

# Nuclear Deal, “National Interests” and Mainstream Indian Opposition

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It is the Indian Left’s concurrence, rather than its disagreement, with the idea of a nuclear future (including nuclear weapons) that has made its case weak and inaudible to the larger masses.

## Contextualizing the deal

While the remaining steps on the Indo-US nuclear deal are now left for the NSG and the US Congress, the domestic debate in India is still alive in political and intellectual circles; though in the media it has been turned more into a commodified entertainment of cash-rich political drama around “national” and “community” interests. In a charged atmosphere produced by both backers and opponents of the deal pitching their positions in terms of “national interests”, it would be necessary not to lose sight of its broader meanings and implications.

In its essence, the deal is about opening up of the restrictions over nuclear commerce imposed on India in response to its 1974 “Peaceful Nuclear Explosion”. Though initiated and facilitated by the United States, this move will provide India access to international markets in nuclear fuel, material and technology, in accordance to the (to be specially laid down) safeguards and guidelines of the IAEA and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). While it might imply huge imports from the US, the deal also removes international fetters on nuclear trade with other countries including Russia, France (and Canada) whose corporations would get major business orders from India once the deal comes into effect.

This deal comes at a time when our global nuclear future has reached a crossroad – in terms of nuclear energy issues, nuclear trade and nuclear disarmament. The nuclear power industry, after decades of withdrawal and recession in the wake of accidents of like Chernobyl and, prior to that, Three Miles Islands, has been trying in the recent past to come out of the closet once again. Nuclear power lost its charm also due to consistent civil activism on issues related to radioactive risks, associated with all its stages of operation, from uranium mining to power plant safety and security to the problem of nuclear waste. The peace movements worldwide have also stressed the inextricable linkage of nuclear energy technology to nuclear proliferation – a fact glossed over by the profiteering companies and states aspiring for the Bomb. Corporate interests in the nuclear industry have been pushing internationally to create a “nuclear renaissance” in the recent past, including through huge donations to both the Republican and Democratic candidates for the forthcoming US elections. India’s shifting of its energy policy focus towards nuclear power would encourage further the other

small Asian and African countries to go for nuclear power which are under increasing influence of the nuclear lobbies and already have plans laid out on their tables.

On the strategic front, the already truncated disarmament and nonproliferation regime is at an equally crucial juncture. 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 40<sup>th</sup> 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 unsustainability 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.

At a time when the Indo-US deal is becoming a vehicle for unscrupulously pushing the entire world towards an inherently unsafe, uneconomic, and unsustainable energy future and a far more intensified arms race, evaluating and contesting this deal in terms of the illusive “national interests” seems patently short-sighted and opportunist.

## **The “National Interest” and the Nuclear Deal**

Ironic it may seem, but in the supposedly flattening world there is an increasing emphasis on shaping foreign and domestic politics in terms of “national interests”. In the mainstream discourse on international relations, the reduction of international politics into a state-centric anarchy is accompanied by an equally insular view of exogenous state interests as primordial constant that are pursued as “national interests”. This monolithic view of states as primary and unitary actors conveniently overlooks the multiplicity of interacting factors like state, society, class, gender and other identities that constitute, perpetuate and continuously renegotiate the world order – within and across the politico-geographical boundaries. Thus the “national interest” view of international and domestic policy only tends to naturalize the existing state and in effect the power relations within. From the radical feminists to the marxists, and relatively emancipatory trends like constructivism have been challenging the notion of “national interest” as a garb to defend the status quo.

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 program 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 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 us 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 our 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 Weapon 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: we are 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 our 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 we 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; our voluntarily placed reactors might not go under perpetual safeguards as feared, since we can withdraw them from safeguards once we stop using imported fuel. The fact is that the deal does indeed provide most of these “positives”. It is precisely because of this that we have seen 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 Siddarth Varadraj and N. Ravi, have both eventually gone over to present different assessments of the safeguards agreement and the negotiations.

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 in 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.

Even without the deal, India could hardly be said to stand up against the US imperial dictates. At times, Indian ruling classes do convey the impression of pursuing a diversified foreign policy, like the recent statement against war on Iran or the latest fracas in the WTO; but essentially these posturing are tactical tools to crack better bargains with the US, not to defy it outright. Moreover, on the issue of progressive foreign policy one can rightfully argue that the recent tide of the ‘Left’ in Latin America and other parts of the world keeps operating under more or less the same neoliberal framework while pursuing high-pitched anti-Americanism to claim for itself a progressive mantle and to mute domestic discontent. Some reputed leftist scholars have pointed to this and argued that it may just be the CPI(M)’s attempt to win over its lost Left face in the wake of Nandigram.

## **Indian Nuclear Programme and the Left**

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 ourselves 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. Recall that 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 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.

## **Left and the 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 us into both unsustainable and dangerous futures. By offering a wholesome opposition to the backers of nuclear energy, we 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 our overall nuclear future and even sets a precedent for judging new nuclear weapon 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?

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**P.S.**

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\* P.K. Sundaram is doing Ph.D. in Disarmament Studies, JNU, New Delhi. He can be contacted at [sundaramcipod@gmail.com](mailto:sundaramcipod@gmail.com)