

India 'expanding its uranium enrichment programme'

Satellite photographs obtained by Institute for Science and International Security suggest India is expanding its uranium enrichment programme



Digital Globe imagery showing the status of India's Rare Materials Plant in February 2011 Photo: DIGITAL GLOBE/ISIS

By Dean Nelson, New Delhi

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India is expanding its uranium enrichment programme which could allow it to double the size of its nuclear arsenal, a leading US think tank has claimed.

The allegation will intensify fears of nuclear arms race in Asia between India, its neighbouring enemy Pakistan and regional rival China. It will also raise eyebrows ahead of next week's talks in Vienna to finalise an agreement to curb Iran's uranium enrichment programme.

But while Tehran's nuclear ambitions are being reined in, India's capability is undergoing an expansion, the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) has claimed.

Based on satellite photographs, the American think tank said it believes India is stepping up its

production of gas centrifuges to enrich uranium to nuclear weapon grade.

The photographs, which were taken in April, show that a building at its secret Rare Metals Plant near Mysore in Karnataka has been extended, it said.

"Commercial satellite imagery shows that the construction is finishing of what appears to be a second gas centrifuge facility at the Rare Materials Plant (RMP), near Mysore. This new facility could significantly increase India's ability to produce highly enriched uranium for military purposes, including more powerful nuclear weapons," the report by David Albright and Serena Kelleher-Vergantini stated.

ISIS has been a long term critic of India's nuclear programme, which it believes was established with "illegal purchases of goods and technology abroad" in defiance of international sanctions.

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Its researchers have based their claims on a comparison of satellite images from 2010 which appeared to show a new plant under construction to develop gas centrifuges and pictures from earlier this year which indicate that construction is now close to completion.

The report said it was unclear however if the new plant marked an expansion of capacity or a replacement of an ageing facility.

Indian analysts said the report could damage India's hopes of buying uranium from foreign suppliers following its 2009 civil nuclear agreement with the United States. The deal was aimed at helping India ease its power generation crisis while assuring the international community of its responsible stewardship. It provides for inspection 14 of its 22 nuclear plants and calls for its civil and military programmes to be kept separate.

According to analyst Deba Mohanty, ISIS's claims are biased against India but could delay its hopes of reaching uranium supply agreements with countries like Australia.

"If the report is proven as ISIS puts it, then it could prevent the prospective trade between India and Non-Proliferation Treaty countries. It could harm the acquisition of uranium for India's civil nuclear programme," he said.

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