How Washington Learned to Stop Worrying and Love India's Bomb
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Summary: Carter's update to his July/August 2006 essay "America's New Strategic Partner?"

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The debate is all over, at least on the U.S. side. On December 18, President George W. Bush signed into law the Henry J. Hyde United States-India Peaceful Atomic Energy Cooperation Act giving legal effect to his July 2005 promise to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to confer de facto recognition to India as a nuclear weapons state. That status has enormous symbolic importance to India and the world. It also has the practical consequence of allowing India to import nuclear technology for peaceful power production without having first to renounce its developing nuclear arsenal (which it has consistently vowed never to do). The bill passed with broad bipartisan support, including favorable votes from Democratic heavyweights such as Senator Joseph Biden (from Delaware), Representative Tom Lantos (from California), Senator John Kerry (from Massachusetts), Senator Hillary Clinton (from New York), and Senator Christopher Dodd (from Connecticut). Bush’s initial deal-making was impulsive and not fully thought through. But Congressional leaders of both parties seemingly put product over process, adding only a few conditions to the deal in the final bill—many of them non-binding and none of them deal-breakers for the Indians. The lobbying also marked one of the first appearances of the Indian-American community in a major foreign affairs debate; as President Bush acknowledged at the December 18 signing, addressing Indian Americans specifically, "I want you to know that your voice was very effective."

To be sure, there are a few more technical steps to be taken. The U.S. and Indian governments must agree on certain ground rules (in a so-called 1-2-3 Agreement) before any nuclear technology can be transferred to India. The International Atomic Energy Agency and India must then agree on how the IAEA will inspect India’s non-weapons nuclear facilities. And then, the United States must secure the unanimous endorsement by the Nuclear Suppliers Group, 45 nations bound to enforce together the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty’s rules on nuclear commerce, of the United States’ policy change toward India. International agreement seems certain, especially since IAEA Director-General Mohammed El-Baradei has already endorsed Washington’s move.

With the stroke of a pen, Bush reversed 30 years of U.S.-led nonproliferation policy, including efforts to punish India for conducting its first nuclear test after the NPT was signed. In the Middle Ages, the Church maintained that lesser sinners who showed contrition should be consigned to the temporary hell of purgatory rather than to eternal damnation, a stance that puzzled many theologians since it seemed to invite premeditated sinning followed by false remorse. So, too, has Bush’s abrupt about-face confounded many supporters of the NPT regime. Making an exception for India might suggest to states that stand outside the NPT regime, such as nuclear-armed Pakistan and Israel, or, worse, to North Korea and Iran that forgiveness comes to those who wait and can weather a few decades of isolation. It might also demoralize states supporting the NPT that have followed the rules faithfully in the belief that the regime would be applied consistently to all.

But the Bush administration and Congressional leaders of both parties argued that India has behaved responsibly during its three-plus decades of possessing nuclear weapons, producing no rogue exporters of technology from its military program comparable to Pakistan’s notorious A.Q.
Khan. As for Iran and North Korea, they signed the NPT and then cheated (Iran) or withdrew (North Korea), so India's exceptional treatment has opened no legal loopholes for them. To the NPT regime's supporters, the U.S. government has argued that they would come to see the logic of following Washington's lead in recognizing that little was accomplished by isolating India. So far, the United States' expectation has been borne out by the growing list of nations voicing support. Even China, an early holdout, seems certain to join the consensus.

If the fears of the deal's critics have not been borne out, what about the hopes of its supporters? What did the United States get for its gift to the Indians? The Bush administration initially made some over-the-top claims—for example, that nuclear commerce with India would be big business for the much-shrunken U.S. nuclear industry and that nuclear power would significantly blunt India’s impact on the global oil market and the environment. In fact, Russian, French, and other foreign firms might benefit most from liberalized nuclear trade with India. And nuclear power will not fuel India's cars and trucks; oil will. Nor will nuclear power stop the growth of polluting coal burning, which is needed to meet India's increasing electricity demand. Some of the Bush administration's arguments seem to have been made in a desperate attempt to claim a rare foreign policy victory.

The benefit sought by most Americans who favored the India deal was a "strategic partnership": the important but elusive long-term goal of having India—a democratic, multicultural, strategically located state—as a new partner for the United States. But there is little evidence so far that India's policies across the board have changed in favor of the United States. Last September, Prime Minister Singh duly showed up in Fidel Castro's Havana to join Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for a thumping anti-American meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement. (A senior Indian official later told me that India recognized the awkwardness of this meeting but believed it could not abruptly abandon the NAM.) India has not weighed in heavily against Iran’s nuclear ambitions, although it has voted with the majority in the United Nations for measures to penalize Iran. India's politicians have not even shown gratitude for the American gesture of nuclear recognition, instead maintaining that they were entitled to it and resenting the (few and loose) strings the U.S. Congress attached to the deal.

But much of this was to be expected. The critics' best argument was always that the deal's benefits to the United States were contingent—even hypothetical—and would be long in materializing. Yet these will be fundamental. A strong strategic relationship with India will give the United States options in the event of a fundamentalist cataclysm in neighboring Pakistan or a turn for the worse in U.S.-China relations. Neither of these developments is to be hoped for, or even likely, but insurance policies are worth having anyway. More generally, over time the United States and India seem destined to travel some parallel strategic paths, and the deal allows them to prepare together earlier and more concretely for that journey. An example of this joint preparation are the growing military-to-military ties between the two countries. Debate will probably go on for some time about whether the United States needed to give nuclear recognition to obtain the strategic partnership, or whether it needed to do it when it did. But the partnership itself will likely develop nonetheless.