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Convince me n-weapons plan safe, I'll say go ahead with deal: Brajesh Mishra

Express news service

Posted online: Thursday, October 25, 2007 at 0000 hrs IST

NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 24

At a time when political parties in the Opposition are rallying around the Left against the UPA on the Indo-US nuclear deal, National Security Advisor in the BJP-led NDA government Brajesh Mishra has said that he would let the deal go ahead if he is convinced that the country's strategic weapons programme is safe and intact.

Mishra, considered one of the key architects of the changed New Delhi-Washington relationship who has been critical of the deal, admitted that its failure would have an "adverse impact on the growth of our relationship (with the US)."

With a disclaimer that he was neither speaking for any party nor leadership, Mishra told The Indian Express Editor-in-Chief Shekhar Gupta on NDTV's Walk the Talk (to be broadcast on November 3 at 9.30 pm) that he faced a dilemma.

"...The deal, which is offered, has been made the centrepiece of the strategic relationship. I don't think the Clinton administration would have offered (such a deal). That is why I say it is a dilemma for a person like me who is worried about the strategic programme and also the deal not going through."

Mishra admitted that if the deal fell through, "nothing much will happen between India and the US when the new administration comes." When told that the next White House, a probable Hillary Clinton administration, would be more anti-proliferationist, Mishra said: "She has also more or less indicated that as far as Asia is concerned, her pride of place for foreign policy would be given to China."

Yet, he offered a way forward.

When asked how could one save both the deal and the Indo-US relationship, Mishra said: "If I were to get credible guarantees from the government about the integrity of what we (the NDA) had left behind three and a half years ago, what has been done in these three and a half years for them to prove that there are also enthusiastic about the nuclear weapons programme, then I would say, personally, to go forward with the deal because I am not so critical of the US for following this particular policy. I am critical of the government bending to the wishes of the US."

Asked what should the Government do to show that enthusiasm to convince you, Mishra said: "Let them say that without getting into numbers...this is what they have done in the last three and a half years, then a person like me, who is aware of the programme as it was before, would know."

He added that a robust strategic programme and the nuclear deal going through "would help Indo-US relations."

However, he underlined that his "impression" was that the Government is

“less than enthusiastic” about the nuclear weapons programme. He cited the separation plan that puts 14 reactors under safeguards as a step that would limit the supply of fissile material claiming that in 2003, when he was in Washington, “we said that we in India would put a couple of our reactors under safeguards and all those to be built under international surveillance.”

Saying that “primacy was given to the deal and Indo-American relations quite forgetting that there are other relations also,” Mishra singled out India’s vote against Iran at the IAEA and the Operation Malabar quadrilateral exercise as steps that “should not have been done keeping in mind our own interest.”

He said that China had taken “umbrage” to the exercise saying this was an “Asian version of NATO.” And if the UPA had no intentions of joining any such military alliance, “they should not send signals like this.”

Asked how would he save the deal if he were the NSA for the UPA government, Mishra said: “The atmosphere today between the Government and the Opposition is not cordial at all. There have been public spats which are not conducive for discussions. The Government should try to convince them of their (the deal’s) desirability...If the Government feels there is still time then they must clear the atmosphere to have a dialogue with the Opposition.”

When asked whether it was easier to convince the BJP than the Left, he said: “I cannot say that but perhaps it is easier because they are also saying we want good relations with the US.”

Mishra admitted that the Government did “talk to me” on the deal adding that “on each occasion, I said you must go to the politicians because talks between politicians are like talks between two equals.”

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