

A permanent nuclear hobble

By Bharat Karnad

Whether the nuclear deal with the United States goes through or breaks down along the way, the safeguards agreement the Indian government signs with the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna will stay. On being asked repeatedly if this reading was correct, Lalit Mansingh, former ambassador to the United States, and one of the key trumpeters of the deal, recently confirmed and reconfirmed it to this analyst, indicating that the Indian government sees nothing wrong with this development and neither, for that matter, does the country's nuclear estate, represented by Dr Anil Kakodkar, whose tenure as chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, was extended by two years, in the main, because he has been found by Manmohan Singh and Company to be eminently amenable. As far as the IAEA is concerned, the accord with India is on a stand-alone basis. If New Delhi and Washington want to make further use of it, well, that is not any of the Agency's business. It is on the basis of the reassurance provided by the safeguards agreement, however, that the US government will convene a meeting of the 44-member Nuclear Suppliers Group to seek an easing of restrictions on trading with India.

The implications of the safeguards in perpetuity are that the "separation plan" too will be in perpetuity and the fire-walls separating almost all of the leading higher research institutions in nuclear sciences and the nuclear weapons unit at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, will be permanent. This is going to hurt Indian weapons designers who have interacted in the past with their peers in the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and other organisations — listed in the civilian part of the separation plan. Such professional interaction has validated BARC calculations, provided a fresh perspective or pointed to novel solutions for surmounting scientific hurdles in the process of conceptualising and realising new weapons designs and improving older designs.

The IAEA got over its initial apprehensions about even accepting India's "separation plan" — because such separation is only allowed to five Non-Proliferation Treaty-recognised nuclear weapons states (P-5), the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France — because the bulk of India's nuclear installations and research facilities coming under international safeguards, was a great inducement. For the P-5 this is a good thing to happen because it will decisively hobble the Indian nuclear weapons designing capabilities, and freeze the Indian fission weapons at the existing low yield type, and the half-tested tritium-boosted and thermonuclear armaments technologies at a fault-prone level (evidenced in the one-off series of tests in 1998), with no possibility of arsenal refinement in terms of tailored yield, yield-to-weight ratio, and other performance parameters. And further, that the Indian nuclear weaponeers will be left with only the heavily thinned out resources and nuclear infrastructure to rely on in order to sustain such weapons programme into the future. The constriction of the resource base will begin to tell soon on the already unsafe and unreliable Indian thermonuclear weapons inventory. For this reason, the Indian government should have insisted on the same sort of safeguards as the P-5 enjoy, which permit facilities to be pulled off the civilian list and used for weapons purposes whenever necessary.

But, the unconditional acceptance in advance by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of the "safeguards in perpetuity"-principle, left no slack for the Indian negotiators, and no incentive whatsoever for the IAEA to agree, for instance, to a minimum prudent "India-specific" safeguards scheme that would become operational if and only if the nuclear deal fructifies, and to last only as long as the 123 Agreement endures, which is 40 years. The safeguards have to have closure or at least to be yoked to the United States commitments, meaning if Washington ends the deal for any reason, the safeguards will end as

well. Instead of such a deal, the Manmohan Singh regime seems content with writing into the safeguards agreement an assurance of the supply of imported enriched uranium fuel for the life-time of the light water reactors India expects to import. This is silly considering the IAEA is in no position to give such an undertaking, as it does not produce the fuel itself and cannot enforce a fuel supply contract India may sign on a bilateral basis with various countries.

But, of course, a "minimum prudent" safeguards agreement won't happen because Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has agreed to unconditional permanent safeguards. This, even though US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice had made it, in her words, "very clear that the permanence of the safeguards is the permanence of safeguards, without condition; China or no China; sophistication of weapons or no sophistication of weapons... In fact, we reserve the right, should India test, as it has agreed not to do, or should India in any way violate the IAEA safeguards agreement ... to which it should be adhering that the deal from our point of view would be at that point off." If Rice was candid, Ashley Tellis — the affable, Mumbai-origin adviser to the US government, who is always at hand to sugar coat the bitter pill, the easier for the largely technically ignorant Indian government officials and audiences he meets up with, to swallow — has been brutally frank. Asked by an online news service about the gains for India from the nuclear deal, feeling, perhaps, a twinge of guilt for his role in obtaining a deal that will eviscerate the nuclear weapons programme of the country of his birth, he replied honestly, "You will save yourself," he said, "a lot of grief over your strategic and foreign policy. But then you won't get energy." But because all the talk of the nuclear megawatts coursing through the electricity grid, is so much hot air, as Parliament and the country now realise, the safeguards-led nuclear deal emerges as the chains India will strategically strap itself down with.

But, we knew where Washington was coming from. The US does not care about India as a counterweight to China, it cares only that its non-proliferation aim is achieved and the potential of the Indian nuclear arsenal restricted. The Left parties fouled up by not recognising the permanent safeguards for what they are and allowing negotiations with the IAEA. In the event, only Narendra Modi's electoral victory in Gujarat, and not the unanimous opposition in Parliament or Prakash Karat's threat of imminent withdrawal of support, may save the country from a nuclear trap because then the ruling Congress Party will have to choose between the deal and 14 more months in power.

A deadly joke on the country is in the offing, and this is how it will be played out: The nuclear deal breaks down — at the NSG stage — Scandinavian countries like Norway refuse to budge on their stand that all of India's nuclear facilities without exception should come under safeguards. Or, China insists on according Pakistan the same status. Or, at the US Congress' approval stage, the powerful non-proliferation lobby succeeds in asking for a more severe renegotiated deal. But whatever happens to the deal, the safeguards agreement will become functional and most of India's dual-use nuclear energy programme will come permanently under IAEA's and, indirectly, the US' supervision. It is a parting kick Manmohan Singh has reserved for the country before he becomes forgettable history.

n Bharat Karnad is Professor in National Security Studies at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, and author of Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security, now in its second edition