

Mounting regional tensions, domestic political crisis

Behind India's nuclear bomb testing

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16 May 1998

India's detonation of five nuclear devices earlier this week threatens to precipitate a nuclear arms race in south and east Asia—home to more than half the world's population.

The Pakistani government has signaled that it will soon test its own nuclear device. Declared Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohard Ayub May 14, "We would be in great difficulty without a nuclear test. Our policy has been for a balance of power with India."

China—which Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes recently termed the gravest threat to Indian security—has also reacted angrily to the Indian tests. Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan urged all governments to press India to abandon its nuclear capability.

The US government has conceded that it was caught completely unawares by the Indian nuclear tests—a gaffe U.S. foreign policy analysts have described as "the worst intelligence blunder" of the decade. A 1994 law, the Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act, made it all but inevitable Washington would impose wide-ranging sanctions against India. But the Clinton administration, which has been seeking a new "strategic partnership" with India, initially indicated that India could escape sanctions, if it immediately agreed to sign an international treaty banning nuclear tests. Delhi's response was to detonate two more nuclear devices.

The US—the only power to ever use nuclear weapons in combat—has a completely hypocritical stance on nuclear proliferation. Washington's aim—as the India government has been quick to point out—is not to eliminate nuclear weapons, but rather to maintain the status quo, under which the US has by far the world's largest and most deadly arsenal. Even German Chancellor Helmut Kohl could not suppress a chuckle when Clinton, at a ceremony in Potsdam, lectured the Indians that no country could seek greatness through nuclear weapons. A constant of U.S. foreign policy over the past two decades has been the use of the US military to project US power on the world stage and thus compensate for America's loss of political and economic hegemony.

The BJP and the bomb

This week's nuclear tests were clearly aimed at demonstrating that the Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (or Indian People's Party) holds the reins of power in Delhi.

Inconclusive elections last March resulted in the coming to power of a ramshackle, 18-party coalition. The BJP dominates the new government, holding more than two-thirds of the coalition's parliamentary seats and all the key ministries. But until this week, the government's agenda, at least publicly, has been set by the BJP's regional allies. Repeatedly, they have extracted concessions from the BJP by threatening to withdraw their support for the coalition.

Moreover, the BJP has had to shelve the most communally-contentious planks of its program. These planks, such as the construction of a temple to the Hindu-god Ram on the site of a famous mosque, are of little concern to the vast majority of Indians, but play a critical role in mobilizing the BJP's fascist-minded cadre.

Speculation is rife that the BJP has staged the nuclear tests and openly courted confrontation with the US so as to prepare the terrain for a snap election in which it will exploit nationalist fervor to win an outright majority in parliament. At the very least, the BJP will use the conflict with Washington to detract attention away from next month's budget, which is expected to boost public spending on infrastructure, by reducing subsidies for food, fertilizer and fuel.

The BJP's calculations notwithstanding, Indian political elite and media have hailed the decision to stage India's first nuclear test since 1974, for it furthers the Indian bourgeoisie's longstanding geo-political objectives. India has long sought recognition as the dominant power in South Asia and as an equal of China in Asian affairs. During the Cold War, when India enjoyed a special economic and political relationship with the USSR, there was no question of the US and the West ceding India this position. But to the India bourgeoisie's chagrin, even in the current decade, the major capitalist powers have continued to give India little stock diplomatically, opposing, for example, its demand for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Even more importantly, the economic gap between India and China has continued to widen, primarily due to the role of foreign capital. During the 1990s, China has received more than \$140 billion in foreign direct investment, India less

than \$10 billion.

If the BJP's nationalist, militarism finds resonance with sections of the Indian populace it is no small part because of the legacy of imperialist oppression. For decades, the U.S. denied India access to sophisticated technology. "Liberalization"—a policy first championed by the BJP—has meant massive cuts in subsidies, the shutting down of public sector industries and the scrapping of land controls that protected the peasantry. Moreover the division of the Indian subcontinent into hostile states, polarized on religious lines was itself part of a post-war settlement imposed on India by British and U.S. imperialism with the connivance of the Indian bourgeoisie.

The collapse of the Congress "national project"

Should the BJP be able to consolidate its grip on power, it will form an extreme-right wing regime, which uses militarism and communalism to try to channel the social tensions generated by India's integration into the world capitalist economy in a reactionary direction.

The BJP was created by the R.S.S., a Hindu nationalist militia, that first rose to prominence during the partition violence of 1947-48. The leading cadre of the BJP, including India's current Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee and the Home Minister L.K. Advani, are all R.S.S. "volunteers."

For decades, the RSS and its political wing (the BJP, founded in 1980, is the successor to the Jana Sangh) were marginal forces in Indian politics. As recently, as the 1984 elections, the BJP won just two seats in India's Parliament.

The rise of the BJP is associated with the collapse of the Congress Party and the breakdown of the ruling class "national project" which the Congress championed.

Because of its association with the struggle against British-rule and landlordism, the Congress was able to rally popular support for a national economic program aimed at strengthening the position of India's native bourgeoisie vis-à-vis imperialism, through import substitution, high tariffs and special economic ties with the USSR.

While this policy enabled the bourgeoisie to develop heavy industry in the 1950s and 1960s, it came unraveled as the result of the computer and telecommunications revolution that began in the 1970s. By 1991, when the Congress government officially repudiated Congress "socialism" and reoriented India to the world market, the gap between Indian technique and that prevailing in the advanced capitalist countries was far wider than it had been 20 years before. India's share of world trade had shrunk to just 0.5 percent. As for the masses, they continued and continue to live in the most wretched poverty. Some 350 million Indians are classified by the UN as living in "absolute poverty."

Parallel with the unraveling of the Congress national project, the old political order based has collapsed. In the 12th Lok Sabha elections, the Congress won just 25.6% of the popular vote and was reduced to a bit player, holding three seats or less, in four of the most populous states—Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Tamilnadu.

Unable to offer any progressive solution to the social crisis, the bourgeoisie has increasingly turned to regionalist, casteist and communalist parties to contain and divert the masses.

It is within this context that the BJP has risen to prominence. Above all, the BJP has battered off the betrayals of the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). For decades, the Stalinist parties subordinated the working class to the Congress and the Indian bourgeoisie on the grounds that it was a bulwark against imperialism. In lockstep with the rest of India's political elite, the CPI and CPM embraced liberalization at the beginning of the 1990s. They were the chief architects of the United Front government, which held power from 1996 through last March, and pressed forward with "liberalization."

For its part, the Clinton administration has been most anxious to work with the BJP-led government. Only last month, Clinton's special envoy Bill Richardson praised the BJP for its "restraint." According to press reports, Richardson and Advani, infamous as a Hindu-chauvinist hardliner, struck a special rapport.

While the US stalks the globe as the upholder of "stability," it is the demands of the US-led IMF and World Bank that are provoking social convulsions in one country after another. Because the working class has been paralyzed by its traditional Stalinist and social-democratic leaderships, these tensions have thus far found expression in the emergence of bellicose nationalist parties that seek to lay the blame for the social crisis on minorities, immigrants, and neighboring states.

Nuclear war cannot be prevented through diplomacy or the machinations of various capitalist powers. Rather disarmament necessitates the mobilization of the working class to disarm the bourgeoisie.



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