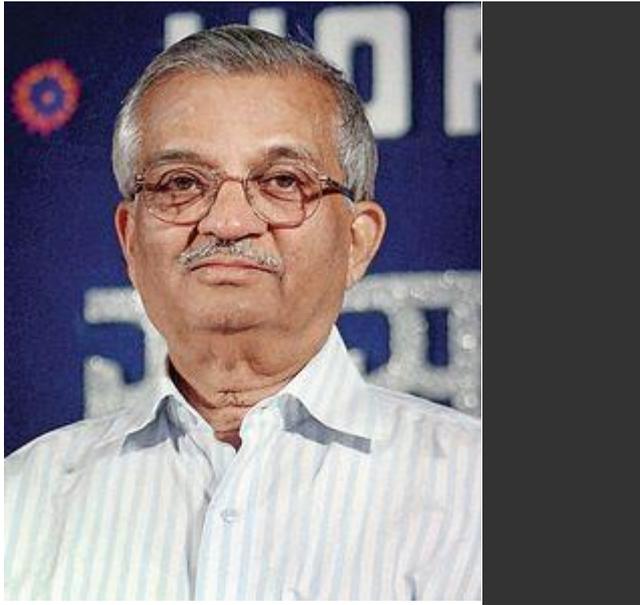


The nuclear deal will continue to be a big facilitator



By Anil Kakodkar February 22, 2020 15:33 IST



The India-US civil nuclear deal of 2008 was the first attestation of trust by the US in India as a “responsible country with advanced nuclear technology”. Though it opened the doors for cooperation in a host of areas, there is a feeling that the deal itself did not achieve some of its immediate goals. This is true, but only in a limited way.

We expected a fillip to capacity through imported reactors from Russia, France and the US. Russia had committed to Kudankulam I and II even before the deal was inked. After the deal, it went ahead with Kudankulam III and IV, and now, units V and VI are also approved. The other two vendors, however, did not take off, for different reasons. The American vendor, Westinghouse, went into bankruptcy. It has stabilised only now and negotiations are beginning again. In the case of the French collaboration, there were administrative changes.

The nuclear deal, however, had other objectives, too, and has been a success story. A major constraint for India was accessing uranium. After the deal, which helped India overcome the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) restrictions, we no longer face that problem. Our existing nuclear plants—old and new—which were working below capacity, are now working at near full capacity. Several of our indigenously designed

Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors (PHWRs) have shown continuous uninterrupted high-capacity operation extending for years.

There are other spinoffs from the treaty. With India getting into nuclear commerce, the general perception of India has changed, and today it partners the US in hi-tech areas like defence and space. There is the larger geopolitical angle, too. The treaty elevated the way India is viewed on the global platform. All this could be realised without compromising India's strategic autonomy.

Nuclear energy is the future for India in many ways, despite the welcome impetus being given to renewables, especially solar energy. Renewables in India, however, will remain the variable element, needing additional investments in the form of either non-fossil base load generation or energy storage and grid stabilisation. Right now, India's base load is coal, but climate change is forcing us to cut down on emissions and the best non-fossil base load generation option is nuclear. Even biomass as a base load may not be sufficient to suit the Indian requirement, making nuclear the inevitable option.

In the developed world, which is the largest consumer of energy, the demand is plateauing. It may even dip as environmentally conscious people get frugal with consumption. But developing economies have growing energy requirements. The market is shifting to these countries, whether it is in supplying technology or fuel. The Indian experience with pressurised heavy water reactors and thorium would be of value in enabling a quickly implementable solution to address this challenge. So, the nuclear deal will continue to be a big facilitator in the coming years, with India emerging as a major nuclear manufacturing hub as well as a solution provider for wider penetration of nuclear energy.

The author was chairman, Atomic Energy Commission of India.

As told to Rekha Dixit.

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