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India's Nuclear Dilemma: To Drop the Deal or to Drop the Left

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The fate of the Indo-United States nuclear deal is on the brink. The 9th Meeting of India's ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and its Left supporters, held in New Delhi on 25 June 2008, drew the parting line but ducked the final verdict. This was done in the interest of buying some more time to work out the least painful way of separation. After unusual hectic political activity for at least a week preceding the meeting, in a cold statement, the Convener of the Meeting and Minister of External Affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, said, "The Committee completed its discussions on all aspects of the India-United States Nuclear Cooperation Agreement. The next meeting of the Committee, to be convened in due course, will finalise its findings".

The Differences and the Issues

Behind this vague statement are sharp differences on the issue. The Left parties, supporting the UPA government from outside with their 59 members in Parliament, are adamant in not allowing the deal to go through. Their objections are at two levels; one, at the policy level, against India's growing strategic proximity with the United States and; two, with regard to the contents and implications of the deal. In their view, the deal, besides forcing India to compromise on further nuclear tests and reprocessing of the spent nuclear fuel, will also impose constraints on its relations with countries such as Iran, due to the overall Hyde Act of the United States Congress, which governs the bilateral agreement. The Indian government, particularly Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, is strongly committed to the deal as it promises to break India's nuclear and hi-tech isolation and offers an additional source of energy at a time when hydro-carbon dependence looks costly and grim. The government does not accept the objections raised by the Left and claims to be confident that it can deal with the foreign policy constraints as they are more notional than real. The government side circulated a 'Note' at the meeting underlining the competitive nature of the nuclear power. It explained that, by importing nuclear reactors or fuel under the deal, India would be able first to reduce to 7GWe by 2020 and then to "practically wipe out in 2050" its expected energy deficiency of 412GWe.

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There is more to the Left-Congress Party policy and ideological differences on the Indo-United States nuclear deal. There exists a serious trust deficit between the two sides. The Left is annoyed at the Congress Party of cosying up with the United States on foreign policy issues and the Congress Party suspects that the Left is toeing the China line on keeping India away, not only from the United States strategically, but also from its legitimate status as a major international player. Media and overall political opinions are also divided along these lines. The Left accused the Prime Minister of not taking them into confidence while negotiating the deal with the United States and the Prime Minister had challenged the Left to withdraw support to his government if they want to (“so be it”) on the nuclear issue. The Prime Minister is personally convinced that the deal is in India’s supreme national interests and has made a personal commitment to the United States President, George Bush, to deliver this deal from India’s side.

The issue at stake in the 25 June 2008 meeting was to let India go ahead and sign the nuclear safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The negotiations on this issue have been finalised between India and the IAEA and a draft agreement has been prepared. These negotiations were carried out after seeking support of the Left under the condition that the government will get back to this Committee to brief the Left and other alliance partners on the outcome of these negotiations before signing the agreement with the IAEA. The government’s ‘Note’ in the meeting clarified that, “The safeguards will be restricted to the facilities that India identifies as civilian and such facilities will be eligible for international co-operation”. The ‘Note’ further said that, “All externally-supplied items will come under the IAEA safeguards”. Once the government signs this agreement, the United States will follow it up, first, by getting the necessary waiver from the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) on the Indo-United States deal and, then, by finally approving it in the United States Congress. The Left’s opposition to the government signing the safeguards agreement was explained at the 26 June 2008 meeting by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] leader, Prakash Karat, who, after reiterating the Left’s position on the deal and the Hyde Act, said that, once the IAEA agreement is signed, the deal will go on “auto-pilot” where only the United States will carry it through and India (and the Left) will not be left with much scope to have its say. The Left also grumbled that the government has not shared the full text of the proposed IAEA agreement with them.

The Congress Party’s UPA allies are also in favour of the deal as they find it in India’s national interests but they do not want the government to fall over the differences with the Left. In fact, no one wants the government to fall, except the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which is in opposition. All the components of the ruling party combine are hesitant to plunge into elections at a time when inflation is more than 11 percent and rising. The combined impact of the skyrocketing oil prices and implications of the global sub-prime crisis have put heavy strains on the economy and, hence, on the common man in India. A heavy political price may be extracted by the voters if the government goes to polls without softening the economic burden. Rastriya Janata Dal (RJD) Chief and Minister for Railways in the UPA government, Lalu Prasad Yadav, cryptically remarked, “The country needs energy and for that the deal is important. But inflation is a much more pressing issue affecting the common masses. It has to be reined in”. Yadav’s concern is more specific because in his home state, where his party’s government was defeated in the last elections, his electoral base has eroded and his rival provincial government headed by Nitish Kumar is doing much better. The Congress Party has also suffered electoral reverses in recently-held state assembly elections, the latest being in Karnataka in June 2008. In these elections, the BJP and the NDA allies made gains.

Even the Left has electoral worries both in West Bengal and Kerala, their strongholds. In West Bengal, issues such as the Nandigram Special Economic Zone have dented their electoral hold in nearly 10 constituencies, including Kolkata, Barrackpur, Jadavpur, Sreerampur, Tamluk and Haldia. In Kerala, the Christian votes that favoured the CPI (M) in the last elections have been alienated. Muslim-dominated Malappuram and Kozhikode are also unhappy with the Left front on a text book controversy. The Christians (20 percent) and Muslims (25 percent) in Kerala together constitute a decisive factor in six parliamentary constituencies. As a result, though the Left leader, Karat, put up a brave face by being prepared to go to elections, he pleaded with other UPA allies such as Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam leader, M. Karunanidhi, and the Nationalist Congress Party leader, Sharad Pawar, to persuade the Congress Party to avoid the split. No one in the ruling coalition is looking forward to immediate elections.

The Options

The opinions in the UPA and, the country as a whole, are polarised along three policy options. One is to **drop the deal** as being suggested by the Left and develop India's indigenous civil nuclear power through thorium (which India has in abundance) cycle, even if takes time. Or renegotiate the deal with the United States, if necessary, with the next administration. India is of as critical a value to the United States as the United States is to India in the emerging dynamics of global power equations. This will spare India from making any compromises with the United States in the freedom of its foreign policy and strategic options, though it may delay its nuclear energy programme. In any case, according to a section of the scientific community in India, the Indo-United States deal will also not deliver energy any time sooner. For energy security, the nuclear option is not the only way out. Vast potential of hydro-power lies unharnessed within India as also in the neighbouring countries and Indian scientists are working hard to develop the thorium cycle to generate power. Besides, renewable and newer sources of energy should also be harnessed. Thus, dropping the deal will help cement UPA-Left alliance, not only during the coming elections, but also in the post-election process of government formation.

The second option is to **drop the Left** and sign the deal. This will ensure India's credibility in the international community, and that of the Indian Prime Minister and the Congress Party within India. The Prime Minister and the UPA have given enough margin to the Left without effecting even the slightest change in the Left's attitude. The Left has seldom let a chance to embarrass and oppose the government go without taking full advantage of it. The Left refuses to see the positive aspects of the deal regarding energy and global access to strategic technologies and material. The UPA can no longer continue to be dictated by the Left on issues of vital national concern. This option is against any delay in the decision because there is a serious need to ensure continuing supply of uranium for the currently-operating reactors. The Prime Minister also has to attend the G8 Summit in Tokyo in early July 2008, where he is likely to meet world leaders, including President Bush, and apprise them of India's progress on the nuclear deal. Moreover, a delayed decision will only buy the government four more months in power because, if the government falls now, elections will have to be held by November/December 2008; but if it does not, elections have to be held in April 2009, when the term of the present government comes to an end. These extra four months may not offer any great political advantage to the government.

The third option is to avoid any of the above precipitate actions and as **buy as much time as possible**. In this time, efforts should be made on various fronts namely; (a) finding a mutually

acceptable compromise between the UPA and the Left on the deal; (b) improving the economic situation with the help of good monsoon, bold monetary initiatives and in the hope that the global economy will show signs of improvement; and (c) pleading with the United States to cooperate in getting the deal finalised in November or December 2008 rather than in the forthcoming session of the Congress. This may be somewhat technically difficult but not impossible, and politically still feasible for the Bush administration. The Bush administration becomes a lame duck only after the Presidential elections. In fact, the United States administration has assured India that it will work for the deal until 20 January 2009. The State Department spokesman, Tom Casey, said on 19 June 2008, "From now until January 20, we'll continue to work to support this agreement. We will continue to encourage the Indian government to approve it." He further hoped that the next administration would "move forward" with the deal. It is argued under the third option that a precipitate action will surely provoke the Left into withdrawing the support. This would make the government either a lame duck, if a vote is carried against it in the Parliament or a minority government if a parliamentary vote can be avoided.² In both these cases, the government's bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States will be compromised at the two pending stages of the NSG waiver and the Congressional endorsement. There are elements opposed to the deal at both these stages within the NSG and in the United States Congress.

The third option appeals to the core political instinct of survival among the political parties. It also gained acceptability in the given context of economic hardships and the BJP's recent political gains. To some extent, hectic political maneuvers by the Left to scare the Congress Party and the UPA allies from taking a precipitate action of going ahead with the deal also whipped up this option. But this option does not have a longer life span, for it has already been in operation for the past more than one year. The possibility of the UPA exercising the first option is least likely as that will tarnish the image of its Prime Minister and the Congress Party, while sacrificing what it considers as in India's national interests.

The UPA seems to be gradually gearing towards the second option. There are indications that the Congress Party President, Mrs Sonia Gandhi, has already asked the Congress Party to rally round the Prime Minister. She has discounted the exaggerated fears that going with the India-United States deal would necessarily result in the alienation of the Muslim votes, a threat branded by the Left. There are also signs of the Congress Party mobilising support among the other smaller parties that have remained out of the UPA and NDA and formed another grouping in the name of the United National Progressive Alliance (UNPA), led by Samajwadi Party (SP) of Mulayam Singh, to represent the 'third force' in Indian politics.³ In the event of the Left pulling the rug, these parties may come forward to offer the necessary numbers for the survival of the UPA government. The SP has 39 members in Parliament and with the addition of other smaller parties support (Rastriya Lok Dal of Ajit Singh with three seats, Janata Dal(S) of Deve Gowda with three seats and some floating votes), the UPA may retain majority after the Left pulls out. The effective strength of the Parliament is 542 and the UPA needs the support of 272 to win the confidence vote. Will the Congress Party succeed in creating counter balances against the Left and mustering the political will of its allies and self to exercise the second option, however, remains to be seen, as the UNPA will decide only on 3 July 2008?

² A legitimate minority government can continue to function even after the withdrawal of support by the Left if the Left or the opposition NDA does not force a confidence vote on the floor of the Parliament.

³ The Congress Party has been actively pursuing Mulayam Singh for support as both the parties stand to gain even in Uttar Pradesh where Congress Party has fallen out from its erstwhile ally and the SP rival, Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party.

The both the Left and the Congress Party are also trying to make their parting as less painful as possible. For achieving this, the Congress Party and the Left are in touch with each other. The Congress Party's plea with the Left would be that when the government goes to the IAEA to endorse the safeguards agreement, the Left may politically distance itself but avoid writing to the President that they have no confidence in the government. In that situation, it will be upon the BJP/NDA to move the motion of no-confidence against the government in Parliament. If and when the BJP moves such a motion, the Left may criticise and oppose the government during the debate on the no-confidence, short of voting with the BJP. It can walk out or abstain at the time of voting. The government may then survive either with the help of the SP and other smaller parties or it will be turned into a minority government without being voted out of office. The possibility of postponing the monsoon session, scheduled for July to August or September 2008 to keep any possibility of a non-confidence vote on hold is also being actively considered. Both the Left and the UPA, notwithstanding their sharp differences on the nuclear deal seem to be of the view that no political advantage should accrue to the BJP. The Communist Party of India leader, A. B. Bardhan, has already gone on record to say that his party will not vote with the BJP to oust the government.

The Indo-United States nuclear deal is, perhaps, the first foreign policy issue in the past decades that has polarised Indian politics so sharply and precipitated a crisis of survival for the government. In 1962, Jawarharlal Nehru's China policy came close to this in view of China's war on India. That political crisis was quickly diffused by Nehru by sacrificing his friend and then Defence Minister, Krishna Menon, to silence the critics of his China policy. Mrs Sonia Gandhi does not seem to be contemplating the possibility at all of reinforcing her grand-father-in law's precedence by sacrificing Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in the interest of UPA-Left alliance. She herself is committed to the Indo-United States nuclear deal. India has now entered a phase of coalition politics which has eroded the broad foreign policy consensus prevailing for a long in the country. This is not a very happy development for a country that is still struggling to secure its rightful place in the global community. The world will naturally monitor closely the evolving interface between the coalition regimes and critical foreign policy issues in India.

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