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U.S. deals with India, Vietnam

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In a year marred by colossal failures of diplomacy, and at a juncture when President Bush is ceding control of Congress to the Democrats, the outgoing Republican-run Congress has handed Bush two going-away presents that represent dramatic diplomatic pivots with two erstwhile adversaries of the United States.

Congress early today approved legislation enabling the U.S. to assist India in the development of its civilian nuclear energy program – a controversial deal which Bush negotiated with the prime minister of India during a trip to New Delhi in March. And Congress has approved Permanent Normal Trade Relations with Vietnam, which Bush had hoped to deliver on his visit to Hanoi last month.

With both agreements, the U.S. effectively is bolstering the economies of two fast-growing Asian economies that serve as political counterweights to the dominance of the booming economy – and military aspirations – of China. And with both, the U.S. is setting aside history – having cut off support for India after nuclear testing in the late 1990s which provoked Pakistan to test its own device and threatened a regional conflagration, and having retreated from Vietnam in 1975 after losing a costly war with the Communist regime there.

"You know, sometimes it's hard to get rid of history," Bush said in India earlier this year, standing alongside Prime Minister Mammohan Singh. "Short-term history shows that the United States and India were divided... The relationship is changing dramatically. Part of that change is going to be how to deal with the nuclear issue."

In the case of India – which detonated a nuclear device as recently as 1998 but never has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that 170 other nations have joined since 1970 – the U.S. is making an about-face turn from its own laws that prohibited nuclear aid for nations that have not signed the NPT.

India, once an ally with the Soviet Union in the Cold War, has secured the right to keep eight of its nuclear plants secret for military purposes while opening the other 14 plants – and all future civilian nuclear power plants – to international inspection. The U.S. and other nations will agree to supply fuel and technology for India's existing and future civilian facilities. And India, a nation of more than one billion with one of the fastest growing economies in Asia, is certain to build a lot more of them.

Sanyay Puri, chairman of the U.S.-India Political Action Committee, today hailed the passage of the legislation as "a turning point in the relationship between the US and India." Its advantage for India and indeed the world is clear, he suggested: "This legislation will not only allow India to explore cleaner renewable sources of energy for its

booming economy, but will also mitigate the threat of the global warming by controlling its pollution levels."

The agreement holds at least two advantages for the U.S.: With the promise of expanded nuclear energy in a fast-growing nation easing pressure on international supplies of petroleum – and perhaps helping contain the price that the U.S. pays for foreign oil; And a lucrative new market for an American nuclear energy industry that has been stymied in the U.S., where no new nuclear power plants have been ordered since the 1970s.

Bush voiced all of this and more in a statement today commending Congress for adopting the Indian deal: "I am pleased that our two countries will soon have increased opportunities to work together to meet our energy needs in a manner that does not increase air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, promotes clean development, supports nonproliferation and enhances our trade interests."

Yet critics complain that the U.S. has forfeited its credibility in continuing relations with other nations, such as Iran, which is enriching nuclear material for what it calls a civilian power program. The U.S., insisting that Iran abandon its enrichment – with the U.S. and European nations accusing Iran of building a bomb – has in effect refused to acknowledge the rights of a nation that signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to develop nuclear power, while rewarding another nation, India, which never joined the nuclear regime.

Robert Einhorn, an analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and former assistant secretary for nonproliferation at the State Department who has devoted years to work against proliferation of nuclear weapons, voiced these concerns in testimony before Congress last year.

He also said this in an interview with the Tribune earlier this year: "I don't think the administration needed to cut this deal in order to cement its relationship with India. There are a lot of ways that we could have shown India how much we love them. Civilian nuclear cooperation is the forbidden fruit that looks so luscious up there on the branch... The administration was prepared to do it, in part because some in the administration working on this didn't understand the downside, and others didn't really care about the downside."

"In the near term, U.S. plans to engage in nuclear cooperation with India will make it more difficult to address proliferation challenges such as Iran," Einhorn testified in Congress. "Of course, Iran's interest in nuclear weapons long pre-dated the India deal. But the deal has strengthened the case Iran can make – and is already making – internationally. Why, Iranian officials ask publicly, should Iran give up its right as an NPT party to an enrichment capability when India, a non-party to the NPT, can keep even its nuclear weapons and still benefit from nuclear cooperation? It is an argument that resonates well with many countries and weakens the pressures that can be brought to bear on Tehran.

"In general, the Bush administration's policy shift conveys the message that the United States – the country the world has always looked to as the leader in the global fight against proliferation – is now de-emphasizing nonproliferation and giving it a back seat to other foreign policy goals." Einhorn said. "Other countries can be expected to follow suit in assigning nonproliferation a lower priority relative to political and commercial considerations in their international dealings, and this would have negative, long-term consequences for the global nonproliferation regime."

The deal cleared the House on Friday by a vote of 330-59 and cleared by Senate by acclamation early this morning. Bush said today that he looks forward to signing the legislation. The bill is entitled the Henry J. Hyde United States-India Peaceful Atomic Energy Cooperation Act of 2006," named for the retiring Illinois congressman who is also the outgoing chairman of the House International Relations Committee.

It will enable India to obtain civilian nuclear fuel and technology while obliging New Delhi to allow international inspectors to monitor its 14 present and future civilian reactors – while its eight military facilities remain off limits.

Brahma Chellaney, a professor of strategic studies at The Center for Policy Research in New Delhi, suggested in an interview earlier this year that the U.S. has its own motivation for this agreement.

"I think the Bush administration is keen to revive the U.S. civilian nuclear industry, which has been moribund," Chellaney said. "There has been no reactor deal signed since the 1970s...Nuclear power plants involve higher capital costs than non-nuclear plants... It seems to me the only way the nuclear power industry in the U.S. can be revived is to get India to place some multimillion nuclear reactor contracts... Each reactor is going to be nearly two billion dollars.... If they can get India to buy six, that's 12 billion dollars."

Bush indeed is intent on reviving a nuclear power industry in the U.S. that has been sidelined since the meltdown at Three Mile Island in the 1970s.

"Today there are more than 100 nuclear plants in America that operate in 31 states, including right here in Wisconsin," Bush said during a speech in Wisconsin in late February, as he prepared for his trip to India. "The plants are producing electricity safely -- safely, and they don't emit any air pollution or greenhouse gases. America hasn't ordered a nuclear plant since the 1970s, and that's the result of litigation -- or because of litigation and complex regulations.

"It's interesting when you think about a country like France, however," Bush said. "They have built 58 plants since the 1970s; they get 78 percent of their electricity from nuclear power. It's an interesting contrast, isn't it? We haven't done anything since the '70s. This country has decided to recognize the importance of having renewable sources of energy that protect the environment, and they have -- 78 percent of their electricity comes from this form of energy.

"China has eight nuclear plants in the works, by the way; plans to build at least 40 more over the next two decades," Bush said. "I think we ought to start building nuclear power plants again. I think it makes sense to do so. The technology is such that we can do so and say to the American people, these are safe. And they're important."

In Vietnam, the U.S. sees another new market for its own goods in a nation where nearly 60,000 American soldiers died – and one million Vietnamese died – during a war that raged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Former President Clinton, the first American president to visit Vietnam since the war, restored diplomatic relations with the Communist-run regime in 1995 and established a trade treaty in 2000 as he traveled to Hanoi, and also Ho Chi Minh City, to acknowledge a new relationship.

Bush retraced those steps just before Thanksgiving, with a swing through Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, posing for photographs before a massive bust of Ho Chi Minh, the late Vietnamese nationalist who died in 1969 and is enshrined in a tomb in Hanoi modeled after Lenin's.

The granting of Permanent Normal Trade Relations with Vietnam "marks a significant step forward in the process of normalizing relations with Vietnam and will benefit both our nations," Bush said today. "This designation will advance our trade and investment relations with Vietnam and ensure that the United States shares in the economic benefits generated by Vietnam's interests... The American people welcome the remarkable transformation and economic progress in Vietnam, and we will continue to work together to strengthen our ties.