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THE GCNEP: FOSTERING INDIA'S 'RESPONSIBLE STATE' IMAGE

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As a part of its endeavour to harness nuclear systems in a safe and secure manner, and address risks relating to physical security of nuclear installations, India has established the multi-faceted Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership (GCNEP). While unveiling its foundation plaque at the Jasaur-Kheri village of Haryana on 03 January 2014, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that the Centre "aims to continue strengthening the security of its nuclear power plants and nuclear materials…together with the development of human resources in the field of nuclear energy… ."[i] At the time when the US-based think-tank NTI has ranked India near the bottom of its nuclear material security index allegedly for its weak regulatory framework[ii], the establishment of the GCNEP would help bringing into light India's strengths and insights in the field of nuclear safety, security, and advanced nuclear and radiation technologies.

The genesis of the Centre goes back to Prime Minister Singh's announcement at the 2010 Nuclear Security Summit at Washington DC, USA. Along with the aim to share India's strengths and insights in the field of nuclear safety, security, and advanced nuclear and radiation technologies with the international nuclear community, the Centre has been envisaged to establish a platform for facilitating broad-ranging partnership through research, training and deliberations.[iii] Accordingly, the Centre has established five schools specializing in the areas of (1) Advanced Nuclear Energy System Studies; (2) Nuclear Security Studies; (3) Radiation Safety Studies; (4) Nuclear Material Characterization Studies; and (5) Application of Radioisotopes and Radiation Technology in Healthcare,

Agriculture and Food.[iv] The foremost aim is to help building capacity involving technology, human resource development, education & training, and giving a momentum to R&D in the enlisted areas.

Specifically, the Centre will focus on the development of enhanced nuclear safeguards to effectively and efficiently monitor nuclear materials and facilities; advanced, proliferation resistant nuclear power reactors; advanced nuclear energy systems, isotopes and radiation technologies, nuclear forensic; and establishment of accreditation facilities for radiation monitoring. In addition, the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) Outreach Programme Cell will also be setup for publicity of technologies developed by DAE for rural areas.[v]

During 2013, a number of off-campus training courses, workshops, public awareness and outreach programmes have been conducted by the Centre in coordination with the DAE and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Another nine such programmes are scheduled for the year 2014.[vi] As per the answer given in response to a question in Rajya Sabha, "agreements for cooperation concerning GCNEP related programmes and activities have been signed with the USA, Russia, France and IAEA."[vii] This suggests that the GCNEP aims to explore international best practices, and foster India's resolve to be a 'responsible state with advanced nuclear technology'.

The structure and vision of the GCNEP is certainly based on the DAE's pursuit of harnessing safe and secure nuclear technology/energy for India. However, a few other issues would bring one the impression that the Centre has to look beyond its current mandate and technological parameters, if it has to stand up to challenge and eradicate the misgivings on India's nuclear track record. To streamline the national nuclear framework, and enhance social acceptance of nuclear technology in the country, the Centre has to take up pressing public concerns relating to the nuclear energy programme, and strategize to reap early the benefits of this energy source at the grass-root level, by broad basing its mandate.

So far, one major allegation, both from inside and outside the country, has been centered round the issue of 'independence' of nuclear regulatory mechanism from the promoting agency. No progress is visible yet on the new regulatory plan under the Nuclear Safety Regulatory Authority Bill (2011) that proposed to establish the Nuclear Safety Regulatory Authority (NSRA) to replace the AERB.[viii] The bill also has proposed to establish the Council of Nuclear Safety to oversee and review the policies of the NSRA. The Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science & Technology, Environment & Forests under the Chairperson of T. Subbarami submitted its Report on the Bill on 06 March 2012 has expressed that the NSRA could be made more autonomous.[ix] Further delay in materializing the proposed regulatory mechanism would be counterproductive.

Secondly, in a bid to tackle smuggling and illegal transportation of nuclear materials, the Directorate of Forensic Science Laboratories (DFSL) in Bangalore had drawn up a comprehensive perspective plan including the aim to take forensic sciences to a global level with the establishment of a centre for nuclear forensic science. The plan is expected to take off by 2018-19, but the proposal is still pending with the state government.[x] As one of the objectives of the GCNEP is to enhance nuclear safeguards through various advanced systems, including nuclear forensics, it may coordinate and expedite the DFSL plan.

Thirdly, cognizant of the consequences of the risks involved in the management of nuclear weapons, India and Pakistan have signed the Agreement on Reducing Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons in 2007.[xi] However, except reaffirming the agreement for another five years in 2012, no initiative has yet been undertaken to implement or put in place institutional arrangements for dealing with such a situation, if one ever arises. Can the GCNEP, or its specialized schools, be the nodal agency take the lead or suggest appropriate measures?

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