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America's New Strategic Partner

By Ashton B. Carter

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SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

Last summer, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced that India and the United States had struck a deal for a far-reaching "strategic partnership." As part of the agreement, President George W. Bush broke with long-standing U.S. policy and openly acknowledged India as a legitimate nuclear power, ending New Delhi's 30-year quest for such recognition.

Much of the debate surrounding "the India deal," as the agreement has come to be known since it was finalized last March, has focused on nuclear issues. Opponents charge that Bush's historic concession to India could deal a serious blow to the international nonproliferation regime and could set a dangerous precedent for Iran, North Korea, and other aspiring nuclear powers. They also note that the Bush administration obtained no meaningful commitments from New Delhi -- no promises that India would limit its growing nuclear arsenal or take new steps to help combat nuclear proliferation and international terrorism. Why, the critics ask, did Washington give India so much for so little?

These detractors are both right and wrong. They are right to say that the deal is unbalanced and seems to have been struck with little regard for some of its implications. But they overstate the damage it will do to nonproliferation -- an important cause, without doubt -- and their understanding of the deal's objectives is too narrow. When the nuclear arrangements of the agreement are understood -- as they should be -- as just one part of a sweeping strategic realignment that could prove critical to U.S. security interests down the road, the India deal looks much more favorable. Washington gave something away on the nuclear front in order to gain much more on other fronts; it hoped to win the support and cooperation of India -- a strategically located democratic country of growing economic importance -- to help the United States confront the challenges that a threatening Iran, a turbulent Pakistan, and an unpredictable China may pose in the future. Washington's decision to trade a nuclear-recognition quid for a strategic-partnership quo was a reasonable move.

Critics rightly note, however, a serious asymmetry in the arrangement: whereas the deal is clear about what the United States conceded, it is vague about what India will

give in return. India obtained nuclear recognition up front; the gains for the United States are contingent and lie far ahead in the uncertain future. This imbalance leaves Washington at the mercy of India's future behavior: there is still a chance that India will not deliver on the strategic partnership, especially if cooperating with the United States means abandoning positions it once endorsed as a leader of the Nonaligned Movement (NAM) and siding decisively with Washington on a range of security issues. It remains to be seen, for example, if India, once a staunch detractor of the nonproliferation regime, will now become one of its supporters.

The truth is that it is too soon to tell whether the promise of the India deal will be realized. It is too soon to tell even whether the deal will be consummated at all. To take effect, the White House's nuclear concessions to India must be written into U.S. law. Only Congress can do that, and many of its members are seeking to rebalance the deal in the United States' favor. Some legislators are eager to do so by taking back some of Washington's nuclear concessions, including on nuclear recognition -- a recanting that would cast a lasting cloud over U.S.-Indian relations. Recognizing the danger of this approach, other legislators, backed by reputable nonproliferation experts, are advocating imposing new technical conditions on India. They hope to limit what they perceive to be the danger posed by the India deal to the nonproliferation regime. But the damage will likely be manageable, and haggling over technical details is unlikely to restore whatever loss to its reputation as a proponent of nonproliferation Washington has already suffered. New Delhi might view such conditions as punitive or as only a begrudging acceptance of the deal, a result that would undermine the goodwill Washington sought to build by launching a broad strategic partnership.

The deal, no matter how problematic its nuclear provisions, should not be recast or curtailed. Rather, Congress must support it in its entirety and approve it with implementation language that clearly states the concrete geopolitical advantages the United States expects to gain from a strategic partnership with India.

RECOGNITION AT LAST

Previous U.S. administrations adopted the stance that India's nuclear arsenal, which was first tested in 1974, was illegitimate and should be eliminated or at least seriously constrained. They did so for two reasons. First, they feared that legitimating the Indian arsenal might spur an arms race in Asia because Pakistan, India's archrival, and China might be tempted to keep pace with India's activities. Second, Washington wanted to stick strictly to the principles underlying the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT): parties to the treaty could engage in peaceful nuclear commerce; states that stood outside the NPT regime, such as India, could not. U.S. policymakers feared that compromising these principles might both give states with nuclear aspirations reason to think they could get around the NPT if they waited long enough and dishearten those other states that loyally supported the treaty against proliferators.

A stance, however, is not a policy. And eliminating India's arsenal became an increasingly unrealistic stance when Pakistan went nuclear in the 1980s -- and then became a fantasy in 1998, when India tested five bombs underground and openly declared itself a nuclear power. After India's tests, the Clinton administration sought to nudge New Delhi in directions that would limit counteractions by China and Pakistan and above all prevent an Indo-Pakistani nuclear war. All the while Washington firmly

maintained that U.S. recognition of India's nuclear status was a long way off. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, which prompted Washington to take a fresh look at U.S. policies in South Asia, the Bush administration first reached out to Pakistan to secure its help against Islamist terrorists.

But then it also turned toward New Delhi, and in the summer of 2005 finally granted India de facto nuclear recognition. In a stroke, Washington thereby invited India to join the ranks of China, France, Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom -- the victors of World War II -- as a legitimate wielder of the influence that nuclear weapons confer. When, earlier this year, the Bush administration negotiated the specific terms of its nuclear arrangement with New Delhi, Washington abandoned, against the advice of nonproliferation specialists, any efforts to condition the deal on constraints that would keep India from further increasing its nuclear arsenal.

Under the terms of the deal, the United States commits to behave, and urge other states to behave, as if India were a nuclear weapons state under the NPT, even though India has not signed the treaty and will not be required to do so. (Even if the Bush administration had wished to make India a de jure nuclear weapons state under the NPT, such a change probably would not have been possible, as it would have required unanimous approval by all 188 parties to the treaty.) Washington has also undertaken to stop denying civil nuclear technology to India and has determined to require India to apply the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) only to nuclear facilities it designates as being for purely civil purposes. India is now also authorized to import uranium, the lack of which had long stalled the progress of its nuclear program.

Nuclear recognition will bring enormous political benefits to the Indian government. Naturally, the deal is popular with domestic constituencies, which were already well disposed toward the United States. (In 2005, a poll by the Pew Research Center found that 71 percent of Indian respondents had a favorable view of the United States -- the highest percentage among the 15 leading nations polled.) Singh supporters in the National Congress Party have downplayed the importance of the few obligations that India has undertaken, such as the commitment to voluntarily subject some of its nuclear facilities to inspections, a routine practice in all the other recognized nuclear states, including the United States. Criticism from the opposition BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) has been narrow and technical -- and it probably reflects the BJP's chagrin that the agreement was secured while the National Congress Party was in power. Although some members of the marginal Left Front parties have criticized the terms of the deal, their complaints have smacked of antiquated NAM politics, and the detractors are unlikely to be able to block the deal's approval by the Indian Parliament. Barring the imposition of new conditions by the U.S. Congress, the deal is thus likely to sail through the legislature in India.

American critics of the deal contend that India's past behavior does not warrant this free pass. They argue that Washington should at least ask India to stop making fissile material for bombs, as the NPT's acknowledged nuclear powers have already done, rather than wait for the proposed fissile Material Cutoff Treaty to come into existence. Others contend that India should be required to place more nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards, to prevent any diversion of fissile materials from its nuclear power program to its nuclear weapons program. Still others want India to sign the Comprehensive Test

Ban Treaty rather than be allowed merely to abide by a unilateral moratorium on further underground testing, as it has done since 1998.

The Indian government, backed by Indian public opinion, has resisted all attempts to impose such technical constraints on its nuclear arsenal. So far, the U.S. government has effectively supported New Delhi's position by insisting that the India deal is not an arms control treaty but a broader strategic agreement. The Bush administration has described the nuclear issue as the "basic irritant" in U.S.-Indian relations and has argued that once the issue is out of the way, India will become a responsible stakeholder in the nonproliferation regime, jettison its vestigial NAM posturing, take a more normal place in the diplomatic world -- and become a strategic partner of the United States.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

The most serious charge against the deal is that Washington, by recognizing India's de facto nuclear status and effectively rewarding noncompliance, hurt the integrity of the nonproliferation regime. There is no question that such an abrupt reversal of U.S. policy was a blow to nonproliferation efforts, but the damage is manageable and will not affect the most worrisome near-term cases.

To begin with, the impact of the Bush-Singh deal on so-called rogue states is likely to be minimal. It is safe to assume that as North Korea's Kim Jong Il calculates how far he can go with his nuclear breakout, he hardly worries about the internal consistency of the NPT regime (much like Saddam Hussein, who eventually stopped paying it any heed). Pyongyang's governing ideology is not communism so much as a fanatical embrace of autarky and self-reliance, which seems to include open defiance of international norms such as nonproliferation. North Korea's tolerance for ostracism by the international community is legendary. Stopping its nuclear program -- by measures short of war -- would require tough and focused diplomacy, with incentives and sanctions, in which the NPT would play little part.

The India deal's impact on Iran, another country driving for nuclear power status, will also be modest. Tehran's ongoing cat-and-mouse game with the IAEA, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany suggests that Iranian leaders have at least a smidgen of sensitivity to international opinion. India's nuclear recognition may give Tehran a new talking point -- if India gets a free pass, why not Iran? -- but that is about it. Iran's nuclear program, like that of North Korea, has deep roots in the country's sense of insecurity and its national pride, and these factors matter far more than the NPT. Besides, because Tehran continues to claim that it seeks only nuclear power, not nuclear weapons, it would be hard-pressed to point to India as a relevant precedent.

The deal's impact will mostly be felt among two other groups of countries: states that are not rogues but have flirted or continue to flirt with nuclear status ("the in-betweens") and states that faithfully uphold the rules, whether or not they have nuclear weapons ("the stalwarts"). South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, South Korea, Taiwan, and, more recently, Libya have all been in-betweens at some point. Although they eventually forwent nuclear weapons for reasons specific to their own circumstances, all of them were in some way swayed by the fear that they would suffer lasting international ostracism if they flouted the NPT regime. With India's sweet deal now suggesting that forgiveness comes to proliferators who wait long enough, some states

might be tempted to stray. (Brazil, which is now trying to enrich uranium, comes to mind.)

Curiously, the India deal might have the greatest effect on the stalwarts of nonproliferation, including the five states that are formally entitled to hold nuclear weapons under the NPT. Not only do these countries play an important role in confronting rogue states and keeping in-betweens in bounds; they also provide direct technical support to the nonproliferation regime by denying critical exports to governments that infringe the NPT's rules. The Nuclear Suppliers Group, in particular, coordinates controls on exports by nations with advanced nuclear power technology. The NSG was the result of a U.S. initiative, and the United States has long helped prevent the group's members from giving in to pressure from their nuclear industries to sell technology more liberally abroad. Now that Washington has suddenly changed its policy, the NSG states might consider themselves free to pick and choose when they will and will not apply nonproliferation rules. The Chinese could be tempted to make deals with Pakistan, the Russians with Iran, and the Europeans with everyone else.

Limiting the damage caused by the Bush-Singh deal must therefore center on managing the in-between and stalwart states. (Developing a plan for doing so would have been a logical part of the U.S. diplomatic initiative toward India in 2005-6, yet the Bush administration failed to devise one.) Such an effort should be possible, and the U.S. government's belated consultations with the leaders of such states have had promising results. In fact, most of the countries whose adherence to the NPT regime remains critical will wind up supporting the deal or at least acquiescing in it, for three reasons. First, they tend to accept Washington's arguments that New Delhi's possession of nuclear weapons is an irreversible fact and that India has controlled the transfer of sensitive technology responsibly -- there has apparently been no Indian Abdul Qadeer Khan (known as A. Q. Khan, he ran a black-market nuclear supply ring from Pakistan). Second, India is not a rogue state but a stable democracy that is likely to play a large and constructive role in the global order in the years to come. Third, India's 30 years in the penalty box, which long exacted a heavy price from New Delhi in terms of both prestige and technology, should be sufficient to establish that adherents to the nonproliferation regime are serious about punishing those who infringe its norms. Such arguments have won over many members of the nonproliferation community, notably Mohamed ElBaradei, the IAEA director general and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Although the Bush-Singh deal has caused some grumbling within the NPT regime, a revolt of its members or the regime's collapse is not likely. The damage to nonproliferation will ultimately be limited.

THE REAL DEAL

Just as the deal's critics have exaggerated its costs to the nonproliferation regime, its proponents have exaggerated -- or misstated -- its benefits. The Bush administration claims, for example, that the India deal will require New Delhi to improve its laws and procedures for controlling exports or diversions of sensitive nuclear technology. But India already is bound to exert such controls under the U.S.-sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 1540. Moreover, Washington is touting better compliance as a plus of the deal, even as it lauds India's apparently solid record of controlling nuclear exports -- effectively trying to argue the point both ways.

Bush administration spokespeople have also defended the deal as critical to preventing India's economic rise from posing a threat to the world's oil security and to the environment. Both New Delhi and Washington want India to be able to satisfy its huge population's spiking energy needs -- which are projected to grow fourfold within 25 years (faster than the country's GDP is expected to increase) -- without aggravating its dependence on oil from the Middle East or excessively contributing to pollution and global warming. Nuclear power can play a part in helping India address these problems, but it will not make a critical difference. It can do little to slake the thirst of the principal oil-consuming sector in India -- transportation -- because cars and trucks do not run off the electrical grid and will not for a long time. Electricity in India will be mostly produced by coal-burning power plants for the foreseeable future; even under the most extravagant projections, nuclear plants will provide less than ten percent of India's electricity. (Today, they produce only three percent.) Burning coal more cheaply and more cleanly would do more for India's economy and the environment than would expanding the country's nuclear power capacity.

The real benefits of the India deal for Washington lie in the significant gains, especially in terms of security, that the broader strategic relationship could deliver down the road. For one thing, with New Delhi as an informal ally, Washington should expect to have India's help in curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions, even if India's assistance would risk compromising its friendly relations with Iran. There have been some promising signs. At meetings of the IAEA Board of Governors over the past year, India joined the United States and its European partners in finding that Iran had violated its NPT obligations and then in referring the matter to the UN Security Council -- two welcome signs that India supports the international campaign to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions. Whether India actively cooperates with the United States against Iran or persists in offering rhetorical support for the spread of nuclear-fuel-cycle activities (uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing) will be the clearest test of whether nuclear recognition "brings India into the mainstream" of nonproliferation policy, as the Bush administration predicts will happen.

The United States will also want India's assistance in dealing with a range of dangerous contingencies involving Pakistan. Pakistan's stock of nuclear weapons, along with Russia's, is the focus of urgent concern about nuclear terrorism. Whatever version of the A. Q. Khan story one believes -- that the Pakistani government and military were unaware of Khan's activities or that they permitted them -- its moral is worrisome. It suggests that terrorists could buy or steal the materials (namely, plutonium or enriched uranium) necessary to building nuclear bombs from Pakistan thanks to diversion by radical elements in the Pakistani elite or if the Musharraf regime crumbles. And if an incident were to originate in Pakistan, the United States would want to respond in concert with as many regional players as possible, including India.

Such risks are still difficult for Washington and New Delhi to acknowledge publicly, however, as both governments try to maintain a delicately balanced relationship with Islamabad. The United States needs Pervez Musharraf's support to search for Osama bin Laden and other terrorists on Pakistani territory, prevent the radicalization of Pakistan's population, and stabilize Afghanistan; it can ill afford to be perceived as tilting too far toward India. The Indian government, for its part, also seems intent on improving its relations with Islamabad.

But it is still reeling from the fallout of the bombings on the Indian Parliament last year, which have been attributed to Pakistani terrorists. And India, too, could be a victim of loose nukes in the event of disorder in Pakistan.

Down the road, the United States might also want India to serve as a counterweight to China. No one wishes to see China and the United States fall into a strategic contest, but no one can rule out the possibility of such a competition. The evolution of U.S.-Chinese relations will depend on the attitudes of China's younger generation and new leaders, on Chinese and U.S. policies, and on unpredictable events such as a possible crisis over Taiwan. For now, the United States and India are largely eager to improve trade with China and are careful not to antagonize it. But it is reasonable for them to want to hedge against any downturn in relations with China by improving their relations with each other. Neither government wishes to talk publicly, let alone take actions now, to advance this shared interest, but they very well might in the future.

The India deal could also bring the United States more direct benefits, militarily and economically. Washington expects the intensification of military-to-military contacts and hopes eventually to gain the cooperation of India in disaster-relief efforts, humanitarian interventions, peacekeeping missions, and postconflict reconstruction efforts, including even operations not mandated by or commanded by the United Nations, operations in which India has historically refused to participate. Judging from the evolution of the United States' security partnerships with states in Europe and Asia, the anticipation of such joint action could lead over time to joint military planning and exercises, the sharing of intelligence, and even joint military capabilities. U.S. military forces may also seek access to strategic locations through Indian territory and perhaps basing rights there. Ultimately, India could even provide U.S. forces with "over-the-horizon" bases for contingencies in the Middle East.

On the economic front, as India expands its civilian nuclear capacity and modernizes its military, the United States stands to gain preferential treatment for U.S. industries. The India deal theoretically creates economic opportunities in the construction of nuclear reactors and other power infrastructure in India. These should not be exaggerated, however. The United States would have to secure preferences at the expense of Russian and European competitors and would need to persuade India's scientific community to focus its nuclear power expansion on conventional reactors rather than on the type of exotic and expensive technologies (for example, fast-breeder reactors) it currently favors. India is also expected to increase the scale and sophistication of its military, in part by purchasing weapons systems from abroad. The United States can reasonably anticipate some preferential treatment for U.S. vendors. Early discussions have concerned the sale of F-16 and F-18 tactical aircraft and P-3C maritime surveillance aircraft.

THE ONLY WAY TO GO

Of course, there can be no guarantees that the United States will benefit from India's partnership in these matters. As befits a great nation on its way to global prominence, India will have its own opinions about how best to live up to the deal -- or not, as the case may be -- while pursuing its own interests.

Proponents of the India deal have compared it to President Richard Nixon's opening to China in 1971. It is true that both overtures were bold moves based on a firm foundation

of mutual interest and that both were leaps of trust rather than shrewd bargains. But there are sobering differences between the two fledgling partnerships. Nixon and Mao Zedong shared a clear and present enemy -- the Soviet Union -- not an uncertain set of possible future dangers, as do Bush and Singh now. More important, India today, unlike Mao's China, is a democracy. No government in New Delhi can turn on a dime in regard to a policy followed for decades or suddenly commit India to a broad set of actions that support U.S. interests; only a profound and probably slow evolution in the views of India's elites could produce such changes. India's diplomats and civil servants are notorious for adhering to independent positions regarding the world order, economic development, and nuclear security. The architects of the India deal have suggested that such habits will quickly yield in the face of the United States' recent accommodations on the nuclear issue. But their expectation is naive. Americans may see Washington's turnabout on long-standing U.S. nonproliferation policy as a serious concession, but Indians view it as a belated and much deserved acknowledgment. The United States could come to regret having played its trump card so early.

Although the deal's critics are understandably worried, they risk expressing their concern in counterproductive ways, most notably by seeking to rebalance the U.S.-India deal by imposing additional constraints on India's nuclear program. Preventing an arms race between India, China, and Pakistan is an important goal, but it is best pursued in nontechnical ways. New Delhi has stated its intention to pursue a "minimum deterrent" - not an all-out arms race -- and the Bush administration should hold it to this pledge.

Rather than pull back, the Bush administration and Congress should move forward. A better approach than subtracting benefits from India's side of the ledger would be to add benefits to the United States' side so as to ensure that Washington will obtain what it rightly expects of New Delhi: not just nuclear restraint and a new level of support in handling potential proliferators such as Iran, but a broad strategic realignment. It is too soon to tell whether the United States' goals are shared by India and whether they will be reached. But the United States can do no better to serve its interests than to state its high expectations of this strategic partnership and then give it a real chance of being fully realized.

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