Civilian Nuclear Cooperation with India: Another Step Down a Long Road
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Thursday’s 85-12 vote in the U.S. Senate in favor of legislation permitting civilian nuclear cooperation between the United States and India is a major milestone in U.S.-India relations. It does not complete passage of the legislation – that will not occur until the House and Senate versions of the bill have been reconciled, re-passed, and signed by the President. And there are four further steps before cooperation becomes a reality: negotiation of a U.S.-India cooperation agreement, ratification of this agreement by the U.S. Congress, negotiation of a framework agreement between India and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and obtaining the assent of the Nuclear Suppliers’ Group (NSG). The bilateral cooperation agreement and the IAEA framework agreement are highly technical documents, with political goals and symbols lurking behind the technical details; the NSG makes its decisions by consensus, so the agreement of some 20 member states is required. But yesterday’s action completes what most observers looked on as the most difficult part of the process.

The Senate vote confirms what was already apparent from the vote in the House of Representatives – that large majorities of legislators from both parties want to be on record in favor of building a serious partnership with India. Not many initiatives by the Bush Administration have enjoyed this kind of support. The controversy that attended the U.S.-India understanding when it was first announced in July 2005 gave no indication that it would receive such a broadly based endorsement. Only rarely in the history of U.S.-India relations has India received this kind of widespread backing in the U.S. Congress. The bipartisan support probably reflects the general good feelings between the Indian and American people and the energy of the Indian-American community more than it does the strategic underpinnings of the U.S.-India relationship.

Once the legislation is fully in place and nuclear cooperation is under way, we need to start building up the underdeveloped elements in our partnership. In particular, we need to deepen our dialogue on the broad issues of security and balance of power in Asia and in the Indian Ocean. This is an area where Indian and U.S. interests are very close. Both countries depend on a global oil market that needs safe passage through the Indian Ocean in order to function. Both want to see the major Asian powers maintain peaceful relations. Neither wants to see a single power dominate the Asian scene. And both expect that Asia’s importance in global affairs will continue to grow. This is a powerful set of common interests, and a strong basis for a geopolitical understanding. The two governments need to make it into one of the foundations of their partnership, together with the economic connections and the bond of democracy that are more frequently talked about.

The second challenge, heading down this long road, is to build a nonproliferation system for the 21st century. The reason the United States was able to conclude this agreement with India is that India has never exported its nuclear wares. But the fact that India was an object of export controls made it reluctant to get more deeply into international efforts to restrict nuclear commerce. India’s new status ought to provide it the opportunity to define a more muscular role for itself in working with the international community to prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons. Nonproliferation has focused mainly on national regimes for control and safeguards. In today’s world, however, the biggest danger is spreading nuclear weapons or materials to “rogue” actors who may be entirely outside the realm of national controls. India is now in a position to show that it is prepared to be part of the solution to this difficult problem.

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