

On the cusp of an Indian summer

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India's relations with Australia are on the edge of a breakthrough. On Sunday, the Australian Labor Party will vote whether to end its ban on uranium exports to India.

This would free the Labor government finally to pursue a strategic partnership with India based squarely on mutual trust and respect. These two Indian Ocean democracies have much to offer each other, including in security cooperation, trade, investment, energy, education and collaboration in multilateral bodies.

Of course things will not all suddenly become smooth sailing — engaging a rising power will always have its frustrations, and Australia has pride and interests too. But at least a fundamental and pointless obstacle — an obsolete symbol of mistrust — would have been removed. Our two nations could be free to push the boundaries of the possible in working together to build an Asian century.

True partnership with India is something the government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard plainly wants, in a changing economic and strategic environment. Indeed, the previous Labor government under Kevin Rudd wanted much the same thing, and forged a 2009 security declaration to that end.

But it was not willing to expend the political capital required to confront the uranium issue within the Labor party, though Rudd, now the foreign minister, has said he personally supports lifting the ban.

Australia was part of the Nuclear Suppliers Group consensus that supported civilian nuclear commerce with India in its historic waiver in 2008. So why has it taken so long for Canberra actually to contemplate beginning its own uranium sales under the very international rule change it helped create?

That is where the mysteries of the Labor Party come into play. A peculiarity of Australian politics, which Indians need to understand, is that a Labor government cannot change direction on a major issue like this without first consulting the party membership at a national conference held only every two years.

Australian governments from the conservative side, on the other hand, have more freedom for rapid and flexible policy shifts — as former Prime Minister John Howard showed when he embraced a civilian uranium supply relationship with India shortly before his electoral defeat in 2007.

Indians are often understandably perplexed about why Australia has been so insistent on banning nuclear commerce with New Delhi.

Australia has been an intensely serious supporter of the global non-proliferation regime ever since it gave up its own nuclear-weapon aspirations and ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1972.

Canberra has been especially vocal against nuclear testing, although before Indians assume that this is somehow an anti-Indian stance it is worth noting that ordinary Australians reserved much more vitriol for the French, back when they tested in the South Pacific, than they ever did for India or any other nation.

It is now widely recognised in Australia that Canberra's response to the 1998 Indian tests was an over-reaction, led by a government seeking needlessly to pre-empt the kind of public anger that had been shown against Paris.

That said, it would still be extraordinary to imagine that any future Australian uranium supply to India would survive further nuclear explosive tests by New Delhi — which thankfully are an unlikely prospect, and one to be discouraged.

Of course, it may strike Indians as hypocritical that Australia has been an anti-nuclear crusader while under the shelter of the American extended nuclear deterrence umbrella. And in the 1950s Australia even hosted British nuclear tests on its soil.

But, in fairness, it must be recognised that many well-meaning and progressive Australians are opposed to all nuclear weapons, uncomfortable with uranium mining and nuclear energy, and consider the British atomic tests a disgraceful stain on their nation's history.

And many Australians, especially in the Labor Party, have tended automatically to identify NPT membership with good non-proliferation behaviour — perhaps not fully aware of the contentious history of that treaty, including India's principled efforts to make it less discriminatory at its inception, and that fact that some of the worst sins of proliferation have been committed by certain NPT parties.

Still, over the past decade Australians have become increasingly pragmatic about the changing international order, including the changing nuclear order.

For instance, the Howard government moved in 2006 to sell uranium to China and then in 2007 to Russia, in both cases under strict safeguards. Rudd and Gillard have honoured those deals. Any future supply to India would of course need similar safeguards.

And there is now broad consensus in Australia — across politics, the strategic community, business, media and a highly multicultural society — that close ties with a rising India are essential for Australia's future. Although there is much hype about Australia's economic dependence on China — admittedly its largest trading partner — the Australia-India business relationship is growing fast, especially in energy supply.

India is on the verge of overtaking South Korea as Australia's third-largest export market, and could eventually push aside Japan for second place. The Indian-Australian community is growing fast and may soon exercise some electoral influence — as a few Labor parliamentarians may be mindful.

Despite the controversies over the welfare of Indian students, and the exaggerated negative images of Australia in parts of the Indian media, most Australians are well disposed towards India and are instinctively comfortable with its pluralistic and democratic ethos.

Australian concern about Chinese military weight and political system, meanwhile, has been growing, and Canberra sees the merits of a balancing strategy even while it continues to engage China — as President Obama's recent visit Down Under made clear.

All of this helps explain why the time, finally, has come for the Australian Labor Party to confront the issue that has bedevilled its relations with the world's most populous democracy. Labor's philosophy should of course chime with the best aspirations of an emerging India — the idea of bringing opportunity, dignity and improved quality of life to a large portion of humanity, however great the challenges and compromises necessary along the way.

It has long struck me as strange that the Australian Left — supposedly supportive of a just international order — has not found more common cause with India. This may be changing at last. It seems that many within the Labor ranks are waking up to the fact that, whatever India did in 1974, it must now be accepted as part of the nuclear non-proliferation solution, and can no longer be treated as part of the problem.

I suspect and hope that Australian diplomacy is on the cusp of its Indian summer.

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