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India-US nuclear deal...rest in peace?

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Publication date: Wednesday 24 October 2007

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Khaleej Times (India) - 24 October 2007 -

INDIA'S ruling United Progressive Alliance has blinked first in its eyeball-to-eyeball standoff with the Left over the India-US nuclear deal. It has suspended negotiations to complete it. Statements made last week by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi suggest the suspension could last months.

Both stressed that Parliament elections "are still far away"; and the government will "complete its term" in 2009. Singh said the deal's death will be "a disappointment, but not the end of life." Gandhi paid tributes to the Left and said: "We're not looking for a confrontation. You have to understand the Left. They have an ideology. We're certainly not in favour of early elections."

Overzealous supporters of the deal have put fanciful interpretations on these utterances to claim the UPA will ram through an amended version of the deal.

In truth, the deal is on the way to the cold storage unless the Congress wants early elections [-] which its UPA partners oppose.

The UPA failed to persuade or pressure the Left to go "soft" on the deal. But the Left wouldn't blink. It was prepared to face losses in an early election, but not dilute its opposition to the deal, based on ideological grounds, which - right or wrong - it takes seriously.

What clinched the issue was hard-nosed power calculations. UPA allies DMK, Rashtriya Janata Dal and Nationalist Congress opposed a mid-term election, in which they're likely to do much worse than in 2004.

Most Congress leaders too were loath to risk elections in which the party would at best win 170 seats (present tally, 145 of a total of 543). Aggressively pursuing the deal would probably mean losing the government-and the deal too. The

UPA's collapse would expose lack of a domestic consensus on the deal and strengthen its international opponents.

The Left proved unrelenting even after a last-ditch October 6/7 effort by Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee through senior CPM leader Jyoti Basu. Eventually, the UPA-Left joint committee on October 9 put the deal on hold.

The deal would have faced stiff opposition in the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, where even one of its 45 member-states can block an exemption for India from its nuclear commerce rules. Ireland, New Zealand and the Nordics are opposed to such exemption. Germany, Japan and China - which is keeping its cards close to its chest - might join them.

However, opposition at the IAEA shouldn't be underrated. India wanted to sign an unprecedented inspections agreement with it that fits neither its standard categories: for the nuclear weapons-states (NWSs) recognised by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and for non-NWSs. This would have been resisted and at least delayed by its 35-strong Board of Governors. A long delay in clearing the deal would be fatal. The deadline for its approval is set by US politics. If Bush can't present the deal to Congress for ratification by February/March, when the Democrats and Republicans name their presidential candidates, the deal is as good as dead.

The deal is very much Bush's baby and won't go through Congress unless he puts enormous political capital behind it. He won't have much capital left as a true lame-duck President early next year. Given these dynamics, the deal's moment may well have passed.

How will this new reality influence Indian public perceptions? What does it mean for India-US relations? And will it affect Indian politics? Indian perceptions are sharply polarised between the elite, which craves for the deal as the cornerstone of a strategic partnership with the US, and a majority of the people, who are sceptical or indifferent. The US isn't exactly

popular in India.

Yet, such is the influence of the crusading pro-American lobby in the Indian media that it has presented the deal as a litmus test for India's emergence as a Great Power! This has damaged the media's credibility - which doesn't bode well for democracy.

The debate however has positive fallout: in raising questions about the viability of nuclear power, and in highlighting the deal's likely effects on the global prospect for nuclear disarmament.

The nuclear power debate need to be pursued seriously, with a sharp analysis of its economics, environmental soundness and its potential for grave accidents and legacy of radioactive wastes which remain hazardous of centuries. It would be foolhardy to plunge into nuclear power development - just when much of the world is shunning it.

The deal would have encouraged other countries to cross the nuclear threshold, and fuelled a nuclear arms race in Asia. This may have been averted.

The deal's suspension will slow down India's strategic alignment with the US. At a time when the US Global War on Terror is destabilising the world, this is welcome, as would be the likely suspension of the proposed India-US Logistics Support Agreement, which will allow the reciprocal use of facilities for refuelling and servicing of military craft. This doesn't argue against improved and balanced Indo-US relations, but only against a close strategic, but unequal, alliance.

The new situation will doubtless change UPA-Left relations. But if the Congress recognises some basic ground-rules of coalition politics, that change could be for the better. The Left is an ideologically driven force, whose commitment to some principles and aversion to certain policies must be respected to secure its support.

Even the BJP kept in abeyance - albeit opportunistically - controversial issues like the Ram temple, Uniform Civil Code and Article 370 to build the National Democratic Alliance. The Congress can do better by moderating some of its policies in good faith.

The Indian public has inadvertently gained from the recent standoff, in the form of election-oriented "populist" measures like extension of the National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme. Such measures must be heartily welcomed.

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