

With n-deal on mind, Manmohan leaves for Japan Monday

In the shadow of political uncertainty, inflationary woes and a looming election, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh heads for Japan Monday morning for a rendezvous with leaders of the world's wealthiest nations, that includes talks with US President George Bush - a crucial meeting which will signal to the world India's decision to move ahead with the nuclear deal.

India is one of the five emerging economies that also includes China, Brazil, South Africa and Mexico, also called O-5, that have been invited as outreach partners to the Group of Eight (G8) summit.

This time round, in view of oil and food crises, leaders of other major economies like Australia, South Korea and Indonesia have been invited to forge a collective response to global issues. Evolving a new global consensus on climate change will top the agenda of the G8 summit of the world's wealthiest nations.

But apart from a separate meeting of the O-5, the meeting that is sure to hog the global spotlight will be Manmohan Singh's meeting with Bush Wednesday at Toyako, the venue of the July 7-9 G8 summit and associated meetings in the northern island of Hokkaido. The crucial meeting will indicate the fate of the much-debated nuclear deal that both Manmohan Singh and Bush have made the showpieces of their otherwise not too sparkling tenures that are both nearing their end.

Both leaders are keen to sign the deal for different reasons. The Manmohan Singh government says the deal will end India's 'nuclear apartheid' and revive fuel and technology supply for its moribund nuclear power plants and reduce its dependence in the long run on depleting and polluting fossil fuels. The Bush administration, on the other hand, is tom-tomming the deal as a way of bringing India's unsafeguarded civil nuclear programme under the global non-proliferation regime while making [New Delhi](#) a key strategic ally in Asia and a possible counterweight against China's burgeoning global military and economic ambitions.

The deal has redefined the political landscape in India with the Communist parties on the verge of formally announcing their rupture with the ruling coalition. The Left parties, which suspect that the deal will allegedly make New Delhi a pawn of Washington, have indicated that they may announce the withdrawal of support to the government if the Manmohan Singh government decides to go ahead with the deal. The government has, however, managed to muster the support of an adversary turned ally to ensure its survival in case the Left carries out its threat.

But Manmohan Singh, who, according to unconfirmed media reports, had threatened to resign if his Congress and United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition did not back him on the deal, firmly believes that the deal, which still has to clear many procedural hurdles before becoming a reality, will be the long-term answer to the country's energy security besides ensuring for the country a place at the global high table.

Singh is expected to ask Bush to help the deal go through its paces at the global nuclear watchdog, the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that will work out India-specific safeguards for its civilian reactors as well as a waiver from the nuclear cartel, the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) for nuclear commerce with India in fuel and technology that it sorely requires.

As nearly all the 16 leaders who will be present in Japan are members of the NSG, Manmohan Singh is also likely to seek their support in the NSG.

With these twin clearances, the deal will then head for Washington in the closing stages of the Bush presidency for a Congressional clearance before it can be signed by the two countries in what could be a moment of singular triumph for both leaders.

Although the Bush meeting will hog all the media spotlight, Singh is also likely to meet Chinese President Hu Jintao and leaders of some of the other participating countries, many of whom are also members of the IAEA Board of Governors as well as in the NSG.

Ahead of the visit, senior officials told the media that the US is committed to getting India an exemption from the NSG under the July 18, 2005 agreement.

'We have been in touch with NSG members. We will seek their support,' Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon said.

Singh will be accompanied by National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan, Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon and Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Climate Change Shyam Saran. The prime minister returns to the capital in the early hours of Thursday - in time to know whether the Left still remains a coalition ally or whether it has withdrawn its support to the government as they are threatening.

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