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By Chua Hearn Yuit and Yeo Lay Hwee

[*Chua and Yeo in this tour d'horizon of nuclear proliferation reveal the large number of players edging toward nuclear weapons capacity. They also hint at another central theme in US policy toward India: creating one more powerful link in the chain of China encirclement. The net effect is to doom hopes for a viable NPT regime, with the US leading the way in its demise. MS*]

The energy race currently led by China and India has not only created new waves in the existing geopolitical order but also exposed new dimensions to global nuclear power politics.

While US Congress debates whether to overturn 30 years of its foreign policy to make good on the India-US nuclear cooperation deal signed during Bush's visit to India last month, Australia - known for its firm stance on the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) - is inclined to hand out its yellow cake (uranium) to non-NPT signatory India once Congress accedes.

When the deal is passed by Congress and the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, Washington will share civilian nuclear technology with India in return for the latter to stem any export of nuclear weapons technology, place 14 of its 22 nuclear reactors under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards by 2014, and which is applicable to any future civilian reactors.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, at a congressional testimony on April 5, put up improving US-India relations as the main line of her staunch defense for the nuclear deal. Rescinding the deal at this stage will incur "all the hostility and suspicion of the past" and relegate the relationship to Cold War terms. Advantages of securing the deal include reducing India's dependence on coal and Iranian oil, lowering the pressure on global energy prices, and creating "3,000 to 5,000 new direct jobs in the United States and about 10,000 to 15,000 indirect jobs," Rice reported.

Just what else is at stake here?

India's special exemption by the US would offer the passport for continued nuclear weapons production under non-NPT status, a WMD scenario that goes against the grain of the Bush "axis of evil" doctrine, the US-led coalition against Iran's nuclear programme, as well as the central tenets of NPT that has curbed South Korea, Japan and Brazil's nuclear aspirations.

The New York Times on April 7 posed the following argument: "The central question is not the importance of India, but rather the importance of deterring a global nuclear arms race [such as between India and Pakistan, as well as Iran and North Korea]."
How realistic is the US strategy to curb China's advances via India's nuclear independence?

Rice, along with Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Nicholas Burns (who was the US interlocutor in negotiations on the deal) is banking on the opposite trend: that the deal - offered as a "sweetener" and hailed as a "a net gain for global non-proliferation efforts" - will create the pathway for non-NPT signatory states to open the doors to international inspection.

Yet, as Kapil Sibal, India's Science and Technology Minister, ominously revealed at his visit to US as part of an aggressive Indian campaign to lobby for the nuclear deal, India needs nuclear weapons to defend itself, and eight of its 22 nuclear facilities would be off-limits.

Is NPT turning decrepit in the face of new global nuclear power politics? Or are the new dimensions to global nuclear power politics - exposed by China and India's energy race and US-India nuclear talks - opening a whole Pandora box in the region on nuclear energy and the transfer of nuclear technology?

Vietnam News reported yesterday (April 9) that Vietnam has recently announced plans to 'go nuclear' by the year 2020, with the initial installation of two nuclear reactors to sustain the country's power needs, and soliciting help from Russia, China, India, South Korea and Argentina. Following close behind is Indonesia's ongoing negotiations with South Korea on securing the latter's assistance to develop nuclear power.

The turn of the tide appears to have arrived for renewed confidence in developing nuclear energy as an alternative power source in the region since the global spectre of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, but more needs to be done in the areas of public education and measures to maintain both political and environmental security.

A case in point is a less benign emerging player - Myanmar - which has received much political and economic backing from China and India especially through the recent gas deals, coupled with fresh assertions of energy independence (The Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise has revealed enough compressed natural gas (GNG) reserves to support the country for more than 30 years). Myanmar may acquire sufficient funds this time to finance a long-standing ambition to purchase nuclear technology, especially to make good on the 2002 agreement with Russia to build a civilian nuclear reactor. A dangerous concoction is in the mix with Russia and Myanmar announcing on April 3 to improve cooperation efforts, during the highest-ranking visit to Russia by the military junta in four decades.

A new energy game, with NPT tenets on the line, remains to be played out.

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