

# Who's a nuclear threat?

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By Rohini Nilekani

Recent assurances by Secretary of State George Shultz to the Indian government regarding U.S. supplying spare parts to the Tarapur nuclear plant have generated misdirected reaction in this country.

Stripped of their politicization the facts are these: By virtue of a 1963 Indo-U.S. agreement, the U.S. has a contractual obligation to supply the Tarapur plant for the stipulated 30-year period. The spare parts now being requested are, according to the Indian government, essential for the safe operation of the plant. The U.S. has sought to withhold supply by applying subsequent domestic legislation unilaterally and retroactively, while India has been trying to activate the American side of the agreement for nearly a decade.

In a recent Perspective article decrying U.S. promises to export the spare parts to India, Joseph W. Clifford cites India's stand against the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty [NPT], which went into effect in 1970. As India and other nonparticipating countries have maintained, this is due to the discriminatory nature of the treaty's application to the nuclear have-nots. While preventing them from building nuclear weapons, the treaty allows nuclear powers to maintain and develop a vast nuclear arsenal. In complete disregard for the spirit in which the treaty was penned, the nuclear powers have made no serious effort to limit the largest stockpiling of weapons in world history.

Nuclear powers cannot succeed at horizontal non-proliferation with a "you-go-first" attitude towards developing countries, which unfortunately have succumbed to the perceived nuclear imperative. Fearing arms races in the Third World, Mr. Clifford mentions an increased danger of irrational use by reckless leaders in conflict-prone countries. Is the U.S. not seen to contribute to such a danger when on at least two occasions its presidents have been known to seriously consider the use of nuclear weapons?

A similar attitude permeates the articles of the treaty. It is assumed that nuclear powers will never be aggressors, though non-nuclear countries have no security guarantee against a nuclear attack. A Brazilian representative described the treaty as a "bilateral understanding between the superpowers" which would condemn non-nuclear countries to a status of permanent technological dependence. Little wonder then that India has been obsessed by a desire for nuclear independence.

On the matter of Tarapur, the U.S. contention that India may not reprocess spent fuel from the reactor without its approval is not upheld by the 1963 agreement. The contract states that such reprocessing may be performed upon joint determination that safeguards may be effectively applied. Unfortunately the U.S. has chosen not to enter into such a determination. There has been no response to India's requests to complete formalities on a fuel reprocessing plant at Tarapur, the design of which was inspected for safeguards by the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission [AEC]. Nevertheless the plant is subject to International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] safeguards by virtue of a subsidiary treaty with India in 1980, regarding the reprocessing of spent fuel.

In any case, India unfortunately already has access to plutonium from other sources. Says Robert Goheen, ex-U.S. ambassador to India, in a letter to the *New York Times*, "Hence reprocessing the U.S. supplied fuel would hardly be epoch-making. Nor is the plutonium of the type that makes very good bombs."

With an unavoidable nexus between nuclear energy and nuclear weaponry, there is no way to adequately control the one while pursuing the other. But in the case of India, as Mr. Goheen points out in his letter, "I think you underrate the restraint India has shown in not exercising the nuclear weapons making capacity, which it demonstrated in 1974, while you implicitly overrate greatly our ability to influence India's nuclear policy by the denial of U.S. supplies." India has reiterated its decision not to manufacture nuclear weapons. Answering rumours that India was preparing for another detonation, Shultz said, "I have no information whatsoever along these lines and from all that I can see there is no such intention." Indira Gandhi should be aware that to do so would lead to disastrous backlashes in the region.

For better or for worse the present Indian government seems committed to the development of nuclear power to meet expanding energy needs. The U.S. supply of spare parts will neither alter this course nor precipitate in any way the nuclear arms race or India's decision to join it.

However, as Mr. Clifford says, the signals that the U.S. sends to the world concerning the proliferation of nuclear weapons are of utmost importance. Sanctions against a country can only be less effective than a overall disincentive to proliferate. There can be no more potent disincentive for the Third World than an immediate freeze on nuclear weapons production and a treaty on general nuclear disarmament by the superpowers.