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By Praful Bidwai

NEW DELHI - Seven years after blasting its way into the world's 'nuclear club', India has executed a major shift in its policy stance by jettisoning its long-standing advocacy of global nuclear disarmament in favour of nuclear non-proliferation. On Monday, the country's Foreign Secretary, Shyam Saran enunciated a new doctrinal orientation: India will now be “part of” a “new global onsensus on non-proliferation”.

The new stance is in line with a far-reaching agreement on nuclear weapons and atomic power signed between India and the United States in July.

From now on India will pay lip service, if even that, to the goal of fighting for universal nuclear weapons abolition and a nuclear weapons-free world.

This unceremonious burial of the disarmament agenda comes less than 18 months after the Manmohan Singh government came to power pledging, in its principal programmatic document, to assume a 'leadership role' in the struggle for the complete global limination of nuclear weapons.

In his speech, Shyam Saran outlined India's emerging tough posture on Iran 's nuclear programme, ahead of another possible vote at the coming meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna a month from now.

Last month, India shocked domestic opinion, Iran, and the Non-Aligned Movement by voting for a West-sponsored resolution accusing Iran of “non-compliance” with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the IAEA's statute, and thus preparing the ground for reporting it to United Nations Security Council for possible sanctions.

An important element of Saran's speech was the naming of Pakistan as the supplier of Iran's clandestine nuclear programme and demanding an investigation into the role of AQ Khan, 'Father of the Pakistani Bomb' in Iran's imports.

Until now, New Delhi had maintained a discreet silence or a low-key approach on the sensational disclosures of Khan's shady nuclear deals.

Since January, last year, India has also been carrying out a series of “composite dialogues” aimed at restoring normal relations with its nuclear-armed rival and neighbour, Pakistan.

“We are clearly seeing in all this the unfolding of the real significance of the India-U.S. nuclear deal of July”, says Kamal Mitra Chenoy, professor at the School of International Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

“The deal makes a special, unprecedented, one-time exception for India in the global rules governing civilian nuclear commerce by declaring India a 'responsible' nuclear state and admitting it into the small monopolistic cartel called the Nuclear Club,” Chenoy told IPS.

But the deal faces a tough ratification process

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in the U.S. Congress and in the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers' Group. India's chanting of the non-proliferation mantra, which Indian pro-Bomb analysts until recently equated with a form of religious nuclear fanaticism, is designed to facilitate Congressional ratification.

" India is paying the price for the deal with the US by sacrificing its own policy independence and its long-standing role as an apostle of peace and nuclear disarmament", said Chenoy.

It is plain from recent Congressional hearings that the U.S. will make the deal's implementation conditional upon India's good or 'responsible' behaviour in collaborating with the U.S. in isolating Iran .

Leading Congressmen have warned India that it must choose between "the Iran of the Ayotollahs", with its oil and gas, and the "democratic West", with its advanced nuclear power technology.

India has been negotiating a major agreement with Iran for a gas pipeline through Pakistan, which will give it assured long-term supplies of the fuel at a low price but the U.S. has publicly opposed the deal.

After the Indian vote at Vienna, the pipeline seemed to be in jeopardy. After Saran's statement, it may well be dead in the water. Saran signalled that India has gone beyond demanding greater transparency and details about Iran's past nuclear activities, including its crude and primitive efforts to enrich uranium (which can potentially be used both to generate electricity and make weapons). India now says it won't "accept as legitimate the pursuit of clandestine activities in respect to WMD-related techniques".

This blanket term covers an entire range of activities, including uranium enrichment and research reactors. Most of these are menable to dual uses.

India 's shift away from the nuclear disarmament agenda to an exclusive preoccupation with non-proliferation is reflected in Saran's speech. The phrase "global nuclear disarmament" does not occur even once in the text. But "non-proliferation" occurs 25 times.

This shift is not about language alone. It signifies that India has abandoned the pursuit of abolition of nuclear weapons from all countries. It only wants to prevent new states from acquiring such weapons. Those which have them, including itself, can keep them. To do this, India advocates "global norms that go beyond the NPT".

This too is in keeping with US priorities. Since September 11, 2001, Washington has refused all proposals for limiting, leave alone disarming, its nuclear weapons. It strongly signalled its opposition to nuclear disarmament at a review conference of the NPT this past May.

But at the same time, the US has redoubled its efforts at preventing proliferation through aggressive measures like intercepting suspect shipments on the high seas. India is moving towards support for such measures too.

"This will be seen as India's betrayal of its own past traditions as a peace campaigner and leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, and its own independent foreign policy", says Aijaz Ahmad, a distinguished professor of South Asian Studies at the Jamia Millia Islamia university in the capital. "There will be sharp divisions and no domestic consensus whatever on this disastrous policy shift".

India 's new turn on the AQ Khan issue is directed as much at the U.S. as at Pakistan. It wants to highlight the proliferation potential in its neighbourhood to indicate that it will play a leading, pro-active role in preventing the possible spread of nuclear weapons.

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This is designed to please Washington although it is doubtful that it will lead to much investigation into Khan's activities, given Washington 's dependence on Pakistan for the 'war on terror'.

India 's new position as enunciated by Saran is that clandestine nuclear operations must be scrutinised from both the demand and supply ends. “We see no reason why there should be an insistence on personal interviews with Iranian scientists but an exception granted to a man who has been accused of running a global 'nuclear Wal-Mart'.” This refers to Khan, who is believed to have supplied components of uranium enrichment centrifuges to Iran.

Such rhetoric may embitter India-Pakistan relations. Already, the composite dialogue process has entered stagnation. The two failed to cooperate in rescue and relief operations across the Line of Control in divided Kashmir after the terrible earthquake there two weeks ago.

By moving into the U.S. orbit, and embracing non-proliferation at the expense of disarmament, India may end up sacrificing its interests in peace and cooperation in the immediate neighbourhood.

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