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Kalam favours thorium, not US N-plan

New Delhi, Aug. 14: President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam has strongly advocated self-sufficiency in nuclear civilian energy. He has made out a strong case in his Independence Day address to the nation for the development of technology for thorium-based reactors, which “has to be accelerated as the raw material for thorium is abundantly available in our country.” A leading nuclear scientist himself, President Kalam said while outlining his vision for energy security that “the nation should also work towards establishment of thorium-based reactors. Research and technology development of thorium-based reactors is one of the immediate requirements for realising self-reliance in nuclear power generation and long-term energy security for the nation”.

This assertion comes at a time when the government itself is involved in a high-powered debate with the nuclear establishment about Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s decision to enter into a nuclear civilian energy pact with the United States for the supply of fuel and nuclear reactors based on enriched uranium.

President Kalam has quietly thrown his weight behind the nuclear scientists, who have been pointing out that the India-US agreement on nuclear civilian energy could make the country excessively dependent on Washington for the supply of uranium fuel. These experts are worried that the US nuclear programme, based on enriched uranium technology, will have little to offer to India for the development of an indigenous programme based on her own reserves. It has been pointed out by the experts that the supply of uranium fuel by the US to India would remain dependent on the will of the US Congress, and could be switched off by just one anti-India resolution.

There is a strong traditional nuclear lobby in the country that has been asking for more funds for the development of civilian nuclear energy resources, maintaining that India is in a position to achieve self-sufficiency in this field given the necessary funds and assistance from the government. These experts have also pointed out that the costs involved in the separation of military and civilian installations, as well as the possible purchase of uranium-based reactors from the US, would deprive the atomic energy department of the funds required for the research and development of indigenous reactors.

The focus, they said, has shifted to the deal with the US with the already “starved” nuclear R&D sector likely to face further discrimination. In fact, research professor at the Centre for Policy Research Bharat Karnad has written that the US is keen to rope India into buying its expensive enriched uranium reactors and warned that the deal could reduce India “to a dependency in the civilian nuclear field”.

President Kalam said nuclear power generation has been given a thrust by the use of uranium-based fuel. But, after this one-line observation, he went on to build a case for the development of indigenous nuclear reactors. He pointed out that a ten-fold increase was required in nuclear power generation to attain a reasonable degree of energy self-sufficiency. He said it was therefore essential to pursue the development of nuclear

power using thorium reserves, which are available in India. He also spoke of the need for nuclear fusion research with international cooperation so as to keep the option “for meeting the large power requirement at a time when fossil fuels get depleted”.

The President was also clearly supportive of the nuclear scientists who have been pleading for more funds and facilities for R&D for thorium-based reactors. This has not been forthcoming with the NDA, and now UPA, governments reluctant to accelerate the indigenous nuclear energy programme. New Delhi is currently arguing in favour of the agreement with the US for civilian nuclear energy. President Kalam’s remarks now confirm that India can achieve self-sufficiency in the nuclear energy field if given Central assistance to develop thorium-based reactors. President Kalam has set a 2020 deadline for India to achieve comprehensive energy security through the enhancement of its oil and gas exploration and production worldwide. By the year 2030, he said, India should achieve energy independence.

Against the macro deadlines, he has set micro deadlines. For instance, he is of the view that India should evolve a comprehensive renewable energy policy for energy independence within a year, and that it should address all issues related to the generation of energy. He was positive that the deadlines were achievable, and that India could achieve full energy independence on its own steam by the given date.

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