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Implications of the US-India nuclear deal and the task for the peace movement

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The US Congress explicitly rejected proposals that the deal be conditional on India halting its production of fissile materials (plutonium and highly enriched uranium) for nuclear weapons. This is despite the fact that the United Nations Security Council had unanimously demanded that India and Pakistan stop such production (Resolution 1172, 6 June, 1998).

The U.S.-India deal will allow India access to the international uranium market. This will enable it to free up more of its domestic uranium for its nuclear weapons program. India could, for example, build a third weapon plutonium reactor and begin enriching uranium for weapons, as well as supply enriched uranium to fuel the nuclear submarine it has been trying to build for several decades. India could also convert one of its unsafeguarded nuclear power reactors to weapons-grade plutonium production, and generate an additional 200 kg/year of weapons-grade plutonium. This would allow India to produce an additional 40-50 weapons worth a year of weapon-grade plutonium --- up from perhaps seven weapons worth a year today.

As part of the nuclear deal, the United States also agreed to let Indian keep its nuclear fuel reprocessing plants and plutonium breeder reactor program outside safeguards. The plutonium breeder reactor that India expects to complete in 2010 would produce about 25-30 weapons worth a year of weapon-grade plutonium in its blankets. India expects to build another four such reactors in coming years.

Pakistan's National Command Authority, which is chaired by President Pervez Musharraf and has responsibility for its nuclear weapons policy and production, declared that "In view of the fact the [U.S.-India] agreement would enable India to produce a significant quantity of fissile material and nuclear weapons from unsafeguarded nuclear reactors, the NCA expressed firm resolve that our credible minimum deterrence requirements will be met."

Our task

The international peace movement can still try to prevent this deal from triggering a major escalation in the South Asian nuclear arms race.

For the deal to come into force, it has to be accepted unanimously by the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). The debate may be drawn out

- the deal is supported by the United States, United Kingdom, France and Russia, while several members (including Austria, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and New Zealand) are opposed, and other countries (among them Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Finland) are divided. China has proposed that instead of an India-specific exemption from NSG rules, a criteria based approach be adopted. This presumably would open the door for the NSG to eventually consider lifting restrictions on nuclear trade with Pakistan â€" whose nuclear weapon and nuclear power program China has supported.

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The countries who are members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group must be urged to abide by UN Security Council Resolution 1172. They should promote an end to the production of fissile materials for weapons in South Asia as a condition for any international nuclear trade with India or Pakistan.

A moratorium on such production could also be important in fostering negotiations on a fissile material cut-off treaty. The United States, Russia, United Kingdom, France and China have all suspended production of fissile materials for weapons. India and Pakistan (along with Israel and North Korea) are continuing their production however. A complete halt to all production of fissile materials for nuclear weapons is a necessary step for nuclear disarmament.

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For more information on the US-India nuclear deal:

Zia Mian and M. V. Ramana, "Wrong Ends, Means, and Needs: Behind the U.S. Nuclear Deal with India," Arms Control Today, January/February 2006

Zia Mian, A.H. Nayyar, R. Rajaraman and M.V. Ramana,

"Fissile Materials in South Asia and the Implications of the US-India Nuclear Deal"

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