

Uranium sales to India would spread trust, not nuclear arms

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There has been no shortage of half-truths and misplaced good intentions in the debate over uranium and India, a big issue at the Australian Labor Party conference this weekend.

But the most mistaken claim is that Prime Minister Julia Gillard's proposal to end the blanket ban on civilian uranium exports to India will somehow lead to the catastrophic spread of nuclear weapons and the ruin of Australia's international reputation. It will do neither.

A change of Labor policy would build a new foundation of non-discrimination, mutual respect, trust and partnership with a rising India. It would also help Australia catch up with a global non-proliferation order that is already adapting to India's importance in the Asian century.

Current Labor policy insists that India can make electricity with Australian uranium only if it signs the 1970 nuclear non-proliferation treaty. But that rests on a political impossibility — expecting India to surrender its nuclear weapons while China and Pakistan keep theirs.

Many Australians may not realise that, for all its merits, the NPT was a messy Cold War deal involving an ethical double standard. It permits only those five nations that tested the bomb before 1967 - the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China — to sign the treaty while possessing nuclear weapons. In this topsy-turvy morality play, he who cast the first stone was without sin.

India's pacifist traditions held it back from an all-out effort to build the bomb. Delhi's eventual decisions to test in 1974 and 1998 thus came too late to allow it a recognised nuclear-armed status under the treaty.

They also came after the failure of India's efforts to negotiate a less discriminatory treaty, to persuade other countries to keep their disarmament promises, or to obtain for Delhi an American guarantee of protection against nuclear threats. Australia, meanwhile, signed the treaty comfortably under the umbrella of its US ally. No wonder our moralising sounds like the hypocrisy of the privileged.

The Indians have gone on to build their small nuclear arsenal slowly, fitfully, and partly because of their fear of coercion by China.

To this day, Delhi has a posture involving no first use of nuclear weapons and a minimum deterrent, kept off alert. India has never exported nuclear weapons technology and advocates nuclear disarmament under a global nuclear weapons convention. No other nuclear-armed nation has a philosophy so consistent with the ideals of the Labor Left.

None of this history should stop us looking at the uranium issue on its non-proliferation merits. Here the critics of the Prime Minister's proposal rely on three shaky arguments.

The first is that Canberra cannot be sure its uranium won't be diverted to military use. Yet all Australian uranium export deals involve safeguards: the recipient country must legally agree to use our nuclear material for civilian purposes only, and must accept monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency to confirm this. Of course, no Australian government should conclude a uranium agreement with India with weaker safeguards than we have with, say, China or Russia. And, it would be extraordinary to imagine an Australian uranium deal surviving another Indian nuclear test.

The second alarmist argument is that using Australian uranium for energy would "free up" India's small indigenous uranium reserves to make weapons. Yet it takes a lot less uranium to make bombs than electricity. If India desperately wanted a huge arsenal, then it could have militarised its entire nuclear complex. Instead, it has put most of its energy reactors under safeguards.

If critics of the Prime Minister's proposal were serious about the "freeing-up" argument, they would also oppose exports to India of coal, natural gas and even solar energy know-how — as these also reduce the need for India to use its uranium to make electricity.

India is already importing all the uranium it needs. So Australian uranium will have zero practical proliferation impact. In 2008, the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group — including Australia — agreed to allow civilian nuclear trade with India. Ten nations are already pursuing legitimate commerce under this waiver.

Finally, we are warned that selling uranium to India would send a bad signal to other countries, making them want nuclear weapons. This ignores the varied reasons — such as security, fear, power and national pride — why nations seek atomic armaments. Iran, North Korea, Pakistan and Israel have long pursued nuclear weapons regardless of how the world treated India. It is absurd to suggest that their leaders are on the verge of nuclear disarmament if only Australia would steer clear of India's nuclear energy program.

In the Asian century, democratic India will have the world's third-largest economy and the largest population of any nation in history. It will be a crucial partner across all the big strategic challenges, including nuclear non-proliferation and security. India is a flawed giant. But treating it as a pariah is no longer sustainable.

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