

"INCORRECTLY POLITICAL"

## Left's Nuclear Moment

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Indian Left's premising of its opposition in 'national interest' terms failed to resist the real implications of the deal—further dangerous undermining of the nonproliferation regime. While the deal in effect legitimizes and boosts India's nuclear weapons capabilities, the Left's contention that it hampered 'sovereign' indigenous nuclear programme proved to be a self-goal and was also inaudible to larger masses.

Before the Nuclear Supplier Group meeting in Vienna on August 21-22, New Delhi was engaged in massive diplomatic campaign. Senior diplomats had been rushing to the NSG member countries to ensure their support, in particular the 'tough' countries like Switzerland, New Zealand, along with Austria, Ireland and the Netherlands were being lobbied desperately. The remarkable point however is, even more than ensuring its access to high-end technologies and the right to nuclear reprocessing in the 'civil' cooperation, India is now busy convincing the NSG countries and the larger world that its responsible track record on proliferation and no first use policy should be held enough to grant it a waiver and India should not be asked for a legally-binding no-test pledge, through existing treaties or otherwise.

This diehard opposition to any curbs on future testing helps in comprehending the real implications of the supposedly innocuous energy deal. By allowing huge investments in the Indian nuclear energy sector, this deal will provide India the necessary elbow space in case of eventual sanctions against future nuclear tests. The rehabilitation of the American, Russian and European nuclear vendors through India's planned 40,000 MW of nuclear energy production and its subsidiary sectors would provide India a much desired cushion and would effectively diversify its nuclear foreign policy. And the signs of it are not far away; clearance at the NSG level would definitely mean increased corporate pressure upon the US Congress to clear the deal soon in the fear of companies from other countries benefiting from the US-driven exemption.

By stressing that the NSG waiver must be 'clean' (meaning NSG should leave the essential conditionalities to be addressed in the bilateral nuclear commerce agreements), India is actually pre-empting any concerted action on any concern related to the qualitative or quantitative expansion of its nuclear arsenal. And its insistence on an 'unconditional' waiver evidently stems from undisguised nuclear ambitions which practically mean protecting its right to producing and testing hydrogen bombs, and of course expanding the 'minimum' of its credible deterrence.

This fierce resistance to test-ban should not be very surprising. Indian state's nuclear diplomacy has been one of the most consistent and successful elements in its overall foreign policy since the very initial days. It has made the most 'creative' use of even the worst of circumstances in its history to keep its nuclear options open, and has resorted to all kinds of manoeuvrings—from high-pitched 'principled' opposition to the NPT and CTBT, to utilizing the strategic leverage in the bipolar world to siding with the lone superpower in the post-cold war days.

Weakened by the continuing denial of the original nuclear weapon states to disarm themselves as promised under Article VI of the NPT, and having the paradoxical duty of keeping proliferation under check while at the same time spreading nuclear technology, the NPT based nonproliferation regime requires substantial overhaul in its 40th year. It is necessary for the world to bring the task of disarming the existing weapon-states back on its agenda while ensuring nonproliferation through more strict verifications. This would also imply discouraging nuclear energy as an option, whose experience in the last half century has already proved its un-sustainability and economic non-viability, besides being an established proliferation route for new states.

However, doing this would entail putting curbs on the US military industrial complex and its hegemonic ambitions; this would also mean closing shop for the nuclear retailers in the energy sector. To avoid this, the US has chosen some dangerous quick fixes – to increase its military preponderance through missile defence; to devise extra-regime punitive actions or unilateral pre-emption towards hostile countries with advanced "civilian" nuclear capabilities like Iran. On the top of all this, it has decided to award country-specific concessions for access to nuclear infrastructure to a state which only a decade ago conducted nuclear tests in total defiance of the concerns of its own people and international opinion, but is poised to become its ally in shaping the new nuclear and political order of the world. This circumvention of nonproliferation principles is seen by the anti-war, anti-nuclear and peace movements worldwide as a total departure from disarmament goals. Earlier America used to preach disarmament while amassing its own nuclear stockpile; now it has no problems with even others acquiring nuclear weapons provided they qualify themselves as "good guys". By this new calculation, India becomes a "responsible" nuclear power while Iran faces war even as its weapon programme remains unproved.

In this deal, India is hoping to outmanoeuvre the minimum resemblance of nuclear restraint in recent times and the consensus around it. India has come a long way after the shameful and failed tricking effort in Vajpayee's letter to the US president citing Chinese threat for the Pokhran tests. In the new emerging nuclear order, it can foresee that the 'nonproliferation apartheid' along which its nuclear policy revolved matters very little to the US. The US itself is now bent on circumventing the nonproliferation regime to maintain its geostrategic hegemony. At a time when US is busy devising pre-emption strategies and extra regime coercions for Iran, and unfettered right to (selective) interdictions and inspections in form of unilateral moves like the Proliferation Security Initiatives (PSI), Container Security Initiative (CSI) and other UN Security Council driven counterproliferation measures, India is trying to silently slip away from the corner from which it used to protest the limitations of NPT and call for universal disarmament.

Eventually, India has changed its tune to nonproliferation which in content means nothing more than joining the US counterproliferation bandwagon in exchange for legitimizing its own nuclear status and ensuring unhindered testing option. Ever since the prolonged Jaswant Singh-Talbot meetings, India has been using its nonproliferation records as diplomatic credit card. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee and all prominent negotiators have been vouching publicly for India's 'impeccable' nonproliferation commitments. At the inauguration of the recent International

Conference "Towards a World Free of Nuclear Weapons" in New Delhi on the 20th anniversary of the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan for Disarmament, Manmohan Singh had little to say anything concrete on disarmament other than his new-found wisdom about the risk of nuclear weapons falling into terrorist hands. Obviously the United States would be more than willing to support India in this pursuit of extending 'war on terror' in the nuclear domain, something that would provide it with fluid targets that it desperately needs. So, the US has not only commended India's 'responsible' nuclear weapons, but has also tried to sell this deal to American people and the international community as a move strengthening the nonproliferation regime.

### **DOMESTIC CONSENSUS**

Unfortunately, this craving for an unfettered option enjoys a total consensus in domestic politics and debates. In India, all the three sides in the current nuclear debate—the Indian government, the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Left forces—have been claiming to have "national interests" on their side. The ideas of strategic sovereignty and energy security are common to the arguments of all the three. In actual terms, all the three sides have been trying to substantiate their claims by using arguments, in piecemeal fashion of course, borrowed from some faction or the other from within the nuclear establishment.

The BJP's opposition is both opportunistic and false. Had it been in power, it would have been on the other side of the debate pushing the deal even more vociferously than the Congress-led UPA. Its major contention is that the deal will put caps on India's testing and strategic programme. This claim is plain false. On the contrary, by allowing India to channel all its uranium reserves for strategic programme while fuelling "civilian" reactors with imported uranium, the deal provides a boost to Indian military nuclear capabilities by freeing indigenously produced uranium exclusively for the "strategic" ones. On the question of explosive testing to upgrade nuclear capabilities, the deal has provisions for prolonged consultation before terminating co-operation, in which the US President would look into explanations related to India's geo-strategic requirements for such testing.

The Left has located its opposition to the deal on two major issues: nuclear sovereignty—*independence and unhindered development of India's civilian (and military) nuclear programmes, and, the pro-US foreign policy thrust provided by the deal.* The Left has located its opposition to the deal on two major issues: nuclear sovereignty—*independence and unhindered development of India's civilian (and military) nuclear programmes, and, the pro-US foreign policy thrust provided by the deal.* The first point about India's sovereignty to pursue a "strategic" nuclear programme is cruelly ironic on the part of the Left which should instead demand denuclearization not only in India but of the whole world. As the Left's worst fears about provisions of the Hyde Act would come true conceivably only in case India goes for further nuclear tests, it is not difficult to see the Left's eagerness to keep India's right to conduct tests intact – *totally in line with the Congress or the BJP.* Also not understandable is Left's aversion to IAEA safeguards on the "civilian" nuclear facilities. The safeguards are meant to check the diversion of sensitive dual—use technology or material from civilian to military purposes and are definitely not against the perceived "sovereignty" or can be seen as US intervention as it

is the IAEA's inspection in Iran that has till now thwarted US' search for alibis to attack that country.

In trying to prove itself more nationalist than the ruling class parties and to wash away the historic bourgeois maligning of communists' internationalist positions, the Left opposition is singing a dangerous tune, a tune which hampers any genuine Left politics in India in the long run. The Left wants people to forget that this is an attempt, on its part, to sell the opposition to the deal without going into the tedious process of making the public aware of the realities of nuclear future – what else would sell better than "national interest" in a postcolonial society?

On the issue of nuclear energy, most of the time the Left camp has chosen to pick up its arguments from within the nuclear establishment itself. From the very beginning, it has held that development of indigenous nuclear energy capability is sacrosanct; as opposition to the deal, it has only argued that it would impede India's own nuclear plans and that the riders of international cooperation in nuclear power would be costly to India's own civilian nuclear programme (consisting of three stages: Uranium-based, Fast Breeder and Thorium-based Reactors). Its argument has been that in the energy deal, India has been co-opted effectively as a Non-Nuclear Weapons State and its reactors would have to go under perpetual IAEA safeguards. Its discontent on the India-IAEA safeguard agreement is based on the observation that it does not provide for fuel supply guarantees or concrete "corrective measures" in case of any disruption. In the first of the now public UPA-Left communications, the Left raised these concerns about "the self-reliance in the nuclear sector".

To the Left's chagrin, these questions would seem misplaced and often also uninformed if one looks at the shared mainstream premise of maintaining and strengthening nuclear energy option. The official logic would go something like this : India is not bound to import material and technology only from US; other countries like Russia, France and Canada would also come closer; the access to uranium import would shorten the country's first-phase preparations for the three-stage programme that is delayed due to shortage of uranium; fuel-supply guarantee would come from respective countries from whom India would do imports; the IAEA does not, can not and has not provided fuel supply to any other country as it is only a regulatory body; voluntarily placed reactors might not go under perpetual safeguards as feared, since India can always withdraw them from safeguards once there is no need for imported fuel.

The fact is that the deal does indeed provide most of these "positives". It is precisely because of this that most of the supporters of the Left's position, either in media or among the scientific community, deserting the Left in their evaluation of the deal. It is instructive to note that two very supportive columnists in *The Hindu*, like Siddharth Varadrajan and N Ravi, have both eventually gone over to present different assessments of the safeguards agreement and the negotiations. And on the NSG throughout their coverage of the deal, they have championed the cause of protecting India's right to conduct nuclear tests in future. Siddharth Varadrajan cites his opposition to the 1998 Pokhran tests to claim his credibility only to argue that India will not do further tests as it no longer needs them strategically. Then why to shy away from a formal pledge? The myopic strategic concerns have led the entire flock of global security experts to have people believe that nuclear bombs will not be used ever again.

This has happened because the Left has never come around to an unequivocal opposition to the nuclear energy option. It did refer to these aspects in the debate at later points, but only as secondary issues. Underlying this equivocation is the fact that the Left has itself never managed to resolve this issue with any degree of rigour or honesty, with Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the Chief Minister of CPM-led Left Front ruled West Bengal castigating environmentalists for opposing nuclear power in the state and the CPI(M) staging a defence of "national interests" at the Centre by "opposing" the India-US nuclear deal.

When the Left is not raising arguments borrowed from the nuclear establishment, it has pointed to the strings attached in the nuclear deal that would make India's foreign policy subservient to US interests. On this count, the Left has made arguments that have found support in well-meaning circles. Although the Hyde Act is a domestic US legislation, it does seek to govern US attitude to the deal and stresses India's increasing congruence with US foreign policy. However, as the US is not the sole beneficiary of this deal, other countries like Russia, France and UK have also come out strongly in support of the waiver and will in effect provide Indian ruling class relatively more space to manoeuvre and promote what the Left calls India's "national sovereignty" in foreign affairs.

Also, one should look at this orientation as a package and not only in terms of foreign policy statements. Intensified neoliberal approach to development and investment, to which the Left offers only lip service opposition and often supports in practice, is bound to give a similar tilt to India's foreign policy. Even on the Iran issue, the Left showed less determination to stop the government when it came to vote. It is not difficult to see that on several other US-sponsored policy changes or neo-liberal turns, the Left had been far more restrained in the four years of its support to the ruling UPA. Not only that, the Left-front ruled state governments have been more than willing to implement these neoliberal policies – be it introducing the SEZ Act in West Bengal two years earlier than the central Act, or the West Bengal CM pushing for nuclear power plant in the ecologically fragile location of Haripur in East Medinipur.

The Indian Left has since the very beginning supported an independent, indigenous and robust nuclear programme. It has held the advancement of nuclear technology a hallmark of India's progress almost in the same manner as the ruling class voices of Nehru and Bhabha. On the question of independence of the programme, it has actually posed itself as the real and most reliable defender of India's scientific prowess. (And polemically, better defender than the dependent elite, who impede the progress of the nation on dictates of their own and foreign masters' interests!) Like the ruling parties, the Left has also considered environmental, health and security risks attached to the nuclear technology as mere cautionary footnotes in the unstoppable turn of development to be met with adequate administrative measures.

This is true not only of the civilian nuclear programme but also of the strategic nuclear weapons project. It is worthwhile reminding the concerned citizens that the CPI(M) had actually congratulated nuclear scientists for their achievement after 1998 nuclear tests while condemning BJP for its jingoism.

On the foreign policy front, the Indian ruling class successfully lulled the Left into consent by presenting its nuclear ambition, in complete disregard to international anti-nuclear opinion, in the garb of national sovereignty and

independence. For one thing the Indian state disregarded the NPT and the CTBT processes decrying their inherently discriminatory nature, only to launch its own weapons programme. While nonproliferation obviously does not by itself lead to disarmament, it is surely a requisite for a safer world—a necessary link to disarmament. In a more general sense, given the enormous difficulties in dismantling nuclear projects and verifying disarmament, it would always be better if there are fewer states to be chased for disarmament.

India could better ask for total and comprehensive disarmament by simultaneously strengthening the non-proliferation regime. However, it chose otherwise and kept peddling morally high-grounded pronouncements about discrimination and the putative meaninglessness of non-proliferation. Domestic and international scholarship, both pro and anti-nuclear, has pointed out that this posturing helped India "keep its options open" and was part of a well-thought out strategy. On this count, the Indian Left has historically found common cause with the ruling elite purportedly to expose the imperialist double-speak on disarmament—an exercise that has been effectively and consciously put to the dreaded Bombs' service. That out of total 192 members of the UN, only Pakistan and Israel, apart from India, never signed the NPT throws an interesting light on the anti-imperialist spin provided to this act of "valiant defiance".

This has continued despite consistent appeals from its own well wishers associated with the anti-imperialist, anti-nuclear cause.

### **NUCLEAR FUTURE**

Contrary to the common perception that the left political parties in India are anti-nuclear and offer an alternative vision to the political, economic, cultural and existential crises of the nuclear age, they accept development of nuclear technology as a benchmark of historically necessary progress. Unhindered technological advancement here is considered a sacrosanct process that would provide all the right answers to every problem and will eventually take care of even the ironies caused in its own unfolding. This is unmistakably coterminous with post-colonial India's violent tryst with "development" that gives nuclear programmes the arrogance to move ahead even without finding solutions to its front and back-end problems starting from uranium mining to radioactive wastes—and of course the weaponization potentials inextricably associated with nuclear energy programmes.

The Left's protest against the Indo-US nuclear deal from the premise of defending India's "nuclear sovereignty" and maintaining its self-reliance in nuclear energy marks a frightening consensus in the political mainstream. Also on the other sustainability issues like the environment and climate change, parties like the Congress and the BJP find a supporter in the Left crying hoarse over discrimination by the US – which in effect only means protecting India's "sovereign" right to be equally *irresponsible*. And in the details of the nuclear deal, India is not only saved from this discrimination, it is being called a "responsible" nuclear power that deserves this!

The current juncture could have been used to put up a comprehensive resistance to forces pushing India into both unsustainable and dangerous futures. By offering a wholesome opposition to the backers of nuclear energy, one could debate and resist the entire set of policies that are devised for capital-intensive energy policies instead of decentralized power generation processes—an option that would be much more sustainable, safe, equitable and

democratic. By limiting the discussion merely to the strings pertaining to "national sovereignty" attached to the deal but not looking at how it affects the overall nuclear future and even sets a precedent for judging new nuclear weapons nations on their closeness to US strategic interests rather than encouraging any comprehensive delegitimization of the entire nuclear process, a major opportunity has been lost. But will it be heard and realized within the Left? Or is it that, after it has proved itself a defender of national sovereignty and saviour from imperialism, it is planning to resume its "nation building" through Nandigrams and Haripurs?