

Scorpene, Eurocopter cloud over Sarkozy's R-Day visit
22 Dec 2007, 0046 hrs IST, Indrani Bagchi, TNN
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NEW DELHI: On the day that French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner arrived in New Delhi, the Delhi high court asked CBI to conduct a preliminary inquiry to see if there were any improprieties in the Scorpene submarine deal. This was bad news for the French government, which is looking for a rousing visit to India by president Nicolas Sarkozy, who is the guest of honour for the 2008 Republic Day.

The bad news was the topping after the Indian government, citing procedural problems, scrapped the bidding of the Eurocopter deal, which made the French livid. "Of course, I am not satisfied," said Kouchner. France, he said, was resigned to putting in fresh bids after India indicated the time. "Yes, we can complain but it is useless," Kouchner remarked in reply to a query. "So we have to participate in the new bidding process," he said, adding, "We will certainly win."

This was a deal Sarkozy was hoping to sign as a big ticket "deliverable" for his visit. That will not happen. An agreement on a future civil nuclear agreement with India on the lines of the 123 agreement with the US is also ready to be initialed, said Kouchner. But neither side can move on it until India completes a safeguards agreement with IAEA and gets a thumbs up from the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

"We are in favour of initialing a sort of strategic agreement but we have to wait for the (International Atomic Energy) Agency," he said. So that too will be on hold, until India gets an NSG exemption by January 24, when Sarkozy lands in New Delhi.

In other words, Sarkozy's visit will be little more than a damp squib. All the big ticket deals that France was waiting to sign with India is on hold. In recent years, India has complained that France overlooked India in favour of its giant neighbour China. But given the fact that both countries want to get cosy, India is not giving France much to talk about. Of course, there will be agreements, and MoUs on areas like climate change, HIV-AIDS, etc. An Indian cultural centre will be set up in France, and there will be agreements on sustainable energy. France wants to treble the number of Indian students studying there. Kouchner said, "We are also trying to ensure that they get jobs in France." With France's unemployment rate at 8.3% this quarter, this is an ambitious plan. India and France will also push the democracy agenda. In a Sarkozy era, France is now as close to the US as India is. But as Kouchner said, India and France are on the same boat. "We are friends of the US but not allies," a line that could come from any Indian leader.

Talking to journalists on Friday, he was at pains to show how India and France were on the same page on international and strategic issues. Kouchner, a renowned doctor and founder president of the Nobel peace prize winning Medicines Sans Frontieres, had dinner with foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee on Thursday night, and met PM Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi.

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