



U.S.-India Relations

Richard A. Boucher, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs

Interview With Niharika Acharya of Voice of America (VOA-India)

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QUESTION: Ambassador Boucher, thank you very much for speaking with the Voice of America. It's obviously a historic moment for U.S.-India relations but then, if you're talking of the road ahead, the next step is of course the 123 bilateral agreement that needs to be agreed upon. How far along on that process are we?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: We're fairly far along. I think at a moment like this, we need to give ourselves a day to breathe a sign of relief and to say this is a major milestone; that we've gotten this far to have understood -- negotiated between the United States and India, a new basis for civil nuclear cooperation, to have gotten that legislation through the Congress where the President can sign it. This is a great achievement for all of us and people on the Indian side as well as the U.S. side. So we need to take one moment and pause and say this is wonderful.

Now, you know, after that, tomorrow morning, we've got to get back to work on all these other things. The 123 agreement, the bilateral agreement, we've had a lot of good discussions with the Indians and I think we all understand the issues and the concepts. We've given them a text. Next step will be to get a text from the Indian side and then sit down and talk about it in detail.

QUESTION: So what kind of a timeframe are we looking at before this agreement can actually be implemented? There are the protocols that need to be set out with the IAEA and then the Nuclear Suppliers Group has to give its approval.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Yeah.

QUESTION: What kind of timeframe are you looking at?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, we're looking at as soon as possible. That's nicely said, but it's hard to define exactly. We have to negotiate the bilateral agreement. India has to negotiate its deal with the IAEA. Those things are not entirely in our hands, and then we have to deal with the Nuclear Suppliers. We're looking at sort of next April, when the Nuclear Suppliers get together. Will we be ready by then? I frankly don't know but that's one moment and if not that moment then the next one. But some time in the next year I would hope we would be able to bring all these things together.

QUESTION: You mentioned the sigh of relief a little earlier.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Yeah.

QUESTION: Was there any time looking back that you felt that the legislation was slip and go, especially with the number of killer amendments that were being introduced?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I personally didn't, because I guess I'm optimistic but also a bit naïve. What I kept hearing from members of Congress is we want to support the relationship with India. We want to support a nuclear -- civil nuclear relationship with India, and we want to do it in a way that's consistent with what the President decided. And even when all these different amendments were thrown out that was the issue, and it was not we're against it, we're against cooperation with India; we're against nuclear cooperation with India. There was a group that was against nuclear cooperation with India and they made themselves known. But most of the members, the overwhelming majority, wanted to vote for nuclear cooperation with India, and they wanted to vote in a way that was consistent with what the President and the Prime Minister agreed. And in the end, by all these discussions, we made it possible for them to do that, and that's why it got such enormous bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate.

QUESTION: When we talk about critics, you have a fair number of them in India as well. You must be aware of misgivings that they have about where the legislation has been shaped or where they say that the aim eventually is to cap Indian's nuclear weapons program. What are you likely to say to these critics in India?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Look at the deal; it doesn't involve the military side. It's a civil nuclear cooperation agreement. That's all it affects. So whatever you want to say about it, you can say it does this or doesn't do that; but you can't say that it somehow implicates something because it's very clear on its surface. It's a civil nuclear cooperation deal. We think it's a good deal for India and a good deal for the United States, a good deal for really the whole nonproliferation system and for India's relations with the West.

QUESTION: And then again there's the question of Iran, because the legislation does make a mention of India's relations with Iran and there are many in India who feel that this is impinging on India's sovereignty. Now this -- the legislation is non-binding; it's the bilateral agreement that will be the binding text between the two governments, so is that something that you would like to clarify to the Indians?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't know that it needs a particular amount of clarification. As far as I remember it ends up being in reporting language. No one in India should be surprised that the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Government cares about the India relationship with Iran, particularly when it comes to high technology exports in nuclear matter, military matters. So the fact that our Congress wants them to report, wants us to report to them (a) it doesn't impinge on India because it doesn't involve India. And second of all, it's a report that we have to provide to our Congress on an issue that everybody knows we're interested in. So I don't see how that breaks any new ground for anybody in that matter. And as you said, in the end the substance of our cooperation is going to be set in the bilateral agreement that we negotiate and that's a fairly standard agreement. It has to cover certain areas. Relations with third countries are not usually part of that.

QUESTION: You would not mention Iran in that bilateral agreement?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I'll leave that to negotiators, but normally it would not be -- have anything to do with third countries. It would be about the U.S. and the partner country.

QUESTION: So America -- can America assure the Indian Government that the final shape of the bilateral agreement will be within the parameters that were set out in the July 2005 agreement and then on March 2nd between the Prime Minister and the President?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, since it's the United States Government and the Indian Government who are going to negotiate it, since we're subject to the

instructions of our President and they're subject to the instructions of their Prime Minister, I think both sides will work very hard to make it within the parameters that we've been given by our leaders.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Thank you very much.

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 [BACK TO TOP](#)

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