

-----Inline Message Follows-----

Is it pause, halt or end?

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A look at the possible scenarios in the event that the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal is put on the back burner.

The statements of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi on the Indo-U.S. nuclear agreement, at the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit last week, leave the future of civil nuclear energy cooperation between India and the international community totally unpredictable. We can only speculate about the different possible scenarios.

The first is that the United Progressive Alliance dialogue proceeds in such a manner that common ground is found between the government interlocutors and the Left and the latter is convinced that the independence of India's foreign policy is not compromised, nor are the contours of Indo-U.S. relations such that they will lead to India becoming a junior partner of the U.S. in the pursuit of the latter's global vision. This expectation appears to be contained in the Prime Minister's statement that "... reason and commonsense will ultimately win the day." However, it is most unlikely that this expectation will be fulfilled, going by the strong statements made in the past by various Left leaders.

A second and more likely situation is that the dialogue gets prolonged, with the two sides exchanging notes and arguments, with no convergence emerging. After some time, fatigue would set in and the government may conclude that it would be best not to pursue the matter any more. The Left parties are unlikely to change their position that they would be obliged to withdraw support to the government if it were to embark on formal discussions with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on safeguards or on sounding

the Nuclear Suppliers Group regarding granting exemption to India and allowing civil nuclear commerce with it. If this situation continues for the next three to four months, the U.S. administration will not be able to present the 123 Agreement for an “Up and Down” vote in the spring of 2008. Thereafter, the U.S. will get busy with its presidential election.

I was in the U.S. last month and interacted with Strobe Talbott, Robert Einhorn, and others who have been involved in the formulation of U.S. nuclear policies in the previous administrations. They felt the U.S. had given away too much to India and that it was too sweet a deal for India to give up. I told them that whatever the U.S.’ perceptions, many Indian parliamentarians and analysts found the Hyde Act to be “India unfriendly” and were not well disposed to the draft 123 Agreement.

Retrograde step

Let us look at a situation where the Indo-U.S. nuclear agreement becomes a dead letter. India must continue to execute its nuclear programmes vigorously. Most important, it must give the highest priority to locating new deposits of uranium and to opening new mines and setting up uranium extraction plants. In the 1990-1998 period, adequate funds were not allotted to the Department of Atomic Energy and some of the uranium mines, on which work had commenced, were abandoned. Looking back, this was a retrograde step, which crippled the atomic energy programme when it began to operate its nuclear power units optimally.

Issues relating to opening new mines have to do with acquisition of lands or at least leasing them for the duration of mining, the rehabilitation of people working in forest or sanctuary lands — all of which can lead to local opposition or protests. Of course, these are common to other mining or large-scale river valley projects too.

However, if India has to secure an independent nuclear future, a more innovative and result-oriented set of policies is needed to pursue such projects expeditiously. As far as reactors are concerned, India has finalised the design of a 700 MWe Pressurised Heavy Water Reactor and many more can be taken up for construction as soon as we can ensure that uranium will be available to fuel them.

Prospects in the U.S.

Turning to the developments in the U.S., it is reasonable to expect that the next President may be a Democrat, as the ill-fated Iraq adventure is associated with the neo-conservative segments of the Republican Party. A Democratic President may revive the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which the Senate, under a Republican majority, did not ratify. India may have no problem in joining the CTBT if China and Pakistan join, in addition to the U.S. itself.

In recent times the Bush administration has brought forward, at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, discussions on the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). India is prepared to support an FMCT provided it is universal, non-discriminatory, and verifiable. The U.S. negotiators have, however, been suggesting U.S. national means of verification, on the ground that it possesses the latest techniques for the purpose. India and other countries can only accept an international verification system using the latest available technology. In addition, India would like to keep the fissile material contained in spent fuel storages outside of the FMCT, whenever it enters into force.

There is, however, a very important initiative India should take in the field of nuclear diplomacy. This is the revival of the Rajiv Gandhi plan for the elimination of all nuclear weapons, proposed in 1988. In the U.S. in September, I had the opportunity to interact with two of the four U.S. signatories to a letter issued in early 2007, in which they suggested that the time had come for the world to revisit the question of universal nuclear disarmament. Henry Kissinger was rather cautious, stating that reaching agreement on balanced reduction of nuclear forces in the interim could prove difficult and even intractable. On the other hand, George Shultz, Secretary of State under Ronald Reagan, was much more positive. He is organising a conference in the U.S. this month and is hoping to have a much larger conference in 2008 outside of the U.S. An important member of the Gordon Brown Cabinet in the U.K. has supported the revival of the idea of a nuclear weapon-free world.

A new U.S. administration may adopt a more reasonable policy on Iran, including direct negotiations, to resolve the nuclear standoff. However, the powerful American Jewish lobby will have to be persuaded to take a more balanced view of resolving the entire Middle East crisis, including the formation of a Palestinian state. The North Korean nuclear crisis seems to be moving towards a solution — unless there are last minute hiccups. China has, in this instance, emerged as a staunch supporter of non-proliferation.

Russia and France lobbied hard in the NSG to seek exemptions for India. In the event that the Indo-U.S. deal is put on the back burner, can they be persuaded once again to seek an exemption for India? India needs a source of non-carbon energy to underpin its fast-growing economy. Or will the U.S. administration that takes office in 2008 revisit the Hyde Act and the 123 Agreement to make them more India-friendly? These are questions for which there are no answers.

When the July 2005 Agreement between the U.S. and India emerged, I told a senior Indian negotiator it would be best if there was a political consensus in the matter. In the coalition era we are living in and will possibly continue to live in, it is best that a measure of consensus is built on all vital issues, including the nuclear deal, no matter how difficult.

(The writer is a former Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission.)