

India will not lose its nuclear independence: PM

U.S. President George W. Bush on December 18 signed into law the historic India-U.S. civil nuclear cooperation bill, paving the way for the resumption of civilian nuclear trade with India after over three decades. The House and Senate had earlier overwhelmingly approved the bill.

The two sides will now negotiate a bilateral agreement that would formally allow resumption of civilian nuclear trade.

In New Delhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, while welcoming the development, assured Parliament that nothing would be done that would “dilute, compromise or cast a shadow on” the country’s strategic programme and its vital national interests.

“Safeguarding the autonomy of the strategic programme is a solemn duty of this government,” said Manmohan Singh, whose meeting with President Bush in Washington, D.C., on July 18, 2005, had kicked off the process that culminated in the U.S. amending its laws to accommodate nuclear trade with India.

“I repeat, nothing will be done that will compromise, dilute or cast a shadow on India’s full autonomy in the management of its security and national interests. Our strategic programme will not be subject to external scrutiny or interference of any kind,” said the Prime Minister during an intervention in a debate on the India-U.S. civilian nuclear deal in the Lok Sabha, the Lower House of Parliament.

“No legislation of a foreign country can take away from us our sovereign right to conduct foreign relations, be it with Iran, or with other countries, solely in accordance with our national interests,” Singh said.

The Prime Minister reiterated that India will find it difficult to and cannot “accept any such conditions” that are outside the July 18, 2005, understanding arrived at between Prime Minister Singh and President Bush in Washington, D.C., and the March 2, 2006, plan outlining the separation of Indian civil and military nuclear plants.

“This objective can be hindered by extraneous issues that were not part of the understandings in the July 18 Joint Statement and the March 2 Separation Plan,” he made it clear.

“We cannot agree to anything that is not consistent with our vital national interests, including protecting the autonomy of our strategic programme, maintaining the



President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh addressing a joint press conference at Hyderabad House in New Delhi, on March 2, 2006, when the former visited India.

integrity of the three-stage nuclear power programme and safeguarding indigenous R&D, including our Fast Breeder Programme. This will be the underlying

approach when we negotiate the bilateral 123 Agreement, which will form the basis of our civil nuclear cooperation,” he said.

“India is interested in long term, stable and predictable cooperation in civil nuclear energy with the United States and other members of the international community. Such a partnership with the United States can be facilitated if the legislation — its scope, content and implementation — were to strengthen the hands of the Administration to fulfill all the commitments agreed to by the U.S. in the July 18 Joint Statement and the March 2 Separation Plan,” Singh added.

Earlier, President George W. Bush said, “By helping India expand its use of safe nuclear energy, this Bill lays the foundation for a new strategic partnership between our two nations.”

“India has conducted its civilian nuclear energy programme in a safe and responsible way for decades,” Bush said. “Now, in return for access to American technology, India has agreed to open its civilian nuclear power programme to international inspection.” The administration also argued it was a good deal because while India’s military plants that work with nuclear material would not be subjected to inspections, there would be international oversight for the civilian programme, which has been secret since India entered the nuclear age in 1974.

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The Road Ahead

- Two rounds of negotiations on the 123 bilateral Agreement are already over, and a third will be launched in January 2007.
- The two countries are to finalise technical details for nuclear cooperation under the 123 Agreement under the relevant section of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act 1954.
- The 123 Agreement then has to be put up for vote in the U.S. Congress.
- Once the 123 Agreement goes through, it becomes law, granting India exemptions from Section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act, 1954, to allow nuclear commerce between India and U.S.
- The 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, which regulates nuclear trade, must also change its rules to allow nuclear transfers to India.
- Indian officials must also negotiate a safeguard agreement with the IAEA.

