

Indian prime minister calls Left Front's bluff over Indo-US nuclear accord

Kranti Kamara, Keith Jones
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In a rare public outburst, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has dared the Stalinist-led Left Front to substantiate its publicly announced opposition to the recently concluded “123” Nuclear Agreement between India and the United States by withdrawing political support for his United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

The Left Front, whose delegation in the lower house of India's parliament boasts 59 MPs, is led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the older, but less influential Communist Party of India. Since May 2004, the Left Front has sustained the Congress Party-led UPA coalition in office despite widespread and growing popular hostility to the UPA's relentless pursuit of neo-liberal policies.

Last month the Indian government and the Bush administration took a decisive step toward implementing the civilian nuclear accord they first initiated in July 2005, finalizing the text of a bi-lateral treaty on nuclear cooperation under Section 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act.

The 123 Agreement spells out the terms under which the US will give India a special and unique status under US and international nuclear regulatory law.

Despite India being a nuclear weapons state and a non-signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the US will urge the Nuclear Supplier Group, the inter-state alliance that controls world nuclear trade, to allow India to purchase nuclear fuel and advanced civilian nuclear technology and equipment. In return, India has agreed to separate its civilian and military nuclear programs. Those nuclear facilities that India declares part of its civilian program will be placed under the inspection regimen of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The UPA government and Manmohan Singh himself have expended much energy and political capital in seeking to finalize the nuclear accord with the US. They have resisted demands from the US geo-political establishment to explicitly tie the accord to India's adherence to the US stand on Iran's nuclear program, while seeking to convince a sceptical Indian nuclear and defence establishment that the deal does not undermine the autonomy of India's civilian and military nuclear programs. Many of the provisions of the Henry Hyde Act—the December 2006 US legislation authorizing the Bush administration to undertake “123” negotiations with India—remain highly contentious in New Delhi, especially a provision that would compel the US to terminate civilian nuclear cooperation should India stage further nuclear weapons tests.

Manmohan Singh and much of India's corporate elite view the Indo-US Nuclear Accord to be far and away the UPA government's most important foreign policy achievement for the following two reasons.

First, when fully implemented, the agreement will give India access

to much needed nuclear fuel and to advanced civilian nuclear technology. These have been embargoed by the nuclear powers since India first staged a nuclear explosion in 1974. With the embargo ended, India will be able to expand its civilian nuclear energy program, thereby reducing its heavy dependence on imported oil, and to concentrate much of its domestic nuclear program and scant uranium resources on the building of nuclear weapons.

Second and just as important, the Indian elite views the accord as placing Indian-US relations on a new basis, with Washington jettisoning any notion of Indian-Pakistani parity, acknowledging India's ambitions to be a “world power,” and granting India access to advanced military technology.

Last week the Left Front came out against the 123 Agreement, arguing that it both represents an attempt on the part of the Indian government to align India's foreign policy more closely with that of US imperialism, and gives Washington the means to ensnare India in a dependent nuclear and military relationship.

A five-page statement issued by the Left Front on August 7 raised a number of specific objections to the agreement and the provisions of the Henry Hyde Act, including the tying of civilian nuclear cooperation to India's participation in the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative and annual US presidential certification that India is acting in congruence with US “non-proliferation” policy.

“While the Indian commitments are binding and in perpetuity,” declared the Left Front, “some of the commitments that the US has made are either ambiguous or are ones that can be terminated at a future date.”

In explaining the Left Front's stance, Communist Party of India (Marxist) General-Secretary Prakash Karat said that the Indo-US treaty cannot be seen as “a separate and compartmentalized entity without considering its implications for India's independent foreign policy, strategic autonomy and the repercussions of the US quest to make India its reliable ally in Asia.”

That Washington has aggressively courted India with a view to harnessing it to US plans to contain and constrain a rising China is incontestable. Top Bush administration officials have said as much publicly. Moreover, the US political and geo-political elite have repeatedly used the accord to bully India into lining up behind the US in IAEA votes on Iran's nuclear program and to press India to abandon plans to join with Pakistan and Iran in building a pipeline to bring Iranian natural gas to South Asia.

In announcing their opposition to the 123 Agreement the Left Front leaders called on the government not to make it operational, while adding that they had yet to determine their parliamentary strategy. They did, however, announce, plans to “mobilize the people” against

the treaty. The centerpiece of their “extra-parliamentary” protest campaign is to be two *jatha* [march-caravans], leaving simultaneously from Kolkata and Chennai on September 4 and culminating in the coastal city of Visakhapatnam five days later, just as the US, India, Japan, Australia and Singapore are to commence their first ever joint naval exercise offshore, in the Bay of Bengal.

Subsequently, Karat and other Left Front leaders warned of grave consequences if the UPA government ignored their objections, many of which are shared by other opposition parties, and enshrined the 123 Agreement in Indian law.

It is within this context that Manmohan Singh decided to strike back. Last Saturday, the Kolkata-based *Telegraph* published an interview with the prime minister in which he boasted that he had thrown down the gauntlet to the Left leaders: “I told them that it is not possible to renegotiate the deal. It is an honourable deal, the cabinet has approved it, we cannot go back on it. I told them to do whatever they want to do, if they want to withdraw support, so be it....”

Singh’s interview had the desired effect. Leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) scrambled to reassure the government and Indian big business that they have no intention of bringing down the UPA government.

It had been the Stalinists’ intention to seek a parliamentary debate on the 123 Agreement under Rule 193, which does not provide for any vote. This would have enabled the Left Front leaders to declaim against the agreement without having to vote against the UPA. But the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which pioneered India’s efforts to forge a “strategic partnership” with the US when it led the NDA government (1998-2004), has demanded a debate on the treaty under Rule 184, which automatically mandates a parliamentary vote.

In keeping with its ties to the most nationalist and militarist sections of India’s military and nuclear establishments, who oppose any restrictions on India’s nuclear weapons program, and its policy of opposing and obstructing all actions of the current government, the BJP has already announced that it will vote against the 123 Agreement.

With the United National Progressive Alliance, a recently formed “third front” grouping of regional parties, also opposing the 123 Agreement, the UPA and their Stalinist allies suddenly faced the prospect of parliament repudiating the UPA’s showpiece foreign policy agreement.

Under India’s constitution, the government can ratify treaties without any recourse to parliament. But it would be politically very difficult for the UPA to proceed with the 123 Agreement in the face of a formal parliamentary vote against it. Indeed, given the importance the government has attached to the nuclear accord, even a non-binding vote against it would throw the legitimacy and continued existence of the government into question.

In any event, Singh and the UPA leadership decided to call the Left’s bluff and predictably the Stalinists capitulated. Left Front leaders have let it be known that if and when the 123 Agreement comes to a vote, they will walk out of parliament. “Obviously, we will not join hands with the BJP to destabilize the government on this question,” a “senior” Left Front leader told the *Telegraph*.

Trying to mask the Left’s complicity in the UPA’s forging of a new partnership between the Indian bourgeoisie and US imperialism, Communist Party of India General Secretary D. Raja made a show of bravado, saying that it is up to the Left, not Singh and the UPA, to determine its relations to the government. Declared Raja, “The Prime

Minister has not said that he does not want our support. It is our decision to support the government and the question of withdrawing support is a larger political decision. When to withdraw, how to withdraw, whether to withdraw is for us to decide. He cannot decide for us.”

The Stalinists’ capitulation notwithstanding, the crisis for both the government and the Left Front is far from over, since even with the Left Front’s MPs abstaining, the UPA may not be able to cobble together enough votes to win parliamentary support for the 123 Agreement.

This week has seen a flurry of consultations between senior government and Left Front leaders. After a meeting between Manmohan Singh and Karat on Tuesday, the Prime Minister’s Office issued a statement saying that the two had “reiterated that efforts would be made to sort out the issues.” Singh also reportedly talked by telephone with the West Bengal Chief Minister and CPI (M) Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. In November 2005, Singh threatened to impose “presidential rule” on West Bengal unless Bhattacharjee and the Left Front leadership ensured that anti-US protests would not disrupt an Indo-US air force exercise in West Bengal.

The Indian media has enthusiastically welcomed Singh’s calling of the Left Front to order. “Dr. Delivers the Dose,” exclaimed the headline of the lead editorial in the *Indian Express*, “Dr” being a reference to Singh who holds a Ph.D. in economics.

The praise for Singh is not just because corporate India strongly favours the nuclear deal. Big business has been complaining with increasing vehemence that the UPA has been too accommodating to its Left Front allies. It hopes the prime minister’s brinkmanship will give the government greater “backbone” in changing labour laws, so as to make it easier to close factories and layoff workers, and push through other rightwing “reforms.”

The UPA’s strong tilt toward Washington greatly heightens the crisis of the Stalinist parties—organizations that continue to avow their adherence to revolutionary Marxism while serving as a vital prop of the Indian bourgeoisie.

Amid widespread popular opposition to US imperialism and its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, anti-US rhetoric and mobilizations have been pivotal to the Left Front’s attempts to obscure its complicity in neo-liberal reform. It has supported the Congress-led UPA government and its implementation of pro-investor policies, including the violent suppression of peasant resistance to the seizure of land for Special Economic Zones, in those states, like West Bengal, where it forms the government.



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