

Ackerman, pro-nuclear deal Democrat, comes to India next week

As hopes recede about the consummation this year of the India-US nuclear agreement, the government is gearing to get a sense of the fate of the deal in the event of a future Democratic dispensation when influential Congressman and Indophile Gary Ackerman comes here next week.

Heading a high-profile Congressional delegation, Ackerman, the recipient of Padma Bhushan - India's second highest civilian honour, comes here July 3 on a brief two-day visit.

He will meet External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee and senior officials of the external affairs ministry and discuss with them a broad spectrum of the India-US relations, including rapidly expanding economic ties between the two countries, official sources said.

The 64-year-old Ackerman, Democratic co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans and a senior member of the House International Relations Committee, is also likely to meet Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The discussions are likely to centre on the future of the nuclear deal under the Democratic dispensation if the deal does not go through this year and Barack Obama wins the November presidential elections.

Given Ackerman's passionate advocacy of the nuclear deal during debates on the subject in the US Congress during the last two years, he is likely to tell his hosts about the strong commitment of the Democratic Party to deepening relations with India and broad support in his party for the nuclear deal.

As a grand compromise with the Left on the nuclear deal is looking increasingly unlikely, there is anxiety in a section of the government here that the deal may have a tougher time sailing through in the case of a Democratic president in the White House.

The Democratic Party is known for its hawkish agenda on nuclear non-proliferation and may revive the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty which India has refused to sign due to its discriminatory nature.

Top Indian interlocutors for the nuclear deal are worried that the nuclear deal may have to be renegotiated to accommodate more stringent provisions on non-proliferation and testing should the Democrats comes to power.

In fact, Ackerman, a self-confessed Indophile and passionate advocate of stronger India-US strategic partnership, could prove to be a valuable bridge for bolstering support for the deal under a likely Democratic regime in Washington.

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