nuclear weapons as it wishes with its own nuclear supplies. Iran: Cannot build any nuclear weapons with its own or anyone else's supplies.

India: Can build and operate un-safeguarded facilities for producing and stockpiling unlimited amounts of fissile material for its weapons program. Iran: Cannot build enrichment or plutonium separation facilities, even if safeguarded and even though the nonproliferation treaty does not prohibit such activities.

India: Is asked to maintain a voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing. Iran: Cannot make or explode nuclear devices under any circumstances.

India: Must divide its nuclear facilities into "civilian" and "military," with voluntary IAEA safeguards applying only to its civilian program. Iran: Must have the most stringent safeguards on all its nuclear facilities.

This double standard favoring India is an example of America's willingness to wash away the nuclear sins of its "friends" to achieve other foreign policy goals. Pakistan is another example; it has received F-16s, which can deliver its nuclear weapons, despite having violated U.S. nonproliferation laws and spread nuclear weapons technology to Iran, Libya and North Korea via the Abdul Qadeer Khan network.

What is the message we're sending? How will these double standards persuade the Iranians to give up their right to produce advanced nuclear materials? How could signatories of the nonproliferation treaty not conclude that it has been seriously devalued when India — which refused to sign it in the first place, broke its contracts with the United States and Canada and developed nuclear weapons — is to be given virtually unconditional nuclear assistance?

SOME NATIONS may decide that if they withdraw from the treaty, build nuclear weapons and wait long enough while avoiding antagonizing the United States, they will eventually get all the nuclear help they want.

Why then is the Bush administration risking undermining the treaty?

It is no secret that it views China as a growing strategic rival and sees India as a counterweight. It is therefore interested in helping India build up its economic and military capability. If the deal goes through, Pentagon officials reportedly expect India to purchase as much as \$5 billion in U.S. conventional military equipment, some of which would be helpful in monitoring Chinese military movements and submarines.

During the 2004 presidential race, both Bush and Sen. John Kerry stated that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction was the most serious threat to U.S. national security. But giving nuclear assistance to India undercuts the rationale for telling other nations not to supply suspected proliferators such as Iran.

Moreover, both China and Pakistan will be motivated to accelerate their own weapons programs and their mutual nuclear cooperation. Pakistani officials will not be more cooperative in the stalled investigation of Khan's activities. Adding the risk to the nonproliferation treaty to this poisonous mix makes the president's proposal a marked retreat from half a century of American leadership in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons.

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