

Indo-US Nuclear Deal: In Whose Interests?

A report of a recent international conference in New Delhi that critically discussed the foreign policy, nuclear weapons and nuclear power aspects of the Indo-US deal.

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The public debate about the Indo-US nuclear deal in the English language media has been characterised by a frighteningly narrow set of reference points. The space for a genuine and informed debate has been crushed between professions of its technical complexity, the assumption that a national interest will be served by the deal, and the charge that opposition to it is based upon a blind “anti-Americanism”.¹

Consequently, the range of views offered has been extremely narrow, typically consisting of imputations and assertions rather than information. The importance of the International Conference on the Indo-US Nuclear deal, held at Delhi on August 31 and September 1, must be understood against this perniciously anti-democratic spirit within which the debate had hitherto been conducted.

The conference, organised jointly by the Heinrich Boll Foundation (HBF), the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace (CNDP) and Popular Education and Action Centre (PEACE) was conceived of as tackling individually the three main planks upon which the deal was being championed – the strategic dimension, nuclear weapons and nuclear energy.

It began, however, with a keynote address by Jean Dreze of the Delhi University and G B Pant Institute. His presentation, made more powerful by the calm and assured manner of his delivery, pointed towards all the dangerous kinds of irrationality that inevitably accompany nuclear questions.

To a packed auditorium, with some sitting in the aisles for lack of space, he pointed out that rational responses to developing situations were the first casualties in the kind of escalatory dynamic that nuclear deterrence demands. The mirage of deterrence – that it would end all kinds of conflict through preparing for annihilation – had repeatedly proved illusory over the last century. His exhortation

to remember the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the dangers of a nuclear conflagration in south Asia was important because these are precisely the kinds of real contexts and consequences that are so easily and disastrously lost sight of in the rush towards taking a “tougher” or more “realistic” stand on questions of foreign policy. Since they all operated upon this plane of nuclear deterrence, he suggested, there could be no such thing as a “responsible nuclear power”. Dreze’s address had the salutary effect of reminding those present that the bigger picture must not be lost sight of amid the minutiae of the nuclear deal.

The first panel took up the strategic dimension of the deal. The first speaker, Achin Vanaik of Delhi University and member of the CNDP, pointed out that viewing the outcomes of the deal through the lens of Indian aspirations for great power status was the opposite of where an analysis of the deal’s consequences should begin. Rather, the stakes for which the US was playing, given that it is clearly the more powerful party here, must be understood before making sanguine claims about India’s independent foreign policy. The recent stance of the Indian government on a variety of issues (such as the Asian energy grid or the vote against Iran in the IAEA) demonstrated that the US was achieving its greatest victories in capturing the hearts and minds of the Indian elite, thus sapping any long-term determination to emerge as a strong proponent for a more just international order. The second speaker, T Jayaraman of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, suggested that India, so long a critic of an unjust international nuclear order, was now looking to benefit from that order. The US, he maintained, far from dismantling the non-proliferation order, was bent upon creating a new, even more unequal and dangerous one of which this deal formed a cornerstone.

The third speaker, Andrew Lichterman, a nuclear disarmament activist and lawyer

associated with The Western States Legal Foundation, California, United States, suggested that the nuclear deal must be located within a broader integration of global elites. The package of economic and military contracts that the “strategic alliance” would entail, were the currency through which a network of empire could be maintained. The 123 might well be followed by a 126, referring to the number of fighter planes that India might well end up purchasing from the US. A struggle against the nuclear consequences of such an alliance cannot, therefore, remain divorced from this much broader front of struggle against an increasingly unequal domestic regime. Ejaz Haider, the last speaker at the session, news editor of the *Friday Times*, Lahore, claiming to be a realist, suggested that India could, in fact, serve its national interest by joining the US bandwagon strategically. Inasmuch as this would have implications for Pakistan, it would pursue a policy accordingly.

Both of these conclusions were disputed during a very lively question and answer session. Jayaraman pointed out that one of the most distasteful aspects of the atmosphere in which the deal had been carried through was the complete lack of dialogue with Pakistan on the question, if only to reassure them that this deal was not a provocation. A Pakistani gentleman from the floor pointed out that we need to think as south Asians and governments had repeatedly used the bogey of “internal matters” to keep us separated, when the reality was that these deals had immediate effects upon all the people of south Asia.

National Interest?

In response to one of the questions, Vanaik also clarified his contention that the whole paradigm of “national interest” is a fiction. Different classes have different interests domestically, and it is folly to think that, somehow, these coincide on international questions. In fact, as things stand, the constant claim of policy being in the “national interest” is little more than a mask for the pursuit of the interests of the elite.

The second session explored the impact of nuclear weapons, in the light of the Indo-US deal, on the possibilities of global and south Asian disarmament. From different perspectives, the four speakers at this session all concluded that the present regime of nuclear power in south Asia has produced a major, crippling threat to the

possibility of global nuclear disarmament, in the form of a hawkish and belligerent process of nuclear weaponisation, with an inherently escalatory logic.

The first speaker at this session was Kanak Mani Dixit, the editor of the Nepal-based magazine *Himal Southasia*. Dixit's talk foregrounded the real dangers of nuclear conflict in south Asia, in the light of the flight time of missiles between India and Pakistan (six or seven minutes), the high risk of nuclear accidents, the fallout of which cannot be contained within national boundaries, and the pervasiveness of a chest-thumping military nationalism in both countries. It emphasised the importance of an anti-nuclear movement based on mass mobilisation in the vernaculars of different regions. Dixit pointed out that the encasement within US security architecture has meant refusal of another energy choice that had been open to India – the proposed Iran-India-Pakistan gas pipeline, which, besides producing energy, would have also created genuine and healthy south Asian economic linkages. He suggested that pushing for an anti-nuclear commitment in the soon-to-be

drafted Nepali constitution might help create a climate of anti-proliferation.

Dixit was followed by Praful Bidwai, independent journalist and founding member of the CNDP. Bidwai offered a critique of the creeping consensus shared by proponents of the deal and, at least tacitly, by its opponents on the official Indian left. Both sides, he argued, have been trapped within a discourse of national sovereignty that neglects the deeply irresponsible nature of India's nuclear programme. A "responsible" nuclear weapons state, he stressed, is a contradiction in terms, and India's claims to such "responsibility" are plainly fraudulent. As early as 1974, India, after signing an agreement on the purely peaceful use of nuclear technology, went on to illegally use imported fuel for a nuclear test. The present deal, by offering imported nuclear fuel and reactors, liberates India's domestic uranium reserves for weaponisation. In the light of escalating military expenditure (which has doubled in the last 10 years), and massive arms procurement, it is clear that the Indian government and security experts have no compunctions about triggering

a subcontinental arms race. Bidwai also pointed out that India has consistently rejected all measures and talks aimed at the achievement of disarmament, replacing an earlier commitment to multilateral agreements against nuclear weapons with a regressive emphasis on purely bilateral treaties that seek to legitimise Indian nuclear strategy.

If further confirmation of India's role in triggering off a south Asian arms race was needed, it was provided by Abdul Hameed Nayyar, president of the Pakistan Peace Coalition and member of the International Panel on Fissile Materials, who offered an account of the Pakistani security establishment's response to the Indian nuclear programme. The Indo-US deal enables India to produce 60-100 weapons-grade plutonium a year, and raises its production of nuclear weapons from six to 26 annually. Within the mad logic of escalatory nuclear deterrence, this was bound to trigger off similar ambitions in Pakistan. Nayyar demonstrated that this is precisely what has been happening, with the construction of new plutonium production and reprocessing plants to

increase fissile material production. The logic of “credible minimum deterrence” that undergirds the weaponisation programmes of both countries, is clearly escalatory and dangerous, as Nayyar’s talk chillingly reminded us.

Oliver Meier, a representative of the Arms Control Association in Europe, and a fellow at the Institute of Peace Research and Security Policy, Hamburg, provided insights into the wider global context of the deal, in particular the hesitancy on the part of Germany, as a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to give the deal a green signal. India, he pointed out, has not accepted all the safeguards prescribed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Full acceptance of these safeguards is usually a prerequisite for NSG clearance, which the deal requires for its operationalisation. India’s refusal to accept the full set of safeguards, however, as Bidwai’s talk had already emphasised, is in line with its consistent opposition to any form of global regulation for the most globally destructive form of energy.

Both the first two sessions – on the strategic embrace of the US by India and the dangers of nuclear weapons proliferation – provided a counterweight to the enormous hawkishness of the Indian state and security apparatus. But the third session, focusing on the dangers of civilian nuclear energy regime, addressed the even wider audience of those who are uncomfortable with nuclear weaponisation but believe in the necessity and manageability of civilian nuclear energy. The speakers at this session were Felix Matthes from the Institute of Applied Ecology, Berlin, Sudha Mahalingam, member of the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board, Delhi, Sanghamitra Gadekar, social activist and editor of the anti-nuclear magazine *Anumukti*, and M V Ramana, member of the International Panel of Fissile Materials and fellow of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Environment and Development, Bangalore.

Matthes, like Meier the day before, provided a German perspective on India’s nuclear programme, in the light of the history of the German civilian nuclear energy programme, which is now being phased out. He emphasised the huge extent of the damages – computed in financial terms amounting to over 2,000 billion euros – in the event of a nuclear accident. A single major nuclear accident, in other words, may terminate a country’s energy policy and wreck any gains made from

nuclear energy. He argued that recent German experience showed that renewable sources of energy may provide a more fruitful bedrock of energy policy. Sudha Mahalingam’s talk amplified the theme of the costs of nuclear energy, and exploded the myth that it is “Too Cheap to Meter”. A single nuclear reactor, she pointed out, was unlikely to have a purchasing cost of below \$ 1,500/kwh. Adding the interest accumulating during construction, the total costs of a nuclear reactor would amount to Rs 8-10 crore/MW. Fuel costs, too, have risen to \$ 105/pound. The risk of a nuclear accident would also have to be borne financially by the government, which would bear virtually unlimited liability. Nuclear energy, in other words, is a much more expensive business than its propagandists claim. Mahalingam argued that gas provided a far cheaper energy option for India, an assertion that further underlined Kanak Dixit’s argument that the Iran pipeline would have been both practically and politically more desirable than nuclear energy.

Health Costs

Sanghamitra Gadekar shifted the discussion from the financial to the “real” costs of nuclear energy. Nuclear power in India, she argued, is necessarily embedded within forms of immense social injustice and ecological irresponsibility, which operate from the very beginning of the nuclear fuel cycle. She demonstrated that the culture of the nuclear establishment was predicated on the exploitation and deception of low-wage workers and residents in areas taken over for mining, or for the establishment of reactors. The land recently acquired for a nuclear reactor at Madban in Ratnagiri, for instance, was taken under draconian emergency provisions, without an Environmental Impact Assessment, or a public hearing. The site of the proposed plant, furthermore, lies in a zone that has experienced 88 quakes of an intensity exceeding three on the Richter scale between 1986 and 2005. At Jadugoda in Jharkhand, where uranium is mined, workers carry out their work with virtually no protection from radiation, and radioactive waste is taken away in open trucks. Local inhabitants have been crippled by tumours, congenital deformities, and chronic diseases. Quite independent of all the other problems with nuclear energy, the culture of nuclear power in India is

shot through with patent disregard for the human lives expended in the production of such energy.

M V Ramana’s paper, the last of the seminar, focused on the absence of effective and accountable safety mechanisms to guard against nuclear accidents – a dimension completely absent from the official “debate” on the nuclear energy issue. He pointed out nuclear power is unique among electricity technologies in having the capacity to inflict instantaneous catastrophic damage. This is a direct outcome of the speed and high pressure and temperature at which highly radioactive material must operate. He described the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident and its consequences in some detail. Closer home he listed several narrowly averted nuclear accidents in India over the last decade and a half, in particular the fire at the Narora atomic plant in 1993, and the valve failure and radiation emission at Kalpakkam in 2003, which resulted in large doses of radiation exposure to three workers. The likelihood of such accidents can be minimised through efficient safety mechanisms, but, argued Ramana, there is no foolproof method of ensuring complete nuclear safety. Besides, as his talk demonstrated effectively, the Indian nuclear establishment is geared towards minimal and very ineffective investments in safety and security. It was an important and sobering note upon which to conclude a conference that would have alerted many to the real and urgent dangers to national and global peace and security posed by India’s current enthusiasm for this nuclear deal. **EW**

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Note

1 Barkha Dutt, for instance, says: “Frankly, for most of us, much of the technical jargon is gobbledygook.... [Nevertheless] no matter how cynical we are about our politicians, we largely trust this government when it says there will be no deliberate self-out of India’s independence.” In taking this stand of claiming not to understand the deal, and yet supporting it out of a sense of “national interest”, she is representative of an important strand of positions taken on the question within the television and print media. *Hindustan Times*, August 18, 2007.

By far the lowest level to which the debate fell, however, was the insinuation that the left, by opposing the deal, was serving the interests of China or Pakistan rather than India. This was the stand taken by the strategic experts quoted in a front-page article of the *Hindustan Times*. ‘Whose National Interest Is the Left Protecting?’, *Hindustan Times*, August 20, 2007.