

Nuclear Issue - India

Has time run out for India-US

By Ashish Kumar Sen

Many analysts and some within the Bush administration believe a failure to conclude the nuclear deal could create a setback to the current momentum in US-India relations

WHEN India's External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee meets US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Washington on Monday he will be reminded that the United States is eager to wrap up a civilian nuclear agreement and that delays in Delhi are not helping matters.

On July 18, 2005, US President George W Bush signed a historic deal with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that overturned three decades of US policy by allowing the sale of nuclear technology and fuel to India.

In return, India promised to allow inspections of its civilian nuclear facilities, but not its military ones.

Critics of the deal in the US complain that it will blow a hole in America's commitment to non-proliferation.

In India, the ruling coalition's Communist allies worry that India is handing over its nuclear sovereignty to Washington.

'Misgivings': With Mr Bush's second and final term in office drawing to a close and presidential elections set for November, the Bush

administration is growing increasingly anxious to wrap up the deal.

Many analysts and some within the Bush administration believe a failure to conclude the agreement could create a setback to the current momentum in US-India relations.

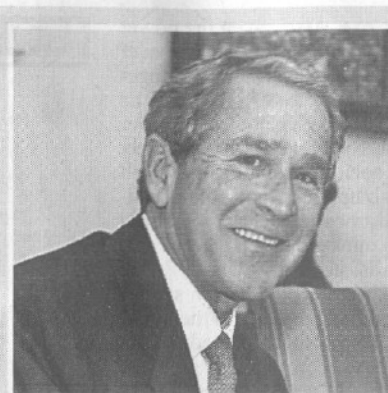
Teresita Schaffer, director of the South Asia programme at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), says that if the agreement doesn't go through "there will inevitably be misgivings and some feeling that India wasn't really ready for the big leagues".

"Seen from Washington, this is a very sweet deal. A lot of Americans will have trouble seeing how it could generate such controversy in India," she said.

With the clock running out on the Bush administration, Mrs Schaffer pointed out that both sides are "not dealing with a deadline artificially imposed by the US government but with a timeline resulting from the legal requirements the US government is subject to".

The International Atomic Energy Agency's Board of Governors and the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) must approve India-specific exemptions before the deal is sent back to the US Congress for its final seal of approval. "It's still possible to fit into the timeline but every passing day makes it more difficult," Mrs Schaffer said.

'Plenty of time': Robert Einhorn, a former deputy assistant secretary of state for non-



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proliferation and currently at the CSIS, does not share the sense of urgency. He says that there is still "plenty of time" to get the deal done.

"If by the end of June, the Indian government and the IAEA board can approve the India-IAEA safeguards agreement and the



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Nuclear Suppliers Group can approve an exception for India, then the US administration can submit the US-India 123 Agreement (which governs the nuclear agreement) to the Congress with sufficient time to consider and approve it before the Congress adjourns in early fall, prob-

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ably September, to allow members of Congress to campaign for re-election," Mr Einhorn said.

But another nuclear expert, Daryl Kimball of the Arms Control Association, believes it may already be too late to save the deal. "Even if New Delhi approves the safeguards text allowing the IAEA Board of Governors to begin its review by mid-April, that leaves very little time for the NSG to consider whether or not to exempt India from its nuclear trade guidelines at its May 19 meeting in Berlin," Mr Kimball says.

"If the NSG does not give its nod by May, it is highly unlikely it will do so in time for the US Congress to review and approve the 123 Agreement."

Congressional sources say the deal must be returned to the US Congress by June so that lawmakers can act on it by July.

'Too far backwards': US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Richard Boucher, is one of those officials in Washington who have devoted considerable time and energy to the deal. Mr Boucher told me that "time is very, very tight" for the deal to be completed.

If the deal falls apart, Robert Einhorn is clear where the responsibility will lie. "The Bush Administration bent over backwards, many say too far backwards, to try to salvage the deal. Americans of both political parties would be deeply puzzled why the Indian government

was unable to win domestic support for an agreement widely seen here as lopsided in India's favour."

Richard Boucher says it will be difficult to predict how the next US administration would view the deal. "I don't think anybody will throw away everything that we have done, but they might also try to take a different approach to finishing it."

Unease: All the three remaining US presidential candidates - Republican Senator John McCain, and Democratic Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama - supported the deal with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Teresita Schaffer believes that a Democratic administration would favour a strong partnership with India, but it would feel the need to put its "stamp on the deal, and they would be uneasy about putting a big effort into something India had been so ambivalent about".

Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institution suggests that a Democratic administration "is more likely to look at the non-proliferation issue more closely than the Republicans have".

Robert Einhorn thinks that if the deal fails in India over domestic political reasons a new US administration may want to let the dust settle for quite a while before considering what to do next. He warns that if the deal is not consummated, bilateral relations will not progress "quite as rapidly as they would progress with the deal in place". COURTESY BBC NEWS