

There is life beyond 123, US lawmakers and experts agree

Leading US lawmakers and experts alike have expressed strong support for moving the stalled India-US civil nuclear deal forward, but all agree its collapse would not jeopardise the growing relationship in other areas.

'I strongly support the 123 agreement and I look forward to the Government of India completing its internal processes so that the US Congress can give final approval to this historic deal,' said Gary L. Ackerman, Democratic chairman of a House panel Wednesday.

'However, there was much more to the July 2005 joint statement than civil nuclear cooperation and there is much more to US-India relations than just the 123 agreement,' he said at hearing of the panel on 'More than just the 123 Agreement: The Future of US-India Relations.'

Describing the case for civil nuclear cooperation between the US and India as 'clear and compelling,' Ackerman said Republican President George Bush had come in for much criticism for his policies but 'if there is one area ... where President Bush got the policy right, it is towards India.'

Noting that it was former Democratic president Bill Clinton who had 'moved from ostracising India after the 1998 nuclear tests to embracing India as an emerging global power,' he said it underscored 'the bipartisan recognition of India's importance in the 21st century'.

'There has been tremendous progress in US-India relations over the last decade and particularly over the last three years,' Ackerman said. 'There is every opportunity and very good reasons to advance relations even further, and future generations will consider us fools if we squander them.'

Senior Republican member Joe Wilson agreed. Hoping that the political difficulties that have stalled movement on the civil nuclear agreement can be overcome, he said: 'The United States and India need to continue to be fair and willing partners on economic, energy, and national security issues.'

Noting that 'No relationship between any two nations will be without disagreements or competing interests at times,' Wilson said: 'It is vital that the US 'continue to seek a fair and mutually respectful partnership with the people of India as evidenced by the tremendous progress in the last three years.'

Stephen P. Cohen, a South Asia expert at Brookings Institution, said as there was only a slim chance of the nuclear deal coming through in the face of communist opposition, the next US administration must see it through.

'When the political situation in India finally proves favourable to the deal 's consummation - be it this year, next year or the year after that - the next US president and Congress should expedite consummation,' he said.

'While it will be imprudent to renegotiate the entire agreement, I do see the possibility of concessions on both sides that make the agreement more attractive,' Cohen said.

He also suggested 'US should also translate the India agreement into a criteria-based format, potentially allowing Pakistan and even Israel to enter into a similar arrangement.

Completing the nuclear deal will facilitate addressing other matters that are potentially more deserving of attention, Cohen said suggesting cooperation in education, particularly higher education; agriculture and the looming environmental crisis in South Asia.

Describing the nuclear deal as 'the most powerful tool the US and India have for putting our partnership on a strong footing,' another expert Teresita C Schaffer.

Schaffer said, 'common interests of the two countries will push us together regardless of the fate of the nuclear agreement'

'India was the missing piece in a US Asia strategy for the 21st Century. That piece is now being put in place,' said Schaffer, Director, South Asia Programme, Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

'The next administration will inherit a lot of useful activities,' She said. What it 'needs to do is to strengthen the strategic context for all this activity, by focusing both governments on our common strategic interests and defining the areas where the United States and India can act in common.'

Dr. Walter K. Andersen, Associate Director South Asia Studies, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies said: 'The relationship with India has advanced to the point that a collapse of the deal would not jeopardise the relationship and not stall moves to advance it in other areas.'

'India is too large, too prosperous, and too strategically located for this to happen. Nonetheless, the lack of Indian action would likely make a future American administration cautious about expending political capital for something comparably innovative and far reaching as the proposed nuclear deal,' he said.

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