

Indian Stalinists reverse course, allow Indo-US nuclear deal go to IAEA

By Kranti Kumara
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Despite a months-long display of conspicuous opposition to the civilian nuclear co-operation treaty that India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government has struck with the Bush administration, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front has abandoned its opposition to New Delhi taking any further steps toward "operationalizing" the deal.

Late last week, the Left Front dropped its opposition to the Congress Party-led UPA initiating discussions with the International Atomic Energy Agency on an "India-specific safeguards" agreement, and talks are to begin today between Indian and IAEA officials in Vienna.

Since 1974, when it first staged a nuclear explosion, India has been subject to a US-led international nuclear fuel and technology embargo. The Indo-US nuclear deal would end the embargo and create a unique category for India within the world nuclear regulatory regime as the only non-signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty allowed access to advanced civilian nuclear technology.

Once it secures an agreement with the IAEA, the UPA government will have to negotiate yet another deal with the Nuclear Suppliers Group—a consortium of the countries that control world nuclear trade.

Only after all these negotiations are successfully completed will the Bush administration, which sees the nuclear treaty as crucial to its efforts to draw India into a "global partnership," ask the US Senate to ratify the treaty.

Negotiations on the Indo-US nuclear treaty were completed in late July, but the Indian government has for months been prevented from initiating the negotiations with the IAEA due to the opposition of the Left Front, whose MPs are sustaining the UPA government in office.

In August, after the Left Front had come out against the treaty, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh staked his government's life on the deal, publicly daring the Stalinists to bring it down if they would not support the treaty. Thereafter, for the better part of two months, Indian politics were dominated by discussion about an imminent election. Then in early October, in part because of pressure from the smaller parties in the UPA, which feared losing seats and influence in the event of an election, Manmohan Singh and Congress President Sonia Gandhi unexpectedly pulled back. To the dismay of India's corporate elite, which strongly supports the nuclear deal, Singh said that were it to fail it would not be "the end of the world."

As part of their efforts to mollify the Stalinists and in the hope of wearing down their opposition and/or gaining time to come up with an alternate strategy, the UPA government formed a joint committee with the Left to study the deal and the criticism made of it by the Left and by members of India's political, nuclear, and military establishments. After five meetings over two-and-a-half months, the committee, from all reports, remained deadlocked, with the Left Front

insisting that it was adamantly opposed to the deal and to the government taking any steps to operationalize it, especially as the treaty is opposed by a clear majority of the members of India's parliament.

The Bush administration, meanwhile, had gone into high gear to press New Delhi to push the agreement forward, warning that with the US political agenda soon to be dominated by the November 2008 elections, it is imperative that India obtain IAEA and NSG approval.

It was within this context that the Left Front, after talks between Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] General-Secretary Prakash Karat and Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi, suddenly dropped its opposition to the government beginning talks with the IAEA. This decision was formally conveyed to the government at a hastily convened meeting last Friday of the UPA-Left Committee on the Indo-US nuclear deal.

Despite their facilitating the UPA government's and the Bush administration's attempts to implement the nuclear deal, the Stalinists are maintaining a posture of militant opposition to it. After the Left Front had given its approval to the UPA to proceed with the IAEA negotiations, Karat thundered, "[The] Left is determined to oppose this deal and we think it is bad for our country."

Karat justified his bombast by the fact that the UPA is still required to present the text of the IAEA "safeguards" agreement to the UPA-Left-Front committee for "its consideration before" the committee "finalises its findings" on the Indo-US nuclear treaty.

The Stalinists are claiming that this gives them an effective veto over the treaty, but government and UPA officials are claiming otherwise. This was made clear by the comments of a UPA "source" to the *Indian Express*. The corporate daily quoted this official as stating, "We have not made any commitment that our signature on the safeguards agreement is incumbent on the Left's approval. The Left can only make suggestions to the draft agreement. Once we have completed formal negotiations with the IAEA, we cannot tell the IAEA that we will not sign it. It's a matter of national prestige. So, it would be for the Left to decide whether it wants to force mid-term polls when the government goes to the IAEA Board of Governors."

Just as importantly, the key thing for the government and for the Congress Party leadership in the current context was to break the logjam in "operationalizing" the treaty.

That has now happened. While the discussions with the IAEA and NSG proceed, the Congress Party leadership will continue to try to lay the political groundwork for politically breaking with the Left, should it continue to oppose the Indo-US nuclear treaty, and precipitating an early election. And there is little doubt that the Congress will opt for such a course, if they think they can carry their UPA allies with them

and triumph at the polls. Both, however, are far from foregone conclusions.

The Stalinists in general and the CPI (M) in particular posture as indefatigable opponents of US imperialism and maintain constant anti-US rhetoric to burnish their left image.

Such a posture was on full display during a speech Karat delivered on November 1 in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). Karat observed that “India is a prize for the US and not Pakistan because of its market. Developed India can be useful for counterbalancing China. This is a game the US is trying to play which has to be foiled.” He then went on to observe that the US was attempting to make India its strategic ally because China as “the most powerful socialist country is capable of challenging the might of the USA.”

His comments were seized upon by the corporate media, which in the main is carrying on a relentless and shrill campaign in support of the Indo-US nuclear deal as further grist for a crude anti-communist campaign, in which the Left Front had been pilloried for being more concerned with China’s interests than those of India.

In fact, the Stalinists’ opposition to the deal has been directed at convincing the Indian bourgeoisie that its “national interests” lie in not allowing India to be ensnared in a dependent relationship with the US and adhering instead to the Indian ruling elite’s traditional posture of “non-alignment.”

That said, the Left Front leaders do very much see the pro-investor policies of “Socialist China” as a model. Indeed, in their zeal to transform their political bastion of West Bengal into a cheap labor haven for international and domestic capital, the Indian Stalinists have begun to duplicate the Chinese Stalinists’ methods, mounting violent attacks against peasants who have resisted their land being seized and transformed into a special economic zone.

Both Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh have tried to allay the Stalinist concern about the UPA’s evident pro-US tilt by making separate, high-level visits to China and Russia.

Sonia Gandhi undertook a five-day visit to China in late October where she was feted by all of the Chinese Stalinist leadership, including President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. “Her trip might be part of a political strategy to appear more balanced in foreign policy as her party has been under siege for the tilt towards the US,” observed Brahma Chellaney, a defence analyst with the New Delhi-based private think-tank, the Centre for Policy Research.

Similarly Manmohan Singh made a visit to Russia for several days commencing November 11 in a bid to overcome tensions that have arisen due to Moscow’s concerns over the India-US strategic relationship and various Indo-Russian arms deals. The talks, however, appear to have been fractious. According to Indian news reports, Russia, angered by the Indian government’s stalling on a deal to purchase Russian nuclear reactors, has signaled that will introduce a new inflation-escalator clause into the two countries’ arms contracts.

Several factors are at play in the crumbling of the Stalinist opposition to the nuclear deal.

First there is the crisis in the Stalinist camp precipitated by the West Bengal Left Front government’s pursuit of pro-investor policies. Recent months have seen a wave of social and political unrest in West Bengal, including food riots. In the days directly before the Left Front’s reversal on the nuclear deal, the West Bengal Stalinist regime was further rocked by the popular backlash against the CPI (M)’s use of armed goons and savage violence to crush a peasant protest in the Nandigram area. (See: West Bengal’s Stalinist government mounts

terror campaign to quash peasant unrest)

The Left Front leaders thus have good reason to fear elections.

They also are in evident debt to the UPA government. The UPA has spurned demands from the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for it to use the breakdown of “law and order” in West Bengal to invoke “president’s rule” in West Bengal (i.e. to sack the state government), and has instead dispatched the Indian state’s paramilitary forces to back up the West Bengal government in Nandigram.

The Stalinists are also acutely sensitive to right-wing criticism that they are threatening the government and want to prove to the bourgeoisie that they are a “responsible” opposition party.

A final consideration is the Gujarat elections. The Stalinists wish to present a united “secular” opposition to the BJP in the upcoming state-assembly elections in the BJP bastion of Gujarat—no matter that the Congress is aligning itself with a group of BJP dissidents, including persons who share major responsibility for the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom.

There is no doubt that the Stalinists’ approval of the nuclear deal is seen as a crucial victory by the UPA government and the Congress Party.

An unnamed government minister was quoted by the *Indian Express* on Nov. 17 exuding confidence that the way has now been cleared for the Congress-led UPA to implement the nuclear treaty: “If [the Gujarat] poll results go against the Congress, the party will have to take a political call. Even then, it could mean a delay of four to five months. From now on, the deal is well on course.”

Despite the fact that the UPA has subordinated every aspect of domestic socio-economic policy to the profit interests of large domestic and international corporations, and despite the mass discontent across India at deepening economic insecurity and ever-widening social inequality, the Left Front has sustained the Congress Party-led government in power. With the assent gifted to the UPA on the Indo-US nuclear deal, the Stalinists have now extended their support, albeit with veiled political rhetoric, to the UPA’s and the India bourgeoisie’s efforts to forge a strategic partnership with US imperialism.

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