



# DISPATCHES

## **The Politics of Nuclear Cooperation**

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NEW DELHI—The proposed civilian nuclear cooperation agreement between India and the United States is now some 32 months old. Since it was first floated by President Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in July 2005, it has roiled Indian politics in an unprecedented manner, becoming a lightning rod for opposition parties to give voice to their views about the United States, nuclear weapons and Indian foreign policy.

At one point in late 2007, it seemed as if the Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) coalition government in New Delhi might even fall, with Left parties threatening to pull out over the “operationalization” of the deal. As of this writing, the nuke deal hangs on by a slender thread. Indian officials remain committed to the agreement, but are quick to point out the difficulties associated with it. “No, I have not given up,” Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee told a reporter in January. “We are working on how we can proceed... of course time is running out... but one cannot help it. Either you lose majority (by going ahead with the deal)... and if a government loses majority, nobody is going to have an arrangement with a minority government.”

Therein lies the crux of the current problem. The two communist parties in India are vital for the UPA coalition in the Indian parliament’s 543-member Lok Sabha (Lower House). In the May 2004 elections, Congress won just 145 seats, while its main rival, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) obtained 138 and the two communist parties secured a combined 53 seats. Logically, therefore, Congress has been forced into an uneasy political partnership of necessity.

The inherent ideological tensions in this alliance came to the fore when the nuclear deal began to gain traction. The agreement is radical and innovative; it



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seeks to revive the long-estranged bilateral relationship between India and the United States by transforming the central bone of contention between them—the nuclear nettle—into an area of potential cooperation. As part of the deal, India would be accorded exceptional international status, staying outside the NPT and retaining a modest nuclear weapons program, even as some of its nuclear facilities were brought under IAEA safeguards. In return, the U.S. would facilitate India's admittance into the global civilian nuclear loop. This was as “win-win” as it could possibly get for the U.S., for India, and for global nuclear security.

But in order for the arrangement to be realized, many complex steps had to be taken—beginning with a change to existing U.S. law that prohibited any nuclear commerce with India. This was perceived to be a nearly impossible task, given the strong non-proliferation constituency within the United States. But the Bush visit to New Delhi in March 2006 provided the necessary political push, leading to the passage of the Hyde Act nine months later.

The next step was the mutually acceptable conclusion of a “123” agreement between the two countries. Again, domestic critics on both sides felt that this was not possible. But in a highly commendable, albeit protracted, set of negotiations, officials from both sides were able to come to terms on such a deal.

When the draft text was formally announced, the political opposition in India became more strident. While the text of the 123 agreement was fair to both sides, the BJP and Left parties took strong exception to certain provisions, including those that established penalties on India for future nuclear testing, and the implication that an important secondary goal of the deal was about “containing” China.

The BJP concerns have been curious. In its day, the NDA government—of which the BJP was a major part—had carried out the May 1998 nuclear tests while simultaneously improving relations with the U.S. The result was a groundbreaking new bilateral strategic dialogue called the NSSP (Next Steps in Strategic Partnership). But now, with the Congress-led UPA having negotiated the best possible deal to end India's nuclear and technological isolation, the BJP has changed its tune. Its objection is ostensibly about forfeiting India's right to test again and the constriction of India's strategic autonomy—neither of which is valid from an objective standpoint.

For their part, India's two communist parties—while formally part of the UPA coalition—have used the same arguments, and added a new one: that the deal would lead to a growing proximity to the “imperial” power, the U.S. Such a state of affairs is at complete variance with the political ideology of the Left, which prefers a closer relationship with Iran and China over a rapprochement with America. Here, the political orientation appears reminiscent of the decades of the Cold War, with the Indian Left firmly anti-American and pro-Chinese in its ideological orientation.

What is clear is that the principal opposition to the realization of the nuclear deal stems from the inflexible position adopted by two of India's major political parties in recent months. Their intransigence has everything to do with their respective political differences with the Congress party.

Yet there is still reason for cautious optimism. Indian public opinion in the main is supportive of improved ties with the U.S. And, at the end of the day, there is hope that this may compel India's bitter political rivals to establish some sort of *modus vivendi*.

