

India offers half-hearted criticism of US war on Iraq

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The Indian government has made the most muted of criticisms of Washington's unilateral decision to launch war against Iraq. After a meeting between Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and senior ministers last Thursday, an official statement cautiously declared that "the military action lacks justification" and was "avoidable".

The statement carefully avoided any direct reference to the United States and instead expressed "grave concern" that differences in the UN Security Council had "prevented a harmonisation of the positions of its members," and were "seriously impairing the authority of the UN system". At the same time, New Delhi reiterated its acceptance of the US pretext for the war—Iraq's alleged "weapons of mass destruction".

Vajpayee's stance is nothing more than cynical manoeuvre. On the one hand, he wants to avoid openly supporting a war that is viewed widely in India for what it is—a neo-colonial war of plunder. Already there have been significant antiwar protests and the opposition is growing. On the other hand, Vajpayee and his ministers are bending over backward to ensure that India retains its close economic and military ties with the US.

US President Bush phoned the Indian prime minister shortly after the first US strikes on Baghdad. According to the *Hindu*, Vajpayee expressed the hope that "military action would be concluded at the earliest" and offered India's willingness to provide humanitarian assistance in Iraq. At an all-party meeting on Saturday, he blocked attempts by opposition parties to "condemn" the US war, saying that India's words and actions "should be aimed at trying to achieve pragmatic goals, rather than creating rhetorical effect".

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes declared over the weekend that India would not provide refuelling to US warplanes, as it had done in the 1990-91 Gulf war. The statement, however, was an empty gesture as Washington has made no formal request for such

assistance. Fernandes has also made clear that New Delhi has no intention of boycotting purchases of hi-tech US military equipment.

During a visit to India last weekend by Iranian special envoy Ali Akbar Velayati, Indian officials indicated that New Delhi would undertake no diplomatic initiative to oppose the US war on Iraq. According to sources cited by the *Hindu*, "There is, in New Delhi's understanding, no need to antagonise the US by using words like 'condemn' to describe the American military action." The article pointed out that New Delhi was keen to retain Washington's support over Kashmir in particular.

The Indian government would have preferred not to voice any "opposition" at all. It was only after the global antiwar protests in mid-February that Vajpayee criticised talk of unilateral war by the US on Iraq. Speaking to a group of MPs from his Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) on February 18, he declared that it would be "the moral death of UN if it succumbed to the pressure of US". The government even expressed its readiness to pass a joint resolution in parliament in opposing the US-led war.

Within hours, however, the Bush administration had begun to apply pressure to New Delhi. US ambassador Robert Blackwill held a series of private meetings with Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, BJP president Venkaiah Naidu and Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal. The repercussions of these "consultations" were quickly revealed as the bureaucrats in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) went into damage control.

In the evening of the same day, the PMO issued a statement explaining that there had been a problem with the translation of Vajpayee's speech from Hindi into English. The prime minister, it claimed, had only repeated what he had said before: when he said that any action against Iraq outside the UN would be "unfortunate for the international community" and would "erode" UN authority.

Since then Vajpayee and his ministers have not stepped out of line. Their criticisms have been mild and general, carefully avoiding any direct reference to Washington. Behind the Hindu chauvinists of the BJP are powerful sections of the Indian ruling elite who are intent on maintaining the close economic, political and strategic ties established with Washington over the past five years.

And as the Indian press has pointed out, there are likely to be immediate payoffs. Seema Mustafa wrote in the *Asian Age* on February 21: “The United States, soliciting India’s support for its war on Iraq, has offered to pay the \$2.5 billion that Baghdad currently owes the government here.” The article also pointed out that Indian companies might be given lucrative contracts for the post-war reconstruction of Iraq.

US ambassador Robert Blackwill confirmed the offer in comments to the *Times of India* on March 11. He said India had a role to play in the “construction of civil society and economic reconstruction of Iraq” and had a number of “comparative advantages”. “India would be welcomed in that situation where not every country would be welcomed,” he noted.

The opposition Congress and the Stalinist Communist Parties have criticised the government and called for stronger statements against the war. Their stance reflects concerns in ruling circles, firstly, about the growth of antiwar protests across India, and, secondly, about the implications for Indian capitalism of Washington’s doctrine of pre-emptive war and the collapse of the UN and post-World War II international relations.

An editorial in the *Deccan Herald* warned on March 12: “While India must not overlook its own strategic and economic concerns in chalking out its strategy, taking an unprincipled position on the issue of war and clambering on to the American bandwagon is hardly likely to further India’s interests in the long-run.”

The extent of popular opposition to war is highlighted by a recent survey in the city of Bombay. Of those interviewed, only 8 percent supported a US war on Iraq without UN approval and 59 percent opposed a war under any circumstances. While antiwar protests have so far been relatively small by Indian standards, they have sprung up in many major cities and are growing in size. One of the largest was a rally of more than 100,000 in the southern city of Trivendram in late February.

A significant feature of these antiwar protests is the absence of any leading opposition figures. Like the government, Congress has been careful to avoid offending Washington. Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi has

declared repeatedly: “We are against any unilateral action. A solution should be found through the United Nations.”

Not surprisingly, at the all-party meeting on Saturday, Congress had no fundamental disagreements with Vajpayee. Its leaders simply wanted stronger words—a joint resolution “condemning” the US. But there was no indication that the party wanted to take the matter any further.

Behind Congress trailed the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (CPI-M). In the debate, CPI-M leader Somnath Chatterjee declared that it was “unfortunate” that the Vajpayee government was not prepared to use the word “condemn” in relation to the war. He joined Congress in declaring that there should be an immediate end to the war and a return to the UN.

From the outset, the Stalinist parties have sought to confine the antiwar protests to pressuring official channels. A CPI-M political bureau statement appealed to the Indian government “to join the majority of world governments in denouncing this aggression and mounting a campaign against the USA’s state sponsored terrorism”. But to borrow an oriental idiom, calling for Vajpayee to oppose the US war is rather like expecting feathers from a tortoise.

On March 7, CPI-M parliamentarian Jibon Roy withdrew his resolution to oppose the war on Iraq in deference to External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha, who repeated the government’s well-rehearsed position that India opposes any unilateral operation against Baghdad. In other words, the CPI-M is not opposed to the invasion of Iraq on principled grounds—that it is an imperialist war of plunder—but rather, like the Vajpayee government, because it does not have the imprimatur of the UN.

The war has confirmed that the CPI-M and CPI function as part of the political establishment to defend the interests of Indian capitalism. Any genuine opposition to the US invasion of Iraq requires a complete political break with these rotten formations.



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