

INDO-US NUCLEAR DEAL: AN EVALUATION

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March 2006 visit of US President Bush to India has finally resulted into Indo-US Civilian Nuclear Agreement, a logical culmination of the nuclear deal signed between George Bush and Manmohan Singh on July 18, 2005 in Washington. Separation of India's military and civilian nuclear programs resulting into this historic US-India civil nuclear deal has been strongly endorsed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as the "cornerstone of global non-proliferation efforts". This deal means that the Indian plan to separate civilian and weapons - dedicated nuclear facilities has met US benchmarks of being credible, verifiable, and defensible from a non-proliferation standpoint. The deal has to pass through the US Congress to become an act.

This article looks into the evolution of India's nuclear policy, which finally resulted into Indo-US civil nuclear deal. Highlighting the main points of the nuclear deal, this article looks into the factors that led United States to sign this deal and its impact on Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and power balance in Asia.

India's Nuclear Exploration and Nuclear Test

India's dabbling with nuclear option goes way back to pre-independence era. India's interest in the nuclear issues was encouraged by impressive community of scientists like C.V. Raman, Srinivas Ramanujan, S.N. Bose and Dr. Homi Jehangir Bhabha who were substantially contributing to international scientific development. Prime Minister Nehru and Bhabha wanted peaceful use of nuclear energy for India's rapid developmental process. At the international level they campaigned for nuclear disarmament but they were quite convinced that India should not give up the option for making nuclear weapons in the future. Because of this India did not support any control mechanism be it Baruch Plan of the US in 1945 or the international safeguards system.¹

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¹ For insights in India's atomic diplomacy see, *India's Nuclear Option* (1976), New York: Praeger Publishers. For India's early years nuclear policy see Perkovich, George (1999), *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation*, New Delhi : Oxford University Press.

Growth of nuclear technology changed the nature of international security. Indian leaders viewed nuclear technology as weapons of mass destruction. A nuclear-weapon-free-world would, therefore, enhance not only India's security but also the security of all nations. This forms the basis of India's nuclear policy. India was not ready to accept a regime that creates an arbitrary division between nuclear haves and have-nots. India believes that it is the sovereign right of every nation to make a judgment regarding its supreme national interests and exercise its sovereign choice. At the same time, Indian leaders and scientists were convinced that nuclear technology can lead to tremendous economic development, especially for developing countries like India who are trying to leap across the technology gaps created by long years of colonial exploitation. This thinking was reflected in the enactment of the Atomic Energy Act of 1948, within a year of its independence.

When in the 1950's, nuclear weapons testing took place India then took the lead in calling for an end to all nuclear weapon testing as the first step for ending the nuclear arms race. Addressing the Lok Sabha on 6 April 1954, shortly after a major hydrogen bomb test had been conducted, Jawaharlal Nehru stated that "nuclear, chemical and biological energy and power should not be used to forge weapons of mass destruction". He called for negotiations for prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons and in the interim, a standstill agreement to halt nuclear testing.²

The debate for nuclear option intensified after the Chinese nuclear explosion of 1964. From the very beginning, the decision to conduct nuclear test seemed to be a less technical question than going a political one. By 1964-65 Bhabha and his team had moved India to the point where they could seriously consider becoming a nuclear weapons state.³

When China conducted nuclear test in October 1964 India could not respond immediately but Indian leaders realized the importance of acquiring nuclear weapons. India could not conduct nuclear test because of political and other crisis at home at that time. In 1965, India advocated the idea of an international non-proliferation agreement under which the nuclear weapons states would agree to give up their arsenals provided that

² Paper laid on the table of the House on Evolution of India's Nuclear Policy, May 27, 1998. See, <http://www.indianembassy.org/pic/nuclearpolicy.htm>.

³ Abraham, Itty (1998), *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb*, London: Zed Books, p.126.

other countries refrained from developing or acquiring such weapons. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) came in 1968 but it lacked the balance of rights and obligations. Indian refusal to sign the treaty was predicated on the discriminatory nature of NPT but was also very significant because under the treaty India could not be accepted as a nuclear weapon state since it failed to conduct nuclear test at that time.

Also, during nuclear debate in 1964-65, many developments took place. India had fought an inconclusive war with Pakistan, the United States had lost interest in the Sub-continent and Indian policies at home were adrift. The debates of 1960s had placed India in a characteristically ambiguous position. On the surface, it pursued a policy keeping open the decision to develop a military nuclear program, not foreclosing the nuclear option. This was a way of deferring a weaponization decision that might prove risky, unpopular, or unnecessary.⁴

The Lok Sabha debated the NPT on 5 April 1968. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi assured the House that “we shall be guided entirely by our self-enlightenment and the considerations of national security”. She highlighted the shortcomings of the NPT whilst reemphasizing the country's commitment to nuclear disarmament. She warned the House and the country “that not signing the Treaty may bring the nation many difficulties. It may mean the stoppage of aid and stoppage of help. Since we are taking this decision together, we must all be together in facing its consequences”. That was a turning point. This House then strengthened the decision of the Government by reflecting a national consensus.⁵

In 1974, India conducted first underground nuclear test. In fact, India's refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1967-68 and India's conducting the peaceful nuclear explosion test at Pokhran on 18 May 1974 were obvious indication that it was aiming at acquiring necessary nuclear weapon capacities and that it would create this capacity and keep this option open to be exercised as and when the country's security concerns demanded it.⁶

⁴ Cohen, Stephen P. (2002), *Emerging Power India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 162-163.

⁵ Supra note 2.

⁶ Dixit, J. N. (2003), *India's Foreign Policy 1947-2003*, New Delhi: Picus Books, p. 421.