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Why the CPI(M) and the Left oppose the nuclear deal

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The Left parties have called upon the UPA government not to proceed further with the nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States. The bilateral agreement arrived at between the two governments in the end of July has resulted in a political crisis. At no time, has an external agreement negotiated by the Indian government, raised such a political storm as the nuclear cooperation deal with the United States. The last time there was strong opposition was during the negotiations for the Marakkesh treaty which led to the setting up of the World Trade Organisation.

Without going into the complex and technical issues concerning civilian nuclear cooperation, it is necessary to take a wider look at the implications of the agreement. Is this only a nuclear cooperation deal or is it part of a wider agreement? If so, does it protect our capacity for an independent foreign policy and how will it affect our sovereignty? One can legitimately question if India should partner the United States in the global democracy enterprise. "Regime change" and implanting of democracy have yielded horrific results in Iraq.

The nuclear cooperation deal is only one part of the wide-ranging alliance that the UPA government has forged with the United States. This was spelt out by the Indian Prime Minister and the American President in the joint statement in July 2005 in Washington. This agreement covers political, economic, military and nuclear cooperation. This alliance entails not just nuclear cooperation but talks of the two countries promoting global democracy, revamping the Indian economy to facilitate large scale investment by the United States and a strategic military collaboration.

Prior to the joint statement of July 2005, the UPA government signed a ten-year Defence Framework Agreement with the United States. It is evident that without the defence agreement, the Americans would not have agreed for the nuclear cooperation. This seems to be part of a *quid pro quo*.

Repeated assertions that India's foreign policy will not be subject to external pressures, have not evoked confidence after the Iran episode. Spokesmen for the Bush administration have often cited India's attitude on Iran to be a test. Even before the nuclear cooperation agreement was finalized, the government responded by voting against Iran not once but twice in the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The first serious conflict with the Left arose when the UPA government did a *volte face* on the Iran nuclear issue. The government voted along with the US and the Western countries in September 2005 and was not even prepared to go along with the position adopted by the bloc of Non-Aligned Movement countries.

The Left parties have been watching with disquiet the way the UPA government has gone about forging close strategic and military ties with the United States. The Left came out in strong opposition to the Defence Framework Agreement. As per the agreement, India is taking steps to interlock our armed forces with that of the United States in the name of “inter-operability”. The framework agreement is leading to various steps like the Logistics Support Agreement and the Maritime Cooperation Pact.

The Left has been vehemently opposed to the joint military exercises as the one that took place in the Kalaikunda air base in West Bengal. These exercises were held despite the strong protests of the Left parties and the Left Front government of West Bengal. The years 2005 to 2007 have seen a sharp increase in joint exercises between the two armed forces. This is now being extended to the “quadrilateral” exercises as desired by the US with Japan and Australia in the September naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal.

The United States has been going about stating obvious strategic and commercial benefits that will accrue from the nuclear deal. Apart from the sale of nuclear reactors, the United States is mounting pressure on India from military contracts to purchase fighter planes, naval ships, radar and artillery. Along with steadily increasing military and security collaboration with Israel, India will find itself entangled in the US strategic designs in Asia.

A major reason put forth being made for the nuclear cooperation agreement is that it will help India meet its energy needs. This ignores the very limited contribution that nuclear power makes to our overall energy generation which is just 3 per cent and which cannot exceed 7 per cent even if the ambitious plans for expansion are implemented by 2020. To make India’s foreign policy and strategic autonomy hostage to the potential benefits of nuclear energy does not make sense except for the American imperative to bind India to its strategic designs in Asia.

Due to the consistent pressure of the CPI(M) and the Left parties who had raised a number of questions regarding the draft legislation before the US House of Representatives and Senate, the Prime Minister had given certain categorical assurances to parliament on August 17, 2006. At that juncture, these assurances were in line with the concerns raised about protecting the country’s interests regarding the three-stage nuclear programme that we have adopted.

However, the situation changed after the US Congress adopted the final legislation to give a waiver for nuclear cooperation with India. This legislation known as the Hyde Act runs contrary to most of the assurances given by the Prime Minister in August 2006. The Act includes provisions imposing restrictions on transfer of technology and barring access to dual use technologies, thus denying India a full nuclear fuel cycle. The US President has to report to the Congress every year on how India is complying with the provisions set out in the Hyde Act. The Act enjoins on the administration to prevent fuel supplies and equipment from other countries to India if the US terminates the bilateral agreement. The argument that the bilateral text overrides the clause cannot be accepted, as the text also states that “national laws” will prevail. To say that the Hyde Act is not binding to India is irrelevant. The point is that it is binding on the United States.

Outside the sphere of nuclear cooperation, the Hyde Act contains directions on India’s foreign policy and other security related matters. There are nine references to India’s role having to be one of support and complicity with the US designs on Iran.

After the Hyde Act was adopted in December 2006, the CPI(M) had stated that it contains provisions which are contrary to the assurances given by the Prime Minister to parliament on August 17, 2006. The CPI(M) had repeatedly asked the government not to proceed with the bilateral negotiations for the 123 agreement, till this matter was cleared up. But the government did not heed this advice too.

The United States is already moving for another round of sanctions against Iran in the United Nations Security Council. Indian companies have been warned not to export to Iran even non-lethal materials. The Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline will not proceed if this nuclear agreement is put in place despite protestations to the contrary by the government. It will be unwise and shortsighted for India to spoil its relations with Iran and other West Asian countries given the vital role these countries play in fulfilling India’s energy needs.

When the UPA government was being installed in 2004, a Common Minimum Programme was drafted. When the Left was consulted, we had insisted on the deletion of a reference to “strategic relations with the United States”. There is no mention of strategic ties with the US in the Common Minimum Programme. But soon after, the government proceeded with forging a wider strategic alliance with the United States.

The Left parties have, after carefully assessing the implications of the 123 agreement, demanded that the government not proceed further to operationalise the agreement. The objections to the deal have been spelt out in detail in the statement issued by the Left Parties. The Left is clear that going

ahead with the agreement will bind India to the United States in a manner that will seriously impair an independent foreign policy and our strategic autonomy.

A wise and expedient step for the government would be to acknowledge that there is widespread opposition to the agreement. The question is not whether it should be put to vote in parliament or not. It is clear that a majority in parliament is opposed to the agreement. The best course would be for the government not to proceed further with the operationalising of the agreement. Till all the doubts are clarified and the implications of the Hyde Act evaluated, the government should not take the next steps with regard to negotiating the IAEA safeguards, which are to be in perpetuity, and proceed to get the guidelines from the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

The Left parties continue to accord priority to having a secular government and keeping the communal forces at bay. However, this cannot be taken as a license by the UPA government to go ahead with such a long term agreement which has serious implications for India's independent foreign policy and sovereignty.