

Indo-US nuclear deal could be casualty of India's fractured domestic politics

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There is growing apprehension in ruling circles in both Washington and New Delhi that the Indo-US nuclear accord, which was enshrined in a treaty that the two states tentatively approved last July, may yet unravel.

Indeed, after the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance coalition government agreed last month to a demand from its Left Front allies not to proceed with the operationalization of the agreement by opening negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG), sections of the US and Indian press declared the deal dead. (The Indo-US treaty cannot take effect until approved by the IAEA and NSG, since it would create a unique status for India in the world nuclear regulatory regime—a nuclear-weapons state that is a non-signatory of the Nuclear-Non-Proliferation Treaty, yet allowed to buy nuclear fuel and advanced civilian nuclear technology from IAEA- and NSG-states.)

“My gut feeling is it (the deal) is probably dead,” a former Indian Ambassador to the US was cited in an October 17 *Hindustan Times* article as saying. Three days earlier, the *Deccan Chronicle* had proclaimed that Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi “have dumped the deal.”

An October 16 *Washington Post* article, titled “Nuclear Deal With India May Be Near Collapse,” reported on US government reaction to a telephone conversation between Singh and US President George W. Bush the previous day. During that conversation, the Indian prime minister officially informed the US that the nuclear agreement was encountering “certain difficulties” and, consequently, that New Delhi had indefinitely put off initiating negotiations with the IAEA. It had been the Bush administration’s hope and plan that the IAEA and NSG would approve the deal this fall, thus enabling the US Senate—which legally must approve all US treaties—to give the Indo-US nuclear treaty its final stamp approval before rising for the Christmas recess.

“U.S. officials,” said the *Post*, “acknowledged deep disappointment with the abrupt decision which they described as unexpected.”

These reports notwithstanding, it would be hasty and short-sighted to conclude that the Indo-US nuclear deal is dead.

The Bush administration views the Indo-US nuclear deal as pivotal to cementing a “global” Indo-US strategic partnership that will be crucial for sustaining US interests in Asia and around the world for decades to come.

In the short-term, the agreement is closely tied to US efforts to ensnare India in its preparations for a military showdown with Iran. The Bush administration and Congressional supporters of the deal like Tom Lantos, the Democrat who heads the House Foreign Relations Committee, have repeatedly tied the nuclear deal to India’s support for US “non-proliferation” efforts against Iran.

Longer-term, the US ruling elite believes that it is in its interests to build up India as a counter-weight to China. US nuclear-energy companies and armaments manufacturers, meanwhile, anticipate that the deal will pave the way for them to win billions of dollars worth of orders.

Washington has responded to the unexpected opposition to the deal in India by mounting a diplomatic offensive. In recent weeks, the US Ambassador to India, David Mulford, US Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and Henry Kissinger, the *éminence grise* of US geo-politics, have met with top leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu supremacist party that forms the Official Opposition in the Indian parliament, and with the Left Front Chief Minister of West Bengal, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee.

Bhattacharjee is a Politburo member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the dominant partner in the Left Front. His government has been actively wooing US investment and he has reputedly counseled his fellow Stalinists not to take an intransigent line in the maneuvering with the Congress over the nuclear deal.

And what of Mammohan Singh and the Congress Party leadership?

The first thing that needs be said in assessing their intentions *vis-à-vis* the nuclear deal is that Singh and his government expended an enormous amount of energy and political capital over the course of more than two years in negotiating it.

They and wide sections of the Indian elite see the nuclear deal with the US as an essential first step in realizing their ambitions for India to become a world-power and this for several reasons. By giving India access to advanced civilian nuclear technology, the Indo-US nuclear accord will enable India to lessen its heavy dependence on oil imports and to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on developing its “strategic” nuclear arsenal. Furthermore, the deal goes a long way to securing international acceptance of India as a nuclear weapons-state and would appear to give India, which has long resented Washington’s support for arch-rival Pakistan, a privileged relationship with the US.

In assessing the import of the government’s decision to indefinitely postpone operationalizing the nuclear deal, it is also necessary to note that Singh and the top echelons of the Congress Party had hitherto taken a very hard line against their Left Front allies, threatening to precipitate early elections if the Left did not abandon its opposition to the deal.

In an interview published by the Kolkata-based (formerly Calcutta) corporate daily *The Telegraph* on Aug. 11, Manmohan Singh dared the Stalinists to withdraw their parliamentary support for his coalition government: “I told them (the Left) 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....”

And on October 7, Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi made a speech in which she hurled abuse at the deal’s opponents, of whom the Left-Front has been far and away the most vocal and consistent. Addressing a political rally just after returning from a US visit, Gandhi termed “opponents” of the nuclear deal “enemies of the Congress [Party] and development” who deserve a “befitting reply.”

India’s corporate elite egged the Congress leadership on in challenging its Left Front allies. Whilst the Stalinists have played a critical role in

smothering popular opposition to the UPA government's neo-liberal socio-economic agenda, much of big business has come to view the Left Front as an intolerable impediment to further "reforms," especially rewriting the country's labor laws to gut restrictions on layoffs, plant closures and the contracting-out of work.

Thus the corporate media was both astounded and chagrined when Manmohan Singh announced that the government was postponing operationalization of the deal and declared that the fate of the UPA government was not tied to its implementation. Speaking October 12 at a *Hindustan Times* conference attended by much of the country's corporate elite, Singh declared that the failure of the nuclear deal would not constitute "the end of life" and that the UPA is not a "one-issue government".

Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi echoed Singh's sentiments in remarks to the same conference the following day. She claimed it was the UPA's "dharma" (duty) to listen to its Left Front allies and even went so far as to say that the Stalinists' demands for a careful review of the deal are "not unreasonable".

There are several factors that account for the Congress leadership's abrupt retreat. First, the Congress, which has not won a majority of the seats in a national election since 1984, faced a revolt from its UPA allies. Several of the regional parties that make up the UPA, including the Tamil nationalist DMK, voiced their strenuous opposition to an early election, because they fear that they would lose seats and influence.

In the month since his October 12th speech, Singh has several times voiced the opinion that the rise of regional parties during the past two decades and the resulting "fractured mandates" of India's governments have oftentimes resulted in the sidelining of the "national interest."

Second, many in and around the Congress leadership grew apprehensive as to how the party would fare in an election framed around the Indo-US nuclear accord. While the corporate elite and a majority of the geo-political establishment favor the deal, amongst India's toiling masses there is widespread hostility toward US imperialism and especially the Bush administration.

In 2004, the corporate elite eagerly anticipated the re-election of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), running under the slogan "India Shining." Instead, the NDA was trounced at the polls, as rural voters and the urban poor used the elections to voice their deep discontent with economic reforms that have enriched a small minority, while condemning the majority to increased economic insecurity and poverty.

A third reason for the government's retreat were the concerns expressed by sections of the political and geo-political establishment that it was acting precipitously in abandoning India's longstanding foreign policy "consensus." These sections fear that under conditions where a strong parliamentary majority, stretching from the Left through to the Hindu supremacist right, is officially opposed to the deal, it will, if implemented, lack political legitimacy, thereby undermining its long-term benefit to India's global ambitions.

The Congress leadership's mid-October retreat was clearly tactical—a response to the political compulsions arising from the Congress' limited electoral support and dependence on minor parties and the Left Front for its parliamentary majority. Singh himself has made clear that the deal is not dead and that he and his government are searching for a means to proceed with it.

In other words, the top echelons of the government and Congress Party leadership are seeking to create the political conditions to go forward with operationalization of the treaty. This could well involve a sudden shift back to a policy of confrontation with the Stalinists. Over the past year the Congress has renewed close ties with the right-wing populist Trinamul Congress, the largest opposition party in Left Front-ruled West Bengal, and it is widely expected that in the next general election the Trinamul Congress will ally with the Sonia Gandhi-Manmohan Singh-led Congress

Party and not, as in 2004, with the BJP-led NDA.

Meanwhile, in an ostensible search for a compromise over the deal, top leaders from UPA and Left Front have been holding a series of meetings to discuss the objections to the deal voiced by the Left and elements within India's nuclear, military, and geo-political establishment.

By all accounts, the gulf between the two sides remains, with the Left Front leaders arguing, based both on the text of the agreement and the manner with which the US has sought to use it to bully India over its relations with Iran, that the deal is designed to tie India to Washington's predatory foreign policy.

At the same time, the Stalinists have been at pains to demonstrate that they intend to prop up the Congress-led UPA till it completes its full five-year term in office. Communist Party of India (Marxist) General Secretary Prakash Karat was quick to lavish praises on Manmohan Singh—the chief architect of the Indian bourgeoisie's post-1991 neo-liberal reforms—when sections of the media suggested that his credibility had been irreparably damaged by his failure to rally the UPA and its allies behind the nuclear treaty.

So as to avoid embarrassing their Congress allies and to underscore that they do not mean to destabilize the government, the Left Front has agreed that the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Indian's parliament, will not even hold a consultative vote—the negotiations of treaties is the sole prerogative of the executive under India's constitution—when it holds a debate on the nuclear treaty later this month.

Whilst it is not inconceivable that the Stalinists could back off from their opposition to the nuclear accord in the face of renewed threats from the Congress Party leadership, it is highly unlikely. In tilting India much closer to Washington, the deal cuts across the interests of those sections of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie to whom the Stalinists are oriented.

Moreover, for the Stalinists to be seen acquiescing to the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional governing party, on this issue would be enormously damaging to their claims to be a socialist and anti-imperialist force. The Left Front and especially the Communist Party of India (Marxist) have used anti-imperialist sloganeering and especially opposition to the nuclear deal to divert attention from their own complicity in the UPA's relentless pro-business "reforms" and from the mounting popular-anger their own pro-business policies have provoked in their West Bengal bastion.

Sections of the bourgeois establishment are now looking to the BJP to extricate the Congress and the UPA government from its nuclear predicament.

The BJP's attitude toward the nuclear deal has been ambivalent ever since President Bush and Prime Minister Singh first announced in July 2005 that they had reached an agreement in principle on civilian nuclear cooperation.

Historically, the BJP and the Hindu nationalist right have been both rabidly anti-Communist and staunchly pro-US. When in power as the dominant partner in the National Democratic Alliance coalition, the BJP approached the US to negotiate a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement very like that struck between Manmohan Singh and Bush and Prime Minister Vajpayee and other top BJP ministers aggressively promoted the idea of an Indo-US-Israeli axis.

The BJP leadership has criticized the Indo-US nuclear treaty on the grounds that it puts too many restraints on the development of India's nuclear-weapons arsenal. It was the BJP that proclaimed India a nuclear-weapons state and it has a long history of promoting militarism. Nevertheless, there is much to suggest that the BJP's opposition has little to do with the specifics of the deal and is really just a continuation of the campaign of obstruction and provocation it has mounted against the UPA since the May 2004 elections.

In any event, after the recent high-level meetings with Kissinger and various Bush administration representatives, the BJP leadership was

demonstrative in its support for closer Indo-US ties. But to the dismay of much of India's elite, the BJP has nonetheless signaled that it will not help the Congress in "isolating" the Left and in giving parliamentary legitimacy to the nuclear treaty, thereby undermining the Indo-US strategic partnership the deal is meant to cement.



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