

India's role in US-led gang-up against Iran inflames debate over Indo-US ties

Vilani Peiris, Keith Jones
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The Indian government's decision, made under heavy pressure from the United States, to vote at last weekend's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meeting to report Iran to the UN Security Council has further inflamed the debate within India's political, military, and corporate elite over the extent to which India should bind its future to the US.

Washington's attempts to have Iran declared a renegade state, and the implicit threat of future sanctions and military action, threaten New Delhi's longstanding ties to Teheran and its plan to draw heavily on Iran's oil and gas to meet India's rapidly growing demand for energy. They also threaten, as the *Hindu* observed, to initiate a "new [military] conflict on India's doorstep."

The issue of India's Iran policy is intertwined with the nuclear accord that US President George W. Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh signed last July.

Manmohan Singh and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government have touted this agreement as constituting international recognition of India as a nuclear-weapons state and great power and as a partial solution to India's energy shortfall, since it will allow India to import civilian nuclear technology from the US and other Nuclear Supplier Group states. But many others, including rival political leaders, sections of the military and a large number of India's nuclear scientists, are arguing that Washington's price is too great. The Bush administration is using the deal to force India to do its bidding against Iran; US demands that India open up large parts of its nuclear program to international inspection, including its fast-breeder program, threaten India's independent nuclear-weapons capacity; and the US offer of civilian nuclear and (through other agreements) military technology would only make India much more susceptible to US pressure.

In the wake of last weekend's IAEA vote, virtually the entire parliamentary opposition has taken up the demand for a parliamentary debate over India's IAEA vote and the United Progressive Alliance government's attitude toward the US-led campaign to isolate, condemn, and bully Iran.

Meanwhile the list of critics and outright opponents of the Indo-US nuclear deal continues to grow. Last weekend, the chairman of India's Department of Atomic Energy said the US attempt, during the negotiations to finalize last July's accord, to dictate what Indian nuclear facilities will be considered civilian and therefore subject to international inspections is tantamount to changing the "goalpost." Then on Tuesday, former Prime Minister V.P. Singh urged the government to review the nuclear accord given how the US has used it to exert leverage over India. "We must review this agreement and see how much the US wants to extract from India," said V.P. Singh.

The Iran and Indo-US nuclear accord issues have become intertwined because Bush administration officials and leading US Congressmen have repeatedly made it clear that if India does not support the US in its confrontation with Iran the nuclear deal will unravel.

The linkage between the two issues first became clear in the weeks preceding an IAEA vote last September. Bush administration officials and several of their congressional allies declared that how India voted on whether to condemn Iran for violating its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty would be a key test of whether India would take responsibility for preventing nuclear proliferation. The UPA government quickly fell in line. India broke with its traditional allies in international forums—Russia and most members of the Non-Aligned Movement abstained—and voted for the US-EU-backed resolution and against Iran, a state it has described as a strategic partner.

In the run-up to this month's IAEA meeting, US officials were even blunter. US Ambassador to India David Mumford declared that the Indo-US nuclear accord would "die" if India did not vote at the coming IAEA meeting to refer Iran to the UN Security Council. In the face of protests from the Indian government and the entire opposition that Mumford's remarks constituted gross interference in India's internal affairs, the Bush administration distanced itself from them. Only days later, however, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said much the same thing. On January 27

she affirmed that “in order to move on to a new phase in which civil nuclear power would be available to India, India has to make some difficult choices.”

Given the importance of Indo-Iranian relations and the evident US pressure on New Delhi, it is not surprising that there was an intense debate within the Indian press and political elite over what India should do at last weekend’s IAEA meeting. The Left Front, a bloc of parties led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) that is providing the parliamentary votes to sustain the UPA government in office, demanded the government abstain.

But the Congress-led UPA kept its cards close to its vest, refusing to take the public into its confidence as to how India would vote. (Similarly, it has refused to provide the opposition parties with details of the proposal it has made to Washington as to what parts of India’s nuclear program will be open to international inspection, although the Indian offer—which the US has rejected—has reputedly been widely distributed on Capitol Hill and among US specialists on India.)

No doubt the UPA government was hoping the IAEA vote would be put off again, as it was last November, or that the great powers would come to some agreement, which would make an Indian vote with the US less conspicuous.

As it was, the day after it became public that Russia and China had agreed to vote with the US and EU states in favor of reporting Iran to the UN, Manmohan Singh summoned CPI (M) General-Secretary Prakash Karat to a meeting to tell him India was voting with the great powers.

How India would have voted if the US, Britain, France and Germany had not secured Russia’s and China’s support cannot be said without absolute certainty. But the government has given out many signals both before and since that if push had come to shove it would have chosen to pursue closer relations with the US and the prospect of US help, to use the words of Condoleezza Rice, in India becoming a world power.

In a none too veiled reference to the Left Front, Manmohan Singh told a press conference last week “no single group can or should have a veto of any kind” over India’s foreign policy. In recent months, two leading ministers known to be wary of too close ties to the US have lost their ministries. Foreign Minister Natwar Singh was stripped of his post and then kicked out of the cabinet on the grounds that he had been named in the Volcker report on the purported UN oil-for-food scandal. Petroleum Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, an outspoken proponent of an Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, was demoted in last month’s cabinet shuffle.

What is incontestable is that there is great nervousness and concern within India’s elite over the extent and intensity of

Indo-US ties and that this nervousness has increased as it has become more and more evident that the US is intent on bullying India to do its bidding. And while the UPA government is simultaneously seeking to broaden India’s ties to China, the Indian political elite is acutely aware that the US is courting India because it sees India playing the role of counterweight to China.

Those raising questions about India’s Iran policy and the Indo-US nuclear accord are to be found on all sides of the official political spectrum. Late last month Brajesh Mishra, national security advisor to former National Democratic Alliance Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and hitherto a strong advocate of closer Indian-US ties, said the nuclear accord “should be thrown in the waste paper basket.” According to Mishra, the agreement could have had merit, “But, the way in which the July 18 deal has been expressed and elaborated, it indicates America’s intent of restricting our ability to have nuclear weapons and it is bound to hit on our strategic capability.”

Given the array of critics it is hardly surprising that there are differences among them over India’s foreign policy. But all, and this goes for the Left Front, share a common objective with the UPA government—how best to advance the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie and its nation-state.

The Left Front has been agitating in recent months for the government to recommit to an “independent foreign policy” and to promote a “multi-polar world.” What this means in practice was well-demonstrated in its response to the events of the past two weeks. The Left Front had been banking on Russia and China to oppose the US at the IAEA, but when these powers cut a deal with Washington, the Left Front was left naked.

After the IAEA vote, the CPI (M)’s Karat told reporters. “Yesterday’s vote was not a decisive one ...and we are not making it an issue.”

The Left Front is now repeating its call for a parliamentary debate on the Iran issue, while insisting that neither the UPA government’s implementation of neo-liberal reforms nor its embrace of the Bush administration will cause it to withdraw support for the government. As CPI (M) Polit Bureau member and elder statesman Jyoti Basu declared this week, “I want the government to continue for some time despite the fact that Congress isn’t paying heed to our views on many issues.”



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