

India and the US hope for compromise on nuclear deal

Let's hope that the US is more sensible this time ... cutting out India failed last time.

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Indian and U.S. negotiators struggled to bridge differences over a landmark nuclear deal in a first round of talks on Thursday but said they still hoped for agreement in time for President George W. Bush's visit next week.

The deal, which aims to give India access to long-denied U.S. nuclear equipment and fuel, has run into trouble over New Delhi's plan to separate its civilian and military nuclear programs to prevent proliferation.

The two-day talks between U.S. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns and Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran are being held days ahead of Bush's visit to New Delhi.

Both sides are keen to make the civilian nuclear cooperation deal the centerpiece of the visit to help cement a new friendship between the two countries, which were on opposite sides of the Cold War.

"There is no question that both of us want to complete these negotiations but there are still some remaining differences between us and those differences need to be worked out," Burns told reporters after a first round of talks.

"We are working very hard, we want to achieve an agreement," he said, categorizing the talks as "very good."

Burns pointed to Bush's speech in Washington on Wednesday when he said the Indian plan to separate its civilian and military nuclear programs -- a key requirement before the deal can be sent to U.S. Congress for approval -- needs to be credible and transparent.

Asked if the two sides were likely to clinch the deal before Bush arrives in New Delhi next week, Burns said: "We simply don't know, we simply don't know if it will happen before President Bush's visit. We are trying our best, both sides."

One Indian official, speaking before the talks, said New Delhi hoped the two sides could find a meeting point.

"The discussions are in the final phase but this is also the toughest phase so far," the official told Reuters.

An Indian Foreign Ministry statement said the two sides had an informal exchange of views on Thursday and more detailed discussions were expected on Friday.

The itinerary and possible outcomes of Bush's visit were also discussed, it said.

The deal would not only give India much-needed access to U.S. civilian atomic technology but also help lift a global ban on New Delhi receiving similar supplies from other nuclear nations to cater to its soaring energy requirements.

But Washington's desire to see a large chunk of India's 22 nuclear reactors placed under international safeguards has rankled India's nuclear establishment.

Indian atomic scientists argue that such a move could compromise nuclear security and shackle the atomic program.

The deal has also come under strong opposition from the American non-proliferation lobby, which says cooperation with India -- which has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty -- would let it expand its military program and also encourage other countries to do the same.

Global security consulting firm Stratfor said it was not optimistic about a deal in time for Bush's visit, with disagreement over whether to place an experimental Fast Breeder Reactor on the civilian list.

"Though India is unlikely to get Bush's signature on the nuclear deal during his March visit, it also is unlikely that the deal would be scrapped over this sticking point," Stratfor said.

"There is still plenty of room for negotiation."