

'Hitch' stops 4 reactors from Russia

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New Delhi, Nov. 12: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's 28-hour visit to Moscow,

the shortest ever by an Indian Prime Minister in the past six decades, has

not taken the chill off relations between New Delhi and Moscow. A major agreement for the construction of four additional nuclear reactors for the

Kudankulam plant, which the Russians had been preparing for, was suddenly

dropped because of "technical hitches", with Dr Singh maintaining that the

status of the inter-governmental agreement was now "work in progress."

Informed sources said that Russia had ensured that the 1988 agreement with

India on Kudankulam was extended to cover the construction of the four additional nuclear reactors as part of the same process. "It was all ready,

the agreement was going to be signed during this visit, but something happened over the past few days and we cannot say at this point what it was," the sources said. Former diplomat M. Bhadrakumar, who has been watching these developments closely, did not hesitate to say that the decision not to finalise this particular agreement came as a "total surprise... as it had been kept as the icing on the cake, but evidently the

US embassy stormed into South Block and read them the riot act." He said

that if the agreement had been signed it would have cut into the supposed

importance of the nuclear deal between India and the US, and that clearly

the Americans were not prepared to allow.

Russian deputy prime minister Alexander Zhukov had made it clear during external affairs minister Pranab Mukherjee's recent visit to Russia that the

agreement for the construction of four additional nuclear reactors as well as

the guidelines for long-term cooperation in nuclear energy would be signed

during Dr Singh's visit. The first indication that this would not happen

came from an on-board briefing by senior officials on the Prime Minister's

special aircraft on the way to Moscow where some reporters were told

that
the 1988 "grandfather pact" could not cover the four additional nuclear
reactors. Sources here said that the Russian reading was that it could,
and
the necessary "arrangements" for signing it had been made. "We don't
know
what happened suddenly," they said.

The civil nuclear energy agreement between India and the US as well as
the
increasing military cooperation with America has been a cause of major
concern with Russia. President Vladimir Putin indicated this by not
meeting
Mr Pranab Mukherjee and defence minister A.K. Antony during their
recent
visits to Moscow. This is seen by experts in both capitals as a major
departure from the past, particularly as Moscow always ensured that
protocol
did not come in the way of its relations with New Delhi. Petroleum
minister
Murli Deora had to cancel his visit to Moscow last month to attend an
annual
energy forum because his Russian counterpart was not available for a
bilateral meeting.

Russia, which has been the major supplier of weapons and other defence
equipment to India, has not used this to force a strategic
relationship,
unlike new entrants like the US and even Israel who have successfully
used
economic and defence relations to strengthen strategic ties. For
instance,
India and Russia have conducted barely any joint military exercises as
against the burgeoning defence relations between New Delhi and
Washington.
The Moscow-New Delhi list totals just three military exercises by their
navies and armies, with the air force still to get off the ground. The
quadrilateral naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal with India, US,
Australia,
Japan and Singapore being the participating navies has drawn adverse
comment
from Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov. He did not refer to India
but
said very clearly that this cooperation between the US, Japan and
Australia
was a "closed format for military and political alliances, and raises
questions among neighbouring countries not party to them as to what
these

alliances are actually being created for and against whom." India's vice-chief of army staff had attended an unpublicised Pacific Countries Army Chiefs' Conference, bringing together the top brass of 19 countries, in Sydney in early August.