

Anil Kakodkar recalls role in closing crucial Indo-US nuclear deal

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Washington DC: Prime Minister Narendra Modi meeting the President of United States of America (USA), Donald Trump and the first lady of USA, Melania Trump at White House, in Washington DC, USA on Tuesday. PTI Photo /pib(PTI6_27_2017_000029B)

Nuclear Asia had recently spoken to the former Indian Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) Chairman Anil Kakodkar on issues coming in the way of the country taking a more proactive role in promoting civilian nuclear energy, and here, in the second part of the interview, he elaborates on how India became an outcast after its peaceful nuclear explosion of 1974, unable to obtain nuclear technology or components, for which it was forced to solely rely on indigenous sources.

It has, thereafter, been a long haul for the South Asian nation till the year 2008 when the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) of 48 countries adopted a policy of civilian nuclear cooperation with India, allowing it to take part in nuclear trade. This was followed by the landmark civil nuclear cooperation agreement with the

US in the negotiations for which Kakodkar played a key role, and which he has detailed in his book “Fire and Fury: Transforming India’s Strategic Identity” co-authored with Suresh Gangotra that was released earlier this year.

According to Kakodkar, although nuclear power has for long been considered a clean source of energy, the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the race to acquire such strategic deterrents led to concerted attempts by major powers, led by the US, to contain their use through arrangements like the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Following its peaceful nuclear explosion at Pokhran in 1974, India was unable to import uranium to fuel its existing plants, while American and Canadian companies went back on their contractual supply obligations, leading to a setback for India’s civilian nuclear energy programme. In this context, the national Department of Atomic Energy and its agencies embarked on a vigorous programme of indigenisation, with Kakodkar himself playing a major role in the conceptualising, design and fabrication of nuclear power projects at various locations in the country.

According to Kakodkar, the key geopolitical factor that made possible the signing of the US-India nuclear agreement in 2008 was the changed strategy of the US administration under President George Bush to involve India in the American efforts to contain China and seek India’s support on the Iran sanctions, besides the objective of facilitating US nuclear technology exports to India. On the other hand, India was interested to see the end of sanctions on its nuclear commerce to be able to acquire equipment and technology.

Kakodkar said that his guiding principle throughout the protracted and difficult negotiations with the US officials was to maintain India’s strategic autonomy, and that he was able to take the bilateral talks to a successful conclusion because he had the full backing of the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. After the NSG adopted a policy of civilian nuclear cooperation, India has entered into civil nuclear agreements with 14 countries, including the US, Russia, France and Japan for exchange of expertise and technology.

Following the 2015 climate change conference in Paris, among India’s stated goals to reduce the impact of global warming include achieving a 40 percent electricity generation capacity from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030 and 63,000 MW of installed nuclear capacity by 2032. In this context, Kakodkar pointed out, however, that India continues to be denied membership of the NSG, despite the willingness of most member states. At the same time, nuclear energy currently contributes to only 2 percent of India’s total energy requirements, while the country has 22 operable reactors, with 7 more under construction.