

Uranium thorn

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Late last month, senior officials from a country with massive energy needs came to Canberra asking if Australia might sell them fuel to make electricity. Australia's conservative government pragmatically said 'perhaps'. But the Labor opposition said, in effect, 'no' — because the fuel was uranium and the country was India.

Labor's policy matters a great deal to India. A federal election is due in Australia this year and — pretty much for the first time since it was defeated 11 years ago — Labor is credibly ahead in national polling. Labor's foreign affairs spokesman reaffirmed to Shyam Saran what was until recently the bipartisan Australian stance: We consider selling uranium only to states that have, among other things, signed the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

India's rise — whatever its flaws — is the largest experiment in peaceful, democratic development in history. It is about improving human welfare and self-respect on a scale most Australians can scarcely imagine. India has deep deprivation. Its economic growth is helping hundreds of millions of its people. This requires electricity — and cleaner air. Australian uranium could help.

Ties between Australia and India have long disappointed. For 60 years, our two countries have too often shared a lacklustre diplomatic scorecard of wiles and dropped catches. Both sides have had to resort to clichés about shared affection for cricket and the English language precisely because neither has made the economic or strategic relationship a real priority. Matters have improved, with growing trade including in coal and education services, plus Australia's relatively recent — in other words, post-9/11 — recognition of common cause against Islamist terrorism.

But while India is building solid partnerships in many directions, there remains nothing special about its ties with Australia. Yet there could be. Australian uranium fuelling India's rise in living standards would put Australia on the path to becoming an indispensable partner to the rising democratic power of the new century. Our relations with India could finally start approaching the strong ties we have with the other Asian giants. But then there's the NPT.

Stopping the further spread of nuclear weapons and reducing the risk of their use are vital security goals that Australia has a proud record of supporting. But Australia and the rest of the international community should not focus dogmatically or solely on the NPT in pursuing them. The NPT is an imperfect instrument. Arguably, it has often helped limit the proliferation of nuclear arms. Sometimes it patently has not. Other factors matter too.

One is safeguards agreements allowing International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to make sure civilian nuclear supplies are not being diverted for bomb-making: NPT parties are bound by these but other states can choose to be too. Another issue is that some countries have safe neighbourhoods and nuclear-armed allies and some do not. India won't sign the NPT until the world or the treaty changes, in ways that seem hardly likely.

The treaty embodies a double standard in which the powers of the 1960s excluded India. It recognises as nuclear weapons states only those countries that had already tested the bomb: the US, Russia, the UK, France and China. By the time India tested — in 1974 and 1998 — all it got was nuclear trade bans and indignation. So for India to sign the existing NPT, it would need to unmake its arsenal — which won't happen while Pakistan or China, or anyone, keeps theirs.

Any Australian uranium sales to India should certainly be bound by strong safeguards, as are Australian sales to others, including China. It is not yet clear to Australia or other observers if those safeguards India will accept would be strict enough. This factor will be crucial to India's new non-proliferation credibility.

But rather than dismiss outright the idea of selling uranium to India, Australia should keep options and dialogue open. At the same time, Canberra could try weighing in seriously in pursuit of a real international consensus on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, something on which the Howard government has done little but which is more in line with Australian Labor ideals. Only, next time Australia convenes an international 'Canberra Commission' of experts to explain how to rid the world of nuclear weapons, it had better include an Indian.

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