

Exception to India may weaken NPT regime: Japan

While India is hopeful of winning Japan's support for civil nuclear cooperation, Japanese envoy Yasukuni Enoki Thursday said that Tokyo continues to have concerns about granting singular exception to India that 'may weaken the NPT regime'.

The issue of civilian nuclear cooperation between India and Japan will figure prominently during discussions with Japanese leaders when External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee visits Tokyo sometime early this year.

It will be an important issue during the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to India in the later half of this year.

'We appreciate explanations from the Indian side. But we can't rule out the suspicion that making India exception to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime may weaken the NPT regime,' Enoki told reporters here.

'Our position hasn't changed in the last one month,' he said when asked whether Tokyo's ambivalent stance on civil nuclear cooperation has changed since Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Japan over a month ago.

Manmohan Singh raised the issue of civilian nuclear cooperation with Abe last month and sought his support for the India-US civil nuclear deal in the Nuclear Suppliers Group of which Tokyo is an influential member.

Abe stressed on Japanese sensitivities on the nuclear issue saying that Japan was the only country to be attacked by nuclear bombs and therefore it was not easy for it to make up its mind on this issue.

Abe had, however, held out hope for backing at the NSG saying that Japan would wait for India's negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency on a safeguards agreement before taking a clear position on the issue.

Alluding to the visit of Shyam Saran, prime minister's special envoy on the India-US civil nuclear deal, to Tokyo last week, Enoki said that the discussions were 'very productive and fruitful'.

'Japan's position is under consideration,' he said.

The joint statement issued at the end of talks between Manmohan Singh and Abe last month struck a positive note, acknowledging the need 'to enhance international civilian nuclear cooperation through appropriate IAEA safeguards'.

Although the dates for Mukherjee's visit have not finalised, Japan is hoping that he visits Tokyo before the SAARC summit here in April at which Japan has been invited has an observer. Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso is likely to represent Japan at the SAARC summit.

'Since this will be Aso's fifth consecutive visit to India without a return visit from his Indian counterpart, we are pressing that Mukherjee visits Japan before April,' Enoki said.

The ambassador also unveiled a busy calendar of bilateral meetings and events this year with the joint task force of the two sides launching their negotiations on a landmark Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CEPA) at the end of the month.

The decision to launch CEPA negotiations and to conclude it in two years was taken during Manmohan Singh's recent visit to Tokyo.

Other important diplomatic and cultural events lined up for this year include the launch of Japan Year in India next month and Japan India tourism exchange year in mid-April.

A memorandum of understanding on increasing seven flights to 21 flights per week between the two countries is also likely to be signed this year.

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