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Delhi nukes US show-stealer - Parallel meet forces non-proliferation lobby to retreat

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Washington, Dec. 17: With the Indo-US nuclear agreement of July in trouble, India has dramatically turned tables on the non-proliferation fundamentalists in Washington, sending an unambiguous message that where its interests are involved, the country can deal with them on New Delhi's terms and get the better of them in their stronghold.

Even as foreign secretary Shyam Saran is packing his bags for Washington for a crucial meeting here on Wednesday with US under-secretary of state for political affairs Nicholas Burns, the Indian embassy in Washington has forced the non-proliferation lobby to back off from a confrontation with New Delhi on the nuclear deal, which could have soured Saran's visit.

The confrontation would have centred around India's CIRUS nuclear reactor: it is a research reactor, which was supplied to India by Canada in 1954 and thus accounts for the first three letters of CIRUS, standing for Canada-India reactor. The Americans supplied heavy water for the reactor, adding the last two letters of the CIRUS name.

The reactor is not under the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) because those measures did not exist when the reactor was supplied to India. But Canada later stipulated that it should only be used for peaceful purposes. The supply contract with the Americans for heavy water also stipulated that the reactor should only be used for

peaceful purposes.

It is widely believed in world capitals which are concerned with nuclear non-proliferation that most of India's weapon plutonium stockpile and plutonium for India's 1974 nuclear explosion in Pokhran came from CIRUS.

Because of the widespread belief that India violated agreements with the US and Canada over CIRUS, it is an emotive issue with non-proliferationists all over the world, especially in the US and in Canada, which were suppliers for the reactor.

After Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced on his way to the East Asian summit in Kuala Lumpur that India's plans for separating its civilian and military nuclear facilities are at an advanced stage, non-proliferationists got into the act and scheduled a high-profile event here on CIRUS on the day Saran was meeting Burns.

The event, organised by the prestigious Monterey Institute's Center for Non-Proliferation Studies, would have assembled all the high priests of nuclear non-proliferation in the US on a single platform hours before Saran was to go to the US State Department to parley with Burns.

These included David Albright, the president of the Institute for Science and International Security; Paul Leventhal, the founder of the Nuclear Control Institute; and Lawrence Scheinman and Leonard Spector of Monterey Institute Center for Nonproliferation Studies.

Their presentations would have been the intellectual equivalent of a mass demonstration on Washington streets against the nuclear deal, say, during a visit by Manmohan Singh to the White House.

The title of the conference was to have been provocative and designed to whip up anger against the nuclear deal between Manmohan Singh and President George W. Bush: "The CIRUS Reactor and the US-India Nuclear Agreement – Will India Declare a 'Peaceful Uses Only' Reactor To Be a Civilian or a Military Facility?"

When the Indian embassy was alerted to the Monterey Institute's plans, it immediately got to work. Indian diplomats negotiated an arrangement with the equally prestigious Carnegie Endowment for International Peace so that Saran could address an audience on a topic that suggested many possibilities: "Inside the US-Indian Strategic Partnership."

Once the Carnegie Endowment sent out its advisory about Saran's address at precisely the same date and time as the Monterey Institute's function, those who had sent their RSVP to the Monterey Institute began sending in their regrets instead.

Said an Indian embassy official: "Who would want to listen to the resident ayatollahs of non-proliferation when you have a new face, a visitor, who is at the heart of the Indo-US nuclear dialogue?"

On Thursday, the Monterey Institute rescheduled the event and apologised to the invitees for having to do so.

