

S U B V E R S E

Our way of doing things

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In recent months, the media went to town that India was down in the dumps, that decision-making — read on the nuclear deal — was at an end and the Manmohan Singh-led government was at its lowest ebb.

On June 12, in Washington DC, at the USIBC annual conference attended by 400-odd senior business and think-tank leaders, this sentiment seemed to prevail. The nuclear deal was spoken of as “dead”. I said — on being questioned — that India is committed to nuclear energy and would persist with the deal. In spite of my confidence, the disbelievers were many.

Now, all these people, Indian and foreign, have been caught off guard. Taken by surprise that the prime minister has moved ahead with the nuclear deal process, quietly and quickly. The Indian ways of doing things are just not understood abroad. There are no straight lines in India. There are many ups and downs. So, anyone drawing straight lines usually draws the wrong conclusions.

Then there's the constant mistake outsiders make in underestimating the Indian government and its leadership. Just because matters are dealt with in an understated, low-key manner, it does not mean lack of commitment or resolve. Being understated is a strength, not a weakness. Underestimation, following from this, is a mistake often seen in analysts and writers. Suddenly, the prime minister, who was being widely criticised, is being seen in a different light.

One of the mistakes many are making is to describe this as an “Indo-US” nuclear deal. It is not. This is a deal between India and the world. A deal to get India into the nuclear room which is guarded at the door by the US. For India to partner Russia, Japan, France, China and others already inside this room. The US is only one of the several players.

This is about India's development and growth. To bring 600-700 million poor people, stuck in poverty, into the mainstream of Indian society and economy. India has to — and can — grow at an average of 10 per cent GDP per annum

for the next 15 years. This will require massive energy capacity. Nuclear energy is clean energy, which is so critical to our national interest.

As India goes to the IAEA and the NSG, let it also be recognised that the government of India has done enormous preparatory work over many months. The prime minister, the external affairs minister, the national security adviser, the PM's special envoy, the foreign secretary, the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission and many others have worked silently and quietly around the world to communicate India's points of view and understand all the issues connected with the nuclear deal.

The country is with the government as it now races to conclude the deal. And, though memories are short, people will remember those who try now to block India's plans to embark on a major expansion programme of clean nuclear energy for the benefit of all Indians. This does not automatically imply that the private sector will have a role in nuclear power generation, going beyond the usual supply of equipment and services. That will depend on the private sector's standards of quality and safety. The near-term growth will be in the public sector.

Clearly, all this will have to happen with international partnership. Self-reliance and self-sufficiency will not carry India too far. The Russians, the French, and others, with proven capability of nuclear power generation, will lead partnerships with India. The US, too, may find opportunity but its recent experience and track record is limited. If the US Congress delays approvals, it will work against the US interest to participate in India's nuclear development. Hence, the confidence that the US will come through however tight the timetable.

India's economic performance over the last few years has earned respect and attention globally. India's democracy and institutions bolster faith in its future. Its ability to be creative and to find low-cost solutions is also admired. This deal would earn India more respect, and credibility, globally. The time is now. Let's get this through.

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