India's tryst with the N-deal

India's nuclear history reached a record high after the NSG (Nuclear Suppliers Group) lifted its 34-year moratorium, paving way for India to engage in nuclear commerce with France and Russia. This achievement is an exception considering that India neither signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty nor the comprehensive test ban treaty – a prerequisite for nuclear trade[1]. The anticipation over clearance from the 45-member NSG was high ever since the International Atomic Energy Agency approved India-specific safeguards agreement[2]. The three-graded procedure has managed to scale the height despite the impediments put forth by the political hegemony and those from the countries opposing the deal.

After the recent approval for the India–US nuclear agreement from the US House of Representatives, the deal now goes to the Democrat Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid for final approval, before President George W. Bush can legalize it. With the US presidential polls nearing, Bush has urged the Senate to accelerate the process to bring about the finality of the nuke deal from the US Congress[3]. This reminds one of US Secretary of State for South Asia, Richard Boucher's counsel to India, few months ago, to 'speedily complete all the steps required to conclude a civilian nuclear deal' before presidential polls in November[4].

Though the deal is said to enhance India's energy output by 8%, the spin-offs are expected to be much larger. Advanced technologies in diverse areas such as aerospace, pharmaceuticals, automotives, defence and IT are expected to open up. India has come a long way since 1950s when it first developed nuclear energy with US aid under the 'Atoms for Peace' programme. This deal qualifies India to buy US dual-use nuclear technology, including materials and equipment that could be used to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium and also receive imported fuel for its nuclear reactors[5].

The process of civil nuclear cooperation deal between the US President George Bush and the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh began in July 2005. A year later, it was declared in an unprecedented agreement that the US would provide nuclear power assistance to India. Under the agreement, India is to separate its civilian and military nuclear programmes over the next eight years in order to gain the US expertise and nuclear fuel to meet its rising energy needs[6]. This deal will expand bilateral cooperation in energy and satellite technology with the US.

Exponents of the agreement contend that it will ameliorate India's relations with the US as both the countries pursue their common interests in fighting terrorism, spreading democracy, and forestalling the supremacy of Asia by any single power. The IAEA Director-General Mohammed ElBaradei, a strong endorser of the deal, had called it 'a pragmatic way to bring India into the nonproliferation community'. This is believed to be a major step, as the existing nonproliferation regime has failed either to impel India to give up its nuclear weapons or make it accept international inspections and restrictions on its nuclear facilities. However, critics fear that the terms of the agreement are overly beneficial for India and may fail to prevent it from continuing to produce nuclear weapons. Though India has asserted that any US assistance to its civilian nuclear energy programme will not benefit its nuclear weapons programme, experts mention that India could utilize the imported nuclear fuel to nurture its civilian energy programme while deviating its own nuclear fuel to weapons production[5].

India is the only country in the world that has accorded a high priority to the use of three fissionable materials, namely uranium-235, plutonium and uranium-233, to meet energy challenges through the deployment of domestic uranium and thorium resources. Currently, India's nuclear resources comprise 61,000 t of uranium and more than 225,000 t of thorium. Speaking at the mid-year meeting of the Indian Academy of Sciences, Anil Kakodkar, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, had expressed a sense of urgency over the nuclear deal, stressing on the importance for early availibility of domestic/imported uranium to reduce import of energy resources as access to global energy sources becomes difficult. He mentioned that the reactors in our country are already working at 50–55% of their capacity and expected it to go up with exploration of uranium deposits in Andhra Pradesh and Meghalaya[7].

Heralding India's triumph as a 'win-win situation', Kakodkar exhorted that the nation remains 'firm in its commitment to realize the vision of Rajiv Gandhi action plan for universal non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament leading to complete elimination of nuclear weapons'[8].

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2. Bagchi, I., *The Times of India*, 2 August 2008.
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4. www.bbc.co.uk, accessed on 5 March 2008.
5. Esther Pan and Bajoria Jayshree, 21 July 2008; www.cfr.org/publication/9663.
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7. Kakodkar, A., Public Lecture, 2008; www.dae.org
8. Laxman, S., *The Times of India*, 2 August 2008.

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