

Indo-US nuclear deal's endgame w

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India



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It took extraordinary commitment on the part of Bush to recognise India's new importance and sign last July's deal that liberated New Delhi from the nuclear 'Trishanku'

AMIDST the celebrations that have followed President George W Bush's decision to clinch a nuclear accord with India on Thursday, it would be unwise to forget how close the UPA government came to squandering a historic opportunity to break out of the nuclear isolation promised by the nuclear pact signed last July.

The international system is usually unforgiving. If a nation refuses to act in time to defend its interests, it would be condemned to pay for decades to come. India's failure to test nuclear weapons before the NPT was drafted in 1968, steadily pushed it into a limbo for the next three and half decades. It took extraordinary commitment on the part of Bush and his will-

ingness to recognise the new importance of India to sign a deal last July that liberated it from the nuclear 'Trishanku'.

Boxed in by conservatives and ultra-nationalists in his own party, Jawaharlal Nehru failed to seize the opportunity during Chinese premier Zhou Enlai's visit to New Delhi in 1960 to settle on a reasonable framework to resolve the boundary dispute. India had to wait four decades before another prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, picked up the political courage in 2003 to negotiate the boundary dispute along the lines Zhou offered in 1960. In the last few weeks we saw a resurgence of the old anti-American bile, whipped up by the Left, sections of the scientific establishment and parts of the Congress pandering to traditional vote banks.

An over-determination of national security concerns, mindless chauvinism, a new cult of scientist-worship, and the prattle about national sovereignty were paraded to undercut a deal with the US that India sought in the first place and was so necessary to end New Delhi's long-standing nuclear predicaments. It is to the credit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Bush that they persevered with the objective of a pragmatic implementation of the nuclear pact and stayed the course on transforming Indo-US relations.

While the July agreement was about broad principles, its implementation was sure to run into political trouble, given the very historic nature of the agreement. While hardball negoti-

ations were inevitable, it was clear from the outset that they were amenable to reasonable compromises, so long the political vision of the two leaders was kept intact. In the last few weeks, though, it seemed that the public negotiation between the two noisy democracies would collapse amidst entrenched institutional resistance

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in both countries, backed by antediluvian political forces. Good sense eventually prevailed to produce important compromises that facilitated the mutual understanding on the implementation of the nuclear pact.

While the PM has held back on the details of the agreement, until he speaks to the Parliament, we don't need rocket scientists to derive the give and take that has allowed the nuclear understanding on Thursday. The central Indian obligation

was a story of mutual political faith

under the July pact was to separate the civilian and military programmes and place the former under international safeguards. The question of separation boiled down to the number of power reactors that India would put on the civilian list. India has 15 operating power reactors and seven under construction.

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Out of this 22, what would India offer? Would it be 10, 12, 14, 16, or 18? India's initial offer was barely 10 and the US, apparently, started at 18. The two sides have reportedly settled for 14. That precisely was the figure the national security adviser of the NDA government, Brajesh Mishra, had offered to put under safeguards in 2002.

The compromise was rooted in the American recognition that India is in any case a nuclear weapon power; there was no point

demanding that too many reactors be put on the civilian list. For India the logic was equally simple. The more reactors it puts on the civilian list, the more international cooperation it gets. The numbers of reactors never really had anything to do with the simulated fears on capping India's nuclear programme.

Equally exaggerated were the fears on putting the fast breeder programme under international safeguards. But once the UPA government conceded DAE's demand, the Bush administration took a political decision to leave the Prototype Fast Breeder Reactors outside the civilian list. For India's part there appears to be some flexibility on where the future commercial fast breeder reactors might stand. In his statement to Parliament, the PM underlined the DAE's view that the "maturation" of the breeder technology through the creation of additional capability" could "create greater opportunities for international collaboration". It remains to be seen whether this implies some openness on the part of the DAE to put future commercial breeders under safeguards in return for international cooperation.

A third major focus on the negotiations was on the nature of international safeguards to be put on the civilian reactors. This remained a contentious issue till the very end. The US wanted Indian reactors to go under safeguards "in perpetuity". New Delhi, burnt by the past experience on Tarapur when America renege on its contractual obligations, resisted. Negotiations in the final hours between the two

sides apparently produced compromise language for an agreement on "assured supplies for permanent safeguards" that both sides could live with. The immediate resumption of fuel supplies to Tarapur has been an important issue in the nuclear negotiations. Without new supplies the Tarapur reactors might have to be shut down some time this year.

To supply fuel, the US has to first change its laws, which in turn depends on the Congress accepting India's nuclear separation plan. While the nature of the final compromise has not been spelt out, one way out would be to let France or Russia sell fuel to Tarapur even as the American Congress and the Nuclear Suppliers Group debate the change of nuclear laws in favour of India. This would act as a huge confidence-building measure for the DAE.

Although many technical issues were thrown in to works over the last few weeks, the debate was never really about scientific abracadabra. It was really about political trust. Past mishaps between the two countries, the steady erosion of the habit of bilateral cooperation during the Cold War, and the relentless expansion of American technology sanctions against India have together bred mind-sets that were not easy to overcome. Bush and Manmohan Singh have taken a great nuclear leap forward on Thursday to overcome the burden of the past. Once a new level of political trust accumulates, India and the US would soon be ready for a future that is very unlike the past. COURTESY THE INDIAN EXPRESS