

Welcoming India to the nuclear club

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News that the federal cabinet will this month consider uranium sales to India is generating more heat than light. Critics of the idea insist Australia is shedding principles to reward an outlaw, thus encouraging others to seek nuclear weapons. In response, supporters of a policy shift claim that nuclear co-operation with India will reduce the spread of these most destructive of arms.

If the public ends up confused, it is because both arguments are overdone. Both obscure that the central issue is not some ideal called non-proliferation, but rather how to reconcile the messy reality of nuclear policy with India's changing place in the global system. Non-proliferation - the effort to stem the spread of nuclear weapons - is vital for international security. But its effects in shaping how states behave cannot be divorced from the unequal and changing distribution of power among them.

The Government's prospective policy shift shows that Australia accepts India's relatively small nuclear weapons program even though New Delhi has not signed the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This is a double standard. We will not sell uranium to Pakistan. But non-proliferation diplomacy has always been marked by a certain pragmatic hypocrisy. After all, the NPT allows only the five countries that tested before 1967 to bear nuclear arms, with vague promises to disarm one day - vows they ignore, as Britain's planned new deterrent attests.

The status quo, with one of the new century's giants treated as a rebel and denied civil nuclear trade, is unsustainable. Trying to help India sign the NPT by reopening the text, with 187 signatories wanting a say, would risk more damage than any informal deal - and could take forever. So slipping India into the club through the back door, 33 years after it first tested the bomb, is the best bad outcome.

It recognises that non-proliferation is about more than the letter of the NPT. Inspection and audit safeguards agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency, which India is willing to sign, are important. And a country's wider contribution to international security and stability should matter at least as much as treaty words.

All these points inform a landmark United States-India deal, ostensibly finalised last month, ending decades of bans on civilian nuclear trade and paving the way for Australia to end its rigid policy of considering uranium sales only to NPT states.

The case against civil nuclear trade with India is weaker than it looks. Neither the US-India deal nor Australian uranium sales will determine whether third countries opt for nuclear arms. Each state that holds or might want such weapons has its own reasons based on fear, power and prestige.

Claims that Australian uranium might end up in Indian warheads are ill-informed. Yellowcake exports to India would be used solely for electricity to help meet huge energy needs. Our insistence on our own safeguards agreements in addition to those of the IAEA ensures this, as it does with China, France and others. As for the argument that our fuel would still free India's limited uranium reserves for bombs instead of energy, were that to be a basis for policy then we might as well absurdly ban coal exports too - since coal-fired power stations also free uranium for arms-making.

Yet there should be no pretending that atomic commerce with India automatically makes the world much safer from proliferation. The US-India deal puts most of India's reactors, including any to be built or fuelled with international help, under IAEA safeguards.

But these would probably have been for civil use anyway. By ending trade bans, the US recognises that India does not share nuclear weapons materials or knowledge with others. Yet in that sense India always played responsibly.

The Government's looming policy change has flaws, but they are on timing, priming and bargaining. A decisive shift by Australia could yet prove premature. The US-India agreement is not quite over the line. Technical details were finalised just days before Canberra's July 26 announcement by leak. American negotiators made last-minute concessions on India's reprocessing of imported fuel and on whether the deal would end if New Delhi tested again. That fix might yet prove too tenuous to convince the middle ground in the US Congress or some of our fellow members of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, the body that sets guidelines on nuclear trade.

So, in considering exports, we still have scope to ask a political price from Delhi's jinns of diplomacy. Any uranium transfer agreement should include our right to cease supply if India tested another nuclear bomb. We should also seek a special public declaration from India, not least to satisfy our cautious mining industry.

This would affirm that India will sustain its moratorium on nuclear tests. It would state that India will support the long overdue negotiation of a verifiable global treaty to ban producing fissile material for weapons - a pact that would eventually limit New Delhi's arsenal.

It would proclaim India's determination to help thwart efforts by any other state to acquire nuclear weapons, and commit India's navy to interdicting illegal nuclear trade in harmony with the Proliferation Security Initiative. And it could reiterate that India has a strictly defensive nuclear posture based on no first use, along with a moral commitment to global nuclear disarmament.

Ending New Delhi's nuclear isolation recognises the massive strategic, economic, demographic and environmental importance of India in a changing world.

For Australia, it is also about forging the missing link in our strategic Asian diplomacy, building a bond of indispensability to match our ties with China and Japan. That should be our destination, but we do not need to get there yesterday.

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