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## ANALYSIS

### INDIA RESCUES THE NUCLEAR PACT AND ITS FOREIGN POLICY

*Harsh Pant*

While a degree of theatricality has always been part of the Indian political landscape, this past week Indian politics put on a cliff-hanger of a show. Ultimately, the Congress-led government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh won a confidence vote in parliament after lining up the support of a regional party to retain its majority in the Indian parliament. And it took nothing less than the threat of resignation from the prime minister for his own party to fall in line in backing him on the U.S.-India civilian nuclear energy cooperation pact, heralding the end-game for the treaty's operationalization. Such manoeuvring was long overdue, and the only mystery is why this crucial decision was left to the last minute.

It was during the visit of Prime Minister Singh to the United States in July 2005 that the U.S. declared its ambition to achieve full civil nuclear energy cooperation with India as part of its broader goals of promoting nuclear power and achieving nuclear security. In pursuit of this objective, the Bush administration agreed to "seek agreement from Congress to adjust U.S. laws and policies" and to "work with friends and allies to adjust international regimes to enable full civil nuclear energy cooperation and trade with India, including but not limited to expeditious consideration of fuel supplies for safeguarded nuclear reactors at Tarapur." India, for its part, promised "to assume the same responsibilities and practices and acquire the same benefits and advantages of other leading countries with advanced nuclear technology."

The U.S.-Indian nuclear pact has virtually rewritten the rules of the global nuclear regime by underlining India's credentials as a responsible nuclear state that should be integrated into the global nuclear order. The nuclear agreement creates a major exception to the U.S. prohibition of nuclear assistance to any country that does not accept international monitoring of all its nuclear facilities. It is a remarkable initiative, not in the least, because it reveals the desire on both sides to challenge their long-held assumptions about each other in order to facilitate a partnership that serves the interests of both India and the United States.

Much to the consternation of the non-proliferation enthusiasts in Washington, the treaty gives India almost everything it had been seeking from the U.S. and the international community in the nuclear realm for the past few decades. It was surprising, therefore, that the Indian government found it difficult to generate

sufficient domestic political consensus on this issue. Whereas the Bush Administration was able to push the deal successfully through the U.S. Congress by putting its political weight behind it, New Delhi dithered.

It is not clear why Prime Minister Singh did not take his own party into full confidence, as the lack of enthusiasm for the nuclear pact within it had been evident throughout. Even more galling was the government's romantic belief that the Indian Communist parties would somehow come around to support the pact despite their historically demonstrated consistency in opposing cooperation with the United States.

It is possible that the government was relying on the main opposition, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to support the deal at the eleventh hour. It was, after all, the BJP-led government that decided, after conducting nuclear tests in 1998, to commence negotiations with the United States on a broad framework that could bring India into the global nuclear regime—a government that was reportedly very close to signing a deal with the U.S. itself. But when Indian political parties sit in opposition benches, they tend to spend their time opposing the government even on those issues on which they might hold similar views. And the BJP may have been smarting from its own failure to negotiate a similar pact with the United States before losing office.

Realizing that time was running out, Prime Minister Singh finally decided to put his own prestige on the line to get the unqualified backing of his own party and to push the deal forward. This forced his party to reach consensus despite misgivings about the possibility of going to polls amidst rising inflationary pressures.

But now, India has only a limited amount of time if it wants to get the deal signed and sealed before George W. Bush leaves office. The deal would have to be taken up by the

next administration in Washington if India fails to firm up a Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and get a waiver from the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) by August. Then the deal would have to go back to the U.S. Congress for a vote.

Indian policymakers like to assert that there is a broad consensus across political parties on foreign and security policy issues. The fracas over the U.S.-India nuclear deal, however, has made it clear that, today, the Indian political scene stands divided on fundamental foreign policy choices. It seems that foreign policy differences between various Indian political formations have never appeared to be as stark as they are today. Also, the debate on the confidence motion in the Parliament has done nothing to bridge that divide. Although the Indian government has now made its move, and its victory in the Parliament has given it the political momentum necessary to carry the deal to its logical conclusion, the dithering that stalled the treaty for so long in New Delhi has already done much damage to India's credibility as a serious interlocutor on foreign policy issues. Put simply, for all its robust economic growth over the past several years, India is not yet ready for the status of a major global player. A cacophony in domestic politics may be a sign of a healthy, vibrant democracy, but in foreign affairs it is making India look like a nation that has yet to make up its mind about the role it sees for itself on the global stage. As India now moves to negotiate with the IAEA and the NSG, "Brand India" stands diminished with serious doubts about the nation's ability to leverage the present economic and strategic opportunities to its advantage. The momentum of history may be on India's side for the time being, but if the present drift in policymaking continues, India will soon lose its lustre as a rising power.

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