

NUCLEAR ISSUES

'It is a reciprocal arrangement'

Interview with Anil Kakodkar, Chairman, Atomic Energy Commission.

The nuclear component of the Joint Statement by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and United States President George W. Bush on July 18 evoked sharp reactions from leaders in the scientific and political establishment in India. They have questioned India's decision to agree to separate its civilian and military nuclear facilities, put the former under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, continue its voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing and so on.

Anil Kakodkar, Chairman, Atomic Energy Commission and Secretary, Department of Atomic Energy, puts the issues in perspective in this interview he gave T.S. Subramanian at his office in Mumbai on August 2. Excerpts:

Can you give us the background to the events that led to this important agreement between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Bush?

There is a recognition of the fact that climate change issues are real. In that context, it is important that we have energy technologies which, on the one side, support development, and on the other, ensure that we don't add to complications in the context of the global climate change. It is also clear that with the economic growth that is taking place in India, there should be a fairly large requirement of energy. It may be as high as 10 to 12 times the present rate of consumption. We have a large population - one-sixth of the world's population. If we want to access such large energy resources, it will raise issues of sustainability, stability of prices and depletion of resources.

In that context, nuclear power is in the interests of India and in global interests. In the U.S. also, based on their own studies, they have come to the conclusion that nuclear power is going to be an important energy source in the years to come. There is a renaissance taking place in the U.S. as far as nuclear power is concerned. President Bush mentioned the importance of nuclear power to our External Affairs Minister when he was in the U.S. last time. Afterwards, things moved quite rapidly and the result is the Joint Statement.

Why was the agreement sprung on the country? There was no debate on it. The nuclear issue relates to India's security and sovereignty. There was a debate even on the issue of introduction of colour television.

No. It is not like that... It is consistent with the policies we have been holding all along. Our policy is that we want to conduct our R&D [research and development] and protect our security interests based on our own autonomous decisions. That still stands. There is no major change.

What are the implications of separating civilian and military nuclear facilities in India as envisaged in the Joint Statement? How is it in tune with India's policy of protecting its security interests and its autonomous decision-making process?

The Joint Statement is actually a framework for cooperation in civilian nuclear power. The Joint Statement calls it a full cooperation in civilian nuclear power. It also says that India is a responsible country with advanced nuclear technology and that it will have the same benefits and advantages as other countries with advanced nuclear technology. The point is whatever development we wish to carry out, we will be able to carry out. There is no hold on that.

First of all, this [separation of nuclear facilities] is going to be a reciprocal arrangement. The second thing is that while there is a recognition that we are a responsible country with advanced nuclear technology, we also said that we would assume the same obligations and responsibilities as other leading countries with advanced nuclear technology such as the U.S. So it is a totally non-discriminatory arrangement. It is a reciprocal arrangement where we expect that restrictions and embargoes on nuclear technology will get dismantled for cooperation in civilian nuclear power technology. We have always been saying that anything coming from outside - external cooperation - will be put under facilities-specific safeguards. This was our policy right from the beginning.

What we are saying now is that the determination of what is going to be identified as a civilian nuclear facility is going to be an Indian decision. It is going to be a decision taken at appropriate points of time. That determination will certainly take into account all our national needs in terms of security, development, and R&D. So there should be no impact on that part. Whatever we determine as civilian, we will put under IAEA safeguards. That will be done in a voluntary manner. Nuclear-weapons states do place their civilian facilities under voluntary safeguards arrangement of the IAEA. We will do the same.

There is an assessment by Dr. A.N. Prasad, former Director, Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), that the costs will be too prohibitive for India to have reactors dedicated separately to civilian and military purposes.

Certainly, that also will be a factor in identifying what is civilian. If there is an implication on the strategic side, then we will not identify it as civilian. Only that which is clearly of no national security significance will be civilian. To that extent, there is no compromise.

According to Dr. Prasad, the U.S. can afford to have a stockpile of weapons but India has only a minimum credible nuclear deterrent and so segregation of civilian and military facilities in the nuclear field in India will be prohibitive and impossible.

This does not imply capping of the programme.

Capping of the nuclear weapons programme?

Yes.

Former Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee and his National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra have said that the segregation would lead to the capping of our nuclear weapons programme.

Here, the Prime Minister has said [Dr. Kakodkar reads out from Manmohan Singh's suo motu statement in Parliament on July 29, 2005] that "the government will not allow any fissile material shortages or any other material limitations on our strategic programmes in order to meet current or future requirements. The defence and security interests of our country are our highest priority and will continue to remain so."

Can India afford to have separate civilian and military facilities in the nuclear field?

What I am saying is this: in identifying civilian nuclear facilities, we have to determine that they are of no national security significance. We will do this in a phased manner. It is not a one-time determination. It will be determined at different points of time, looking at the national requirements, which exist from time to time. The point I am making is that this does not put any limitation on our ability to meet national security needs.

There is an assessment that putting the civilian nuclear facilities under safeguards will cap the nuclear weapons programme because the spent uranium from the nuclear power reactors can no longer be enriched in order to be used in the making of nuclear bombs.

I am telling you it is not there. The important point to recognise is that our energy requirements are very large. We have a three-stage nuclear power programme. In that, we have said that based on the natural uranium available in the country, we can support 10,000 MWe of Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors [PHWRs]. Beyond that, we will continue to grow on the basis of Fast Breeder Reactors. Beyond that, we will pick up thorium utilisation. This is our three-stage programme and it will continue as per plans.

In the light of the fact that our national energy requirements are very large, we have been looking at external inputs as additionalities. If we can do that, the rate at which we can add nuclear power will be high. On that there was a constraint because of the nuclear technology control regime. If that constraint gets removed, and we are able to access both nuclear fuel and nuclear reactors from outside, I think we will gain a lot on the energy front.

For example, if we get natural uranium in plenty from outside, then we can construct more PHWRs within the country, for which we have the technology. You can visualise a PHWR capacity much larger than 10,000 MWe. There will be no problem in putting under safeguards this additional capacity, which we can sustain with imported [natural] uranium. You can, in fact, think tomorrow of large parks of imported [light water] reactors and of PHWRs built in the country but fuelled by imported [natural] uranium. This could be an addition to our domestic programme, which is a three-stage programme. We have to go through a lot of development for this. That development will continue.

There is a school of opinion that putting the civilian nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards will hamper the Fast Breeder Reactors programme.

No. How will it hamper?

Dr. Prasad has said that. Several people whom I talked to said the plutonium reprocessed from the PHWRs will come under safeguards and that the IAEA may not allow that plutonium to be used in the breeders.

We are not going to put under safeguards any research and development programme.

So the Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR) under construction at Kalpakkam and the Fast Breeder Reactors will not come under safeguards.

No. The PFBR will not come. The PFBR is a prototype. Why should it go under safeguards? When technology becomes mature, it is a different story. The point is all these decisions will be taken at the appropriate time and there is no need to decide on it today.

Will the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research (IGCAR) at Kalpakkam, which deals with breeder reactors, come under the safeguards?

IGCAR is an R&D centre.