

Sweden seeks closer ties with India

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Sweden has been identified as one of the few countries in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) that is wary of accepting an India-specific waiver, allowing India access to nuclear fuel and technology for its civilian power sector.

Sweden's Deputy Prime Minister Maud Olofsson, whose Centre Party won national elections in September 2006, is the first member of the current Swedish government to travel to Asia.

The choice of India as her first destination, she said in an exclusive interview with *Hindustan Times*, is indicative of the importance her government attaches to building relations with this country.

Sweden is also among the few countries that has not supported India's claim for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council.

With bilateral trade between the two countries valued at around two billion dollars annually, there is 'great potential for growth', she said. Also Sweden's Industry Minister, Olofsson is accompanied by a 20-member business delegation, who want to "network" with Indian companies to advance trade relations.

Hoping to set the negative image of the Bofors gun episode behind them, Olofsson said the small Scandinavian country with a population of just over nine million people wants to be recognised only for the quality and reliability of its products.

In India on her first ever visit, Olofsson led her country's delegation for the Satyagraha Conference. "Utterly impressed" by the little she has seen so far, Olofsson said the importance of the conference was in bringing (Mahatma) Gandhi's message of peace to centrestage.

Q) You have come for the Satyagraha Conference. What is the most important message of Mahatma Gandhi and what prompted you to come for this meeting?

The most important message is peace. Gandhi's message gives a hope to the future that dialogue, not war, is a solution. His 'bottom up' solution, based on respect for each individual human being, is so important.

In the rapidly globalising world, there is a tendency to impose solutions 'top down'. I have read a great deal about him. Though he did not get the Nobel Prize, if you are a long-lasting hero in a philosophic sense, that is more important historically.

Q) Sweden is seen in this country as one of a few that is against India's quest for nuclear energy, which it desperately needs to preserve the pace of development. Why are you, as a key member of the NSG, against India's return to the nuclear mainstream?

We do understand why India has to discuss the energy issue. But there are regulations common to all to deal with these issues. Within our government, we are discussing whether we should let this NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) work globally, or make an exception for India.

Sweden does not think India has broken any rules. But a lot of countries, like Sweden, are promoting multilateral solutions. Sweden has been at the forefront of multilateralism, even at the United Nations.

Q) Talking of the United Nations, are you in favour of India's entry as a permanent member of the UN Security Council?

Sweden has not said anything specific about support for India. Sweden wants to see a stronger, expanded UN Security Council, with greater representation from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

It is important that there is greater world representation, not necessarily just one or two new members. But the UN must also become more efficient. The UN must become more active in helping to solve genuine problems of people, like hunger and war.

Q) You have said this is the first new year you've witnessed when there has been no snowfall in Sweden. Is climate change one of the topics you will discuss with those you meet here?

Yes, certainly. I am very worried about what is happening. But I see that there is increasing awareness. I see industry trying to come up with technology to meet the challenges. For our Indian partners, we have shown that we can raise GDP levels while reducing energy consumption.

We are discussing sustainable cities and planning solutions for clean energy and water, cleaning and recycling garbage. These offer business opportunities.

We are urging the Indian government to set up ambitious goals for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, and opt for cleaner fuels.

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