

# **The Bush Administration Stokes Dangerous Arms Race on Indian Subcontinent**

**By Stephen Zunes | July 21, 2005**

For more than two decades, arms control experts have argued that the most likely scenario for the hostile use of nuclear weapons was not between the former Cold War superpower rivals, an act of terrorism by an underground terrorist group, or the periodically threatened unilateral U.S. attack against a “rogue state,” but between India and Pakistan. These two South Asian rivals have fought each other in three major wars—in 1947, 1965, and 1971—and have engaged in frequent border clashes in recent years in the disputed Kashmir region, coming close to another all-out war as recently as 2002.

It is ironic, then, that President George W. Bush—who reiterated in the 2004 presidential campaign that his primary concern was the proliferation of nuclear materials—is actively pursuing policies which will likely increase the risk of a catastrophic nuclear confrontation on the Indian subcontinent.

## **The United States and India**

On July 18, during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, President Bush announced his intention to provide India access to sensitive nuclear technology and sophisticated nuclear-capable weapons systems. The agreement does not require India to eliminate its nuclear weapons program or its ballistic missile systems, as called upon by a 1998 UN Security Council resolution, or even to cease production of weapons-grade plutonium which enables India to further expand its arsenal of more than three dozen nuclear warheads

Nicholas Burns, the U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, called the agreement on the transfer of the dangerous technology “the high-water mark of U.S.-India relations” since the country’s independence from Great Britain in 1947. It is demonstrative of the Bush administration’s view of foreign relations that the transfer of such dangerous technology is seen as of greater positive significance than the critical agricultural assistance and food aid the United States provided India in the 1960s, which

not only prevented an incipient famine of mass proportions but significantly boosted India’s long-term agricultural production, thereby saving untold millions of lives.

Former U.S. Senator and 1972 Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern, who helped oversee such foreign aid programs to India when he served as director of the Food for Peace program in the Kennedy administration, called Burns’ statement “a dangerous misunderstanding of how America can best utilize foreign aid in support of economic development and international security.”

In order for the proposed U.S.-Indian agreement to be implemented, the Bush administration will need Congress to amend the U.S. Non-Proliferation Act of 2000, which bans the transfers of sensitive nuclear technology to any country which refuses to accept international monitoring of its nuclear facilities. It will also mean contravening the rules of the 40-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, which controls the export of nuclear technology and to which the United States is a signatory. It would also be a violation of the 1968 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which has been signed and ratified by the United States and calls upon existing nuclear powers to not transfer nuclear know-how to countries which have not signed the treaty.



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This proposed agreement would actually endanger India's security by encouraging a dangerous and destabilizing nuclear weapons program that award-winning Indian novelist Arundhati Roy has referred to as "the final act of betrayal by a ruling class that has failed its people."

The best-case scenario, in which U.S. nuclear assistance was somehow limited solely to peaceful uses, would still be bad for India. Even advanced industrialized countries have found nuclear power to be an extremely dangerous and expensive means to generate electricity. As evidenced by the 1984 accident at a Union Carbide chemical facility in the Indian city of Bhopal, which killed more than 20,000 people, there are serious questions regarding the ability of Indian authorities to adequately safeguard the public from industrial accidents.

India's interests in procuring additional nuclear technology is ironic, moreover, given that the man who led the country's freedom struggle from British colonialism, Mohandas Gandhi, was not only a pacifist and an opponent of the partition of his country between India and Pakistan, but also opposed centralized control of basic necessities like energy—whether it be by the state or private corporations. Were he alive today, Gandhi would not only be leading the struggle against the proposed U.S.-Indian nuclear agreement, he would be an outspoken advocate of small-scale, locally-controlled renewable energy and other appropriate technologies, such as solar power.

India ranks 118th out of 164 countries on the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index, ranking below even the impoverished nations of Central America. More than 400 million Indians are illiterate, more than 600 million lack even basic sanitation and more than 200 million have no safe drinking water. Surely, if promoting "sustainable development" in India is really the goal, as President Bush claims, there are certainly better ways to do that than by building nuclear power plants.

## The United States and Pakistan

The Bush administration's announcement in March that it intends to sell sophisticated F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan similarly raises serious questions regarding its stated commitment to promote democracy, support non-proliferation, and fight terrorism and Islamic extremism.

Unlike India, which—despite its enormous social and economic inequality and ethnic diversity—has nurtured a longstanding democratic political system, Pakistan has primarily been ruled by a series of military dictatorships.

General Pervaz Musharraf, who overthrew Pakistan's democratically-elected government in 1999, continues to suppress the established secular political parties while allowing for the development of Islamic political groups that show little regard for individual freedom. Despite this, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had little but kind words for the Musharraf dictatorship when she visited Pakistan in March during her "democracy promotion" world tour. While acknowledging that he has yet to restore constitutional governance, she praised his willingness to consider holding elections some time in 2007.

Under Musharraf's rule, the Pakistani government's funding for education has declined to become one of the lowest education budgets relative to GDP than any country on the globe, resulting in the collapse of what was once one of the developing world's better public school systems. This lack of adequate public education has led to the rise of Saudi-funded Islamic schools, known as *madrasahs*, many of which have served as recruiting grounds for terrorists. The Congressional Research Service, in a report this past December, noted how—despite promises to the contrary—Musharraf has not cracked down on the more extremist *madrasahs*. Yet the Bush administration is only offering \$67 million in foreign aid for Pakistani education—compared to \$3 billion worth of weaponry.

An administration official has claimed that the U.S. fighter-bombers "are vital to Pakistan's security as President Musharraf prosecutes the war on terror." However, these jets were originally ordered fifteen

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years ago, long before the U.S.-led “war on terror” began. They were suspended by the administration of the current president’s father out of concerns about Pakistan’s nuclear program and the Pakistani military’s ties with Islamic terrorist groups. These concerns seem to bother the son not at all. Nor are such sophisticated aircraft particularly effective in attacking a decentralized network of underground terrorist cells located in remote tribal areas of that country, where small-unit counter-insurgency operations would be far more effective.

The other factor the administration and its supporters fail to mention is that, for more than a decade, Pakistan actively supported the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which provided sanctuary for the al-Qaida network. Osama bin Laden and his senior aides are widely believed to have been living in Pakistan for the past three and a half years.

One of the most disturbing aspects of U.S. support for the Pakistani regime is that Pakistan has been sharing its nuclear materials and know-how with North Korea and other so-called “rogue states.” The Bush administration has chosen to essentially ignore what has been called “the most extravagantly irresponsible nuclear arms bazaar the world has ever seen” and to instead blame others.

For example, even though it was actually Pakistanis who passed on nuclear materials to Libya, the Bush administration instead told U.S. allies that North Korea was responsible, thereby sabotaging negotiations which many had hoped could end North Korea’s nuclear program and resolve that festering crisis. Though it was Pakistan which provided Iran with nuclear centrifuges, the Bush administration is now citing Iran’s possession of such materials as justification for a possible U.S. military attack against that country.

The Bush administration, despite evidence to the contrary, claims that the Pakistani government was not responsible for exporting such dangerous materials, but that these serious breaches of security were solely the responsibility of a single rogue nuclear scientist name Abdul Qadeer Khan. Unfortunately, the Pakistani military regime has not allowed U.S. intelligence access to Khan, the former head of Pakistan’s

nuclear program, who lives under government protection in Islamabad.

## Encouraging a Regional Arms Race

The Bush administration has tried to assuage India’s concerns over the transfer of such military aircraft to Pakistan by promising that India too would be able to receive the nuclear-capable warplanes. It is not unreasonable to expect that, out of a similar interest in “balance,” the Bush administration may support the transfer of nuclear technology to Pakistan as well. The result of such policies will almost certainly be a renewed and increasingly dangerous nuclear arms race.

Pakistan and India are among only a handful of states which have refused to sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Though U.S. law had formerly prohibited U.S. arms transfers to these governments, President Bush—with bipartisan Congressional support—successfully had such restrictions overturned in 2001.

In 1998, the UN Security Council—with U.S. support—passed resolution 1172, which called on Pakistan and India to eliminate their nuclear weapons and their ballistic missiles. Among policymakers, however, this resolution seems to have been forgotten.

The Bush administration tried to justify its 2003 decision to invade Iraq on the grounds that the Iraqi government was flouting UN Security Council resolutions requiring the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, WMD programs, and offensive delivery systems. Although the Iraqi government had in fact already done so, and had even allowed UN inspectors unfettered access to verify that it had disarmed as required, the United States proceeded with an invasion to deal with this supposed “threat.”

By contrast, Pakistan and India—unlike Iraq in 2003—not only have active nuclear weapons programs; they have built, tested, and amassed a stockpile of nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable missiles. Pakistan and India, unlike Iraq in 2003, are in open defiance of the UN Security Council’s insistence that they disarm these weapons and delivery systems.

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The Bush administration and Congressional leaders, however, appear to believe that nuclear proliferation and violations of UN Security Council resolutions only matter for governments that the U.S. government does not like.

For more than a decade, the U.S. government has forcefully challenged Russia not to provide nuclear technology to Iran, even though the Russian-Iranian nuclear agreements have had more stringent safeguards than the proposed U.S.-Indian nuclear agreement. Indeed, unlike India, there is no solid evidence that Iran even has a nuclear weapons program, much less nuclear weapons themselves.

Rather than get serious about discouraging proliferation, the Bush administration—with the support of a bipartisan majority in Congress—appears instead to insist upon a kind of nuclear apartheid, where the United States alone gets to decide who can have these dangerous weapons and who cannot.

Any arms control regime based upon such double standards, unilaterally imposed from the outside, is bound to lead to increased efforts by the have-nots to join the ranks of the already-haves. The best hope for genuine peace and security in the region would be a nuclear weapons-free zone for all of South and Southwest Asia, similar to those which already exist in Southeast Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the South Pacific. Unfortunately, a proposed UN

Security Council resolution in December 2003 calling for the establishment of such an additional nuclear-free zone was withdrawn after a threatened U.S. veto.

Maintaining such double standards regarding nuclear proliferation presents incalculable dangers to regional and global peace and security. They are also simply not worthy of a country which asserts the right to global leadership.

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