

The Bush-Manmohan Nuclear Compact: heightening insecurities in South Asia and beyond

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UNITED States President George W. Bush's visit to India and Pakistan (1-4 March) came at a time when he is dogged by domestic controversies, his stock back home is crashing and there is wide spread resistance to his policies not only in the US but across the world. An important element of the Bush administrations agenda to win legitimacy for its policies is to bring more allies on board and this is where a more-than-willing India makes its entry. The Manmohan Singh Government keen to get into the US scheme, with little regard for the traditional principles of non-alignment on which India's foreign policy has hitherto been based. This deal has wide-ranging ramifications; in the realm of geo-politics, third world solidarity and trade and development. This article attempts an analysis of the implications of the first aspect.

The fallacies of the Bush administration and its hegemonistic agenda are well known. Little is known, though, about India's perceptible shift towards the US.

Both major political parties, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), seem to believe that the Bush administration's policies coincide with India's long-term interests. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh calls it 'enlightened self-interest'. After the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government assumed office in May 2004, there were expectations that the foreign policy would undergo some major shifts, and it did, only for the worse. The Indian vote at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors meeting in November 2005 is an illustration. Faced with sanctions, Iran was counting on active support from the non-aligned bloc. India, which used to consider Iran a 'strategic partner', voted with the US and the European Union. Only Egypt demanded the whole of West Asia be declared a 'nuclear weapons free zone'. Indian officials, on the other hand, echoed American concerns, stating that they do not want "another nuclear power in the neighbourhood".

The BJP has now come out in full support of the India-US nuclear agreement and the vote against Iran at the IAEA meeting in the first week of February. The India National Congress party (known commonly as Congress) finds the pro-US shift in foreign policy beneficial for some short-term gains!

According to reports, the Bush administration has offered close bilateral strategic ties in the short term. In the medium term, the two countries will be partners in the 'war on terror' and in the long term, according to US officials, India will be given the 'privilege' of being a part of the proposed anti-China coalition.

It is important to understand Bush's visit, the protests and the joint statement in this political context. The Joint US-India statement issued after the meeting between President Bush and Prime Minister Singh on 2 March clearly reflects the Indian approval of the principles on which the US hegemony is established globally.

The five sections, in which the statement is divided, are:

- "For economic prosperity and trade" (commitment to corporate interests).
- "For energy security and a clean environment" (code for an energy alliance).
- "For innovation and the knowledge economy" (code for sustaining scarcity).
- "For global safety and security" (that is, global interventionism).
- "Deepening democracy" (that is, financing regime change).

THE UNCLEAR (NUCLEAR) DEAL

George W. Bush arrived in India on the 1 March, but much had preceded him. For example, the hype created by the media over the "historic visit". And the whole retinue of US officials, including under secretary of state for political affairs Nicholas Burns, all at pains to prepare ground for a safe and successful visit.

More notable than this, however, was the shadow of a nuclear militarism preceding the presidential visit. The Bush mission bodes ill indeed for South Asia and particularly for India and Pakistan, and our fears have come true. The so called historic deal has been signed and now India will proceed on its separation plan and implement the commitments in the 18 July, 2005 statement on nuclear cooperation leading to full civil nuclear cooperation between India and US.

The deal should be analysed from three angles:

(a) The sanctity it gives to arsenals and undermines disarmament. It will lead to an arms race in the region, making South Asia even more insecure (the US has already made the offer for the sale of F16s to India). There is also talk that a defence deal has been inked, which is neither being discussed in Parliament nor being made open to the media. This deal will, down the line, have a more frightening nuclear dimension to say nothing of the effect of it on the peace process between India and Pakistan. The government does not appear to care what this means for the impoverished millions of the region but the people do care and this was evident from the nation wide protests to the Bush visit. The agreement will increase worldwide resentment of US' and India's double standards and encourage future proliferation in Iran, Pakistan, Syria and North Korea. We are not convinced that the deal will encourage "responsible" behaviour on India's part because once it gets imported nuclear technology and material it might direct its own scarce domestic uranium to military use.

(b) Another predictable consequence is a close India-US partnership on the Iran question. The IAEA is meeting again right now in Vienna and we have not got a clear idea of India's stand at the time of writing. Another possible fall out will be on the Iran-Pakistan-India oil pipeline. This offer of nuclear cooperation, especially for power production, will throw the entire Indian geo-strategic planning into disarray with an uncertain future for gas pipelines from Iran and Burma/Myanmar.

It is no coincidence that Mani Shankar Aiyar the erstwhile Petroleum Minister was stripped off his portfolio a few weeks before the Bush visit. Aiyar was not only determined to go ahead with the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline but also proposed a pan-Asian oil grid.

(c) The pan-Asian oil grid was an attempt to connect the oil and gas fields of Kazakhstan in Central Asia and Indonesia in South East Asia to the energy consuming economies of India and China. Aiyar was recently in China and signed historic Sino-Indian agreements not only related to energy requirements but also on no competition, joint bids in production and transportation. All of this will probably be put on the back burner now, as the new petroleum minister, Murli Deora, has been carefully ambivalent on the future of his predecessor's ventures. The US could not have asked for

more as a pan-Asian energy grid would dramatically shift the balance of economic power from the US and Europe to Asia. This is an opportunity lost for forging a new progressive geo-political front to counter US designs in the region.

The so-called security deal between India and US has created a great sense of insecurity in South Asia since it gives legitimacy to the dictates of the big boy "India" in this region. However the Indo-US closeness has resulted in tremendous fissures among members of the ruling UPA coalition. Embarrassingly for Manmohan Singh, the Left parties, who provide outside support to his Congress-led government, coordinated massive protests, ranging from 50,000 to 200,000 thousand people in almost every corner of the country. Muslim organisations, farmers, workers and various people's organizations and movements joined the protests. The issues highlighted during the rally and speeches were the nuclear agenda, Iran-Pakistan-India oil pipeline, calling on the government to rethink its policies on the alignment with the US and build a major alternative to the power centres of the US and Europe. The rally also condemned the content and the publication of the Danish cartoons.

This is the fallout not only from the Indo-US deal but also on the issue of India's voting against Iran in IAEA, the pro-free trade reformist economic policy of the government and the betrayal of the developing world by India at the WTO's Hong Kong Ministerial.

The UPA government was elected to power on a progressive agenda to reverse the policies of the previous right wing BJP government. In the last 21 months it has fast-tracked its predecessors most regressive policies. As the UPAs crisis of legitimacy deepens on the social, political, economic and foreign policy front, it remains to be seen if progressive political forces will align and attempt to forge an independent trajectory for the country that re-aligns India to the developing world.

Resistance to the UPA government is growing, not only from the mainstream left but also from sections as diverse as the Muslims, farmers, and workers. The rallies against Bush saw a rare unity across all these sections. The US attempts to gain more influence in South Asian affairs will probably have a paradoxical effect: it will create new divisions and set off more violence in the name of terror and counter terror, but it will also strengthen a more diverse unity in the country and across the region.

P.S.

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