

What the debate in India over the US nuclear pact shows

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In recent weeks, the debate within India's ruling elite over the Indo-US nuclear accord has intensified. On August 17, Prime Minister Mammohan Singh gave a major parliamentary address in response to warnings from the scientific-military establishment that the US Congress is trying to attach new conditions to the accord, and last week the Lok Sabha debated its merits.

From all the speeches, press commentary, and political maneuvering, several conclusions must be drawn:

Although it is unlikely, the Indo-US accord could yet fall apart because of concerns within the US political establishment about India's reliability as an ally and whether the US's long-term geopolitical interests are served by sanctioning India's acquisition of nuclear weapons in defiance of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and world nuclear regulatory regime

India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government considers the accord and the Indo-US strategic partnership that it is meant to cement to be a cornerstone of India's twenty-first century foreign policy.

India's corporate elite stands solidly behind the UPA government in its push for the accord.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CP [M])-led Left Front, although it has warned that the accord will tie India to the predatory machinations of US imperialism, will knuckle under and continue to prop up the UPA government even as it presses forward with the accord and aligns India ever-more closely with Washington.

Singh's address contained a warning to the Bush administration and to the US Congress not to move the "goalposts"—i.e., not to seek to impose any conditions over and above those that India agreed to in the initial nuclear pact of July 2005 and in the March 2006 plan to separate India's civilian nuclear energy and nuclear weapon's programs.

(Under the accord, India's civilian nuclear facilities are to become subject to International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] inspections, in exchange for the US and other members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group [NSG] giving India a unique place in the world nuclear regulatory regime and lifting all restrictions on the export of civilian nuclear fuel and technology to India.)

"I had personally spoken to President Bush in St. Petersburg on this issue," Singh told the upper house of India's parliament, "and conveyed to him that the proposed US legislation must conform strictly to the parameters" of the July 2005 and March 2006 agreements. "This alone would be an acceptable basis for nuclear

cooperation between India and the United States.... If in their final form the US legislation or the adapted NSG Guidelines impose extraneous conditions on India, the Government will draw the necessary conclusions, consistent with the commitments I have made to Parliament."

India has strongly objected to several of the riders that the US House of Representatives and Senate have tacked on to their respective bills amending the US Atomic Energy Act so as to allow for civilian nuclear fuel and technology exports to India. These include: annual US presidential certification that India is in full compliance with all nuclear non-proliferation and other commitments; a moratorium on India producing fissile (radioactive, nuclear bomb-making) material; inspections of India's civilian nuclear facilities by US inspectors; and stipulations that could deny India access to technology transfers in some parts of the civilian nuclear fuel cycle.

Singh was emphatic that his government will never compromise India's nuclear weapons program, which he declared to be "an integral part of our national security."

His speech was most noteworthy, however, for the comparison that he drew between the Indo-US nuclear accord and the 1991 decision of the Narasimha Rao Congress government to dismantle India's nationally regulated economy and adopt the neo-liberal program of full integration into the world capitalist economy and export-led growth.

Singh, who was Rao's finance minister, challenged his critics from both the Left Front and the right-wing, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP): "Who'll say what I did then was wrong?" He then went on to argue that today, just as in 1991, he is ready "for India's sake" to take "risks" so as "to initiate a new order of things."

Singh's comparison of the strategic turn the Indian bourgeoisie made in 1991 with the Indo-US nuclear accord is indicative of the importance that the UPA government and the most powerful sections of the Indian bourgeoisie attach to the accord. They view it and its implicit recognition of India as a nuclear weapons state as a major step toward India attaining the "great power" recognition they have long coveted, as paving the way for closer economic, military and geo-political collaboration with Washington and Wall Street, and as providing a significant boast to India's military might since it will allow India's indigenous nuclear program to focus on weapons development.

Singh's comparison was also meant as a message to the Left

Front, which is providing the minority UPA regime with the parliamentary votes to remain in power: the government views the accord as a pivotal and no matter how much the CPM and Left Front leaders fulminate against it, will work with Washington to implement it.

Singh took umbrage at suggestions from opposition MPs and critics of the accord from within the scientific-military and geo-political establishment that over past year India has adjusted its foreign policy, particularly in respect to Iran, to please Washington. Affirmed Singh, “Our sole guiding principle in regarding to our foreign policy, whether it is on Iran or any other country, will be dictated by our national interest.”

But whereas Singh’s explanations of the parameters of the nuclear accord and what the Indian government will and will not accept were clear and detailed, he provided only hollow assurances as to his government’s willingness and ability to withstand pressure from Washington.

The proof, as they say, is in the pudding. Over the past 12 months, India, in a break with its traditional geo-political posture, has lent important support to the US in its efforts to bully Iran over the nuclear issue, and for weeks, New Delhi could not bring itself to record a serious protest against the Israeli assault on Lebanon for fear of riling Washington.

Moreover, Bush administration officials and leading US congressmen have repeatedly boasted about the connection between the shift in India’s attitude toward Iran and the Indo-US nuclear accord. In arguing for its implementation, Senator Richard Lugar, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, pointed to New Delhi’s recent votes against Iran at IAEA meetings as proof that India is willing “to adjust traditional foreign policies and play a constructive role on international issues.”

And it is readily acknowledged by Nicholas Burns, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, and other top Bush administration officials that Washington’s long-term objective in pursuing a strategic partnership with India is to make it an economic, military and geopolitical counterweight to China.

Empty as were Singh’s denials that his government is binding India to an ever-more aggressive US imperialism, the Left Front leadership warmly praised his speech. “The prime minister has accepted what we had said on the Indo-US nuclear deal,” declared CP (M) politburo member Sitaram Yechury. “On each of our concerns, there has been a categorical assurance.”

Yechury proposed that the upper house of India’s parliament accept Singh’s speech as representing “the sense of the house.”

The opposition BJP, however, refused to give its assent, a move consistent with the scandal-mongering, chauvinist appeals, and obstructionist tactics the Hindu supremacists have pursued since falling from power in May 2004.

In their press and speeches, the Left Front continues to warn that through the nuclear accord, Washington is seeking to ensnare India in a dependent relationship so as to compel New Delhi to do its bidding on the world stage and win further concessions for US capital within India.

But Yechury’s proposal that Rajya Sabha endorse Singh’s speech as articulating “the sense of the house” constituted a clear signal to the government that the Stalinists will accede to the

accord—will not break with the UPA government over its pursuit of a strategic partnership with the US any more than over its socially incendiary, neo-liberal domestic program.

The only provisos are that the UPA government succeed, as Singh has promised it will, in rebuffing the attempts of the US Congress to add new conditions to the accord, and continue to insist, as it will, against all evidence, that the accord has not caused it to change India’s foreign policy to placate Washington.

One further point should be made about the Stalinists’ now largely rhetorical opposition to an Indo-US strategic partnership. The CP (M), no less than the Congress and BJP, argues from the standpoint of the “national interest”—that is, the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie and its state. To the proposed Indo-US strategic partnership, the CP (M) counterposes not a struggle to unite the workers of India with workers in the US and around the world against capitalism, but rather the call for India to forge a great-power bloc with the aspirant bourgeoisies of China and Russia.

The corporate media was full of praise for Manmohan Singh’s performance, for both his spirited defence of the accord as in India’s national interest and his readiness to defy his Left Front parliamentary allies. But there was an undercurrent of criticism in the swathe of laudatory commentary. Singh and his government, argued a spate of editorials, need to show the same determination and ruthlessness in implementing a new wave of pro-business reforms.

The *Hindustan Times* said Singh had taken “on the combined forces of the Left and the Right and undid them through sober argumentation and facts, rather than political rhetoric and half-truths.” The *New Indian Express* hailed Singh’s speech but said he should have given it weeks ago: “Almost half the tenure of the UPA government is now past. Not that much time is available to the prime minister to actualise his announcements of economic and administrative reforms. Thursday’s success must, funnily enough, increase the pressure on him to proactively construct consensus on those reforms”



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