



Interview With The Times of India

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

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(3:35pm EST)

QUESTION: Secretary Burns, I was just reading that I believe you were at the FPC, Foreign Press Center, yesterday and you asked for bold decision to be taken by the Indian government about the nuclear deal. And I was wondering what you meant. Are you asking the government to defy the sort of limited political mandate it has, knowing that it might precipitate an early election?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, first of all let me say that the last thing I would wish to do is to interfere in the internal politics of India and with the coalition in India. So I will not do that and I will steer clear of that. But I will say this: this agreement between the United States and India is really an agreement between India and the world community. Because what it does is it brings India out of the isolation in which it's been for well over 35 years. It allows India to be treated in a more egalitarian way. It allows India access to nuclear fuel and civil nuclear technology which will be critical for its economic development, for electricity production, and for the international goal of reducing carbon emissions. And it does all that, and it has its champions Russia, China, France, Britain and the United States. So I think it's a deal that makes – if I could say this as an outsider – it really makes sense for India.

There is a calendar and there is a clock ticking. And there's no escaping that. For the process to be completed, the IAEA Board of Governors, the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the US Congress, this agreement would have to get to the US Congress by May or June, as Senator Biden said last week, for the Congress to act before its summer recess in July. If you back up from there, that means that the IAEA safeguards agreement will need to be completed and approved by the Board of Governors in a very short period of time from now. Because we assume that the Nuclear Suppliers Group is going to be a lengthy, quite involved and complicated process involving 45 countries. Any time you have 45 countries, you know, involve themselves in anything like this it's going to be very, very complicated and complex. And so that's why I think it's very important for the Indian government now to act quickly and decisively. And our view is that this agreement is worth defending and worth supporting.

QUESTION: Okay. Just walk me through the timeline again, Secretary Burns. You mentioned May or June?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes. Senator Biden when he gave his press conference in Delhi last week said that in order for the Congress to be able to vote by no later than July, then he thought that this had to get to the Congress by May or June. Meaning the IAEA and NSG processes would have concluded by then. And that's a very tall order, and it means that things have to happen rather quickly.

QUESTION: Right. I also heard you mention China as one of the champions. That sounds like a new development. Are you saying the Chinese are on board on this one?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I don't think that China would block the deal. I think that China understands that this deal is going to go forward with a great deal of support. And so therefore I think the Indian public should look at this as an international show of interest in India, and that India in achieving this agreement would I think strengthen its international position across the board.

QUESTION: Right. I mean, saying China won't block the deal is a little different from touting China as a champion of the deal, which is I believe the word you used. I'm a little mystified as to, is there such a strong support for the deal from China? Is it something you sense from Beijing? Or is this a new development?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, you have to ask the Chinese; I can't speak for them. But I can say this: it's our firm impression that China will support this deal at the NSG.

QUESTION: What do you think is holding up the deal right now? Is it just the political situation in India? Or do you think the negotiation with IAEA is genuinely complex as some Indian officials have claimed?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, my view has been that the IAEA process is a relatively simple and straightforward process. And in our view it could be concluded quite rapidly should the Indian government wish to do that and should the IAEA be fully engaged, and I think it is. And so I don't think there's a problem there and I think that – it's fairly clear to us that this process will move as fast as the Indian government wishes it to move.

QUESTION: So does it mean the primary hurdle is actually political?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well I think that's obvious. I think that this is a question – and again, I don't want to get into the politics of this, it's not for me to do that. But I think, you know, we've reached a point where it is clearly time for a decision. And we hope that decision, obviously, will be positive.

QUESTION: Nick, is it frustrating for you – and I want to take you back to something that you said earlier, in fact I had asked a question when we had a briefing at the State Department about how many hours and days it had taken you. And my – I don't have my notes in front of me in Bangalore, but my recollection is that something like 300 hours. And I think you mentioned several cities, a number of cities in which you had negotiated.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: This has been one of the most complex negotiations that I've ever been involved in. It's really been a marathon. It's – yes, we've negotiated over three years. I've made eight trips to New Delhi during that time. And we've met, of course, in the United States, in Washington, in New York. We have negotiated this in Vienna, in Madrid, in Paris. It's been quite an odyssey, very much worthwhile. And I must say I had the great good fortune to have two Indian counterparts who are supremely effective professional diplomats – Shankar Menon, the current Foreign Secretary, and Shyam Saran, his predecessor. And it's been a privilege to work with both of them. Both are friends, I count them among my friends, of course, and I've been very impressed by the way that India has negotiated in such an effective fashion, but also one that has brought a lot of trust between our two governments.

QUESTION: So what I'm asking is that, on a day when you're actually leaving the service, I believe you would have liked to have sort of wrapped this up as a sort of crowning glory. And it looks as of now, although Secretary Rice has just mentioned that you will be sort of seconded to the State Department for some more months, it looks as if at least in the official scenario you're not going to go home with this all wrapped up.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think it's quite clear as I'm leaving my position as Under Secretary today, obviously it's going to take some more time. But we'll be wishing India well.

I think this is an important moment for India. India is clearly a rising power in the world. This agreement signifies and symbolizes that rise. It symbolizes the fact that the international community I think fully embraces the fact that India must be treated with greater respect and equality. And as an American diplomat let me say that I think our government recognized this earlier than most others did. We made a strategic decision to improve our relations with India. We were willing on our own to overcome and defy 30 years of conventional orthodox wisdom in the United States about India and its nuclear program. We've completely overturned the way we work with India. And we've achieved a historic vote in the United States Congress 15 months ago, the Hyde Act's passage. We still have strong bipartisan majority support for India and the India civil nuclear deal in the United States Congress. And I am proud as an American that my country has led the way to embrace India's growing role in the world and to see it as a positive development. And I think this does mirror – it also mirrors the rapid growth of the relationship in agriculture, in science, in space technology, in business, in military cooperation, in counterterrorism – there's been a huge expansion in this relationship, which I do think is in the interest of both countries. And it would be my strong wish that this trend continue and that India and the United States continue to improve our relationship.

QUESTION: Nick, there were things also in India, during my several trips here, and I'm sure you would have read it through your reports, your own, you know, political reports from the embassy. This deal has public support in India. This deal has largely, you know, editorial support in India. So why isn't the Indian government using that, you know? The momentum it has from people and from the media, do you think?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I don't want to second guess – I would never want to second guess the Indian government. We have too much respect and trust in the government to want to give it public advice like that. So I would leave that to the Indian government to characterize.

I think the Indian government is a very serious, competent, professional government that is trying to do its best, and obviously there are – it's a very delicate time and sensitive one for domestic politics and we understand that. All democratic countries, of course, have a balance of competing interests inside their government. We certainly do in the United States in our separation of powers between the Congress and the Executive Branch. So I don't want to second guess –

QUESTION: And what happens to you after you leave the administration? You've been part of the Foreign Service, part of the State Department for so long, and counted as one of the most brilliant diplomats, so I'm wondering –

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I'm retiring from the Foreign Service and the diplomatic corps and I'll be entering private life. I have not yet announced what I'm going to be doing, but I will do that shortly. And I'm going to miss diplomacy very much, at least miss working for my government very much. I've been very fortunate to have had just an interesting career. And I must say that this issue of the US and India has been a great passion of mine for many years. And I believe strongly in the potential for a strong friendship between the US and India. I think we can see it on the horizon. We can see how it will be structured. I think that Prime Minister Singh and President Bush have given this a major boost forward.

But the key thing is, remember when President Clinton was in office he was working with BJP governments and they worked well together too. So I think in essence you have bipartisan support on both sides of this relationship.

QUESTION: And it's not unusual for, you know, career Foreign Service officers to actually serve beyond the professional period, right? Tom Pickering comes to mind, who came back to the department I think after he retired. So, can we expect to see you back?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I don't know. That's a question – it's hard to see into the future and to predict the future, isn't it? I will go into private life. And I'm looking forward to the many challenges there. It's been a privilege to serve in the government and I would never turn that opportunity down, of course, should it arise in the future. But I'm expecting this to be a move into the private sector for several years.

QUESTION: Okay. I hate to ask this, but I can't let go because my one last question – what happens if the deal doesn't go through?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: If the civ-nuke deal doesn't go through?

QUESTION: Yes.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well you know, I think it will be a great missed opportunity. Here we have probably the single most important opportunity to advance US-India relations in 35 years. We have substantial public support in both countries. We have the leaders of both countries wishing it to happen. And so if it doesn't go through I think it will be a great loss for both countries. And so we must try everything we can to avoid that. We must preserve this deal and put it forward.

I would also say, however, that the relationship is quite strong and quite broadly gauged. If you think about all the different areas in which our two governments are working and also think about the private sector connections between the two countries, this is a relationship that can withstand a lot, and that's positive. But certainly the civil nuclear deal has become, symbolically, in many ways the centerpiece of this relationship. So there will be great disappointment in both countries if it doesn't materialize. I know that's the case in the US Congress where it has very strong support.

So I do think it's time for us to redouble our efforts to put this agreement forward and to work as hard as we can to finish it this year.

QUESTION: Right. The reason I'm asking – the reason I ask this is, I've been in India for a week now and I'm sure by now you know how India works. You know, for every little thing we hark back to 5,000 years of civilization. And for many Indians, too, it's very frustrating to face what I call a very karmic approach, you know, the sense of karma and the attitude here is, oh well, if we miss this, so what? It's not the end of the world kind of attitude.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I frankly disagree with that.

QUESTION: And Indians find it frustrating too.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yeah, I frankly very much disagree with that. I think that this would be a major missed opportunity. The timing is important here. It is – you know, we don't have all the time in the world to carry this forward.

QUESTION: Alright. Thanks, I really appreciate you opening up and talking to me.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: It's a pleasure.

QUESTION: And when I come back to D.C. I hope I can come by and meet you and say hello and –

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Please do.

QUESTION: Is there a timeline to which you continue to be associated with the State Department and this deal?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes, until April 30th.

QUESTION: Okay. Is that also a good indication of when the US expects to have this wrapped up?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, we'd like to get it wrapped up yesterday. Right?

QUESTION: [Laughter] Right.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Anyway, I think we're seeing the emergence of a very positive relationship between the countries and we should continue to work hard to fulfill that promise.

QUESTION: Right. Thank you very much, and I look forward to meeting you when I come back to Washington.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thanks very much.

QUESTION: Have a good day, sir.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Okay, bye, bye.

QUESTION: Bye.

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