

India, between nuclear euphoria and Naxalite insurrection

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Global Research, July 05, 2007

CEPRID 18 July 2007

Region: [Asia](#)

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India is the second most populous country in the world and at the same time one of the most unknown. While on the one hand China and Russia are courting India so as to create a real counterweight to the United States (1), the country's oligarchy want to break with that proposed alliance and to do so are using the issue of nuclear power. Still, US proposals to share technology and nuclear fuel with India lack India's agreement on a crucial matter : whether or not to carry out new nuclear tests. The US opposes them, while India thinks that agreeing to US demands would limit its right to process depleted uranium fuel, a key step to obtain plutonium and, thus, would limit its sovereignty.

This is not only the official government position but that of the opposition, on both Right and Left, and of scientists, who demand that the agreement not be ratified unless Parliament does so beforehand. On that, both the Communist Party of India (Marxist), with 44 seats of the New Delhi Parliament's total of 543, and the right-wing Bharatiya Janata (138 seats) agree and without them it is impossible to get a parliamentary majority. The pressure is such that if Prime Minister Manmohan Singh ratifies the agreement without parliamentary approval it would bring down his coalition government. It is worth noting that the government is made up of a centrist three party alliance led by the National Congress Party of India (145 seats), the Rashtriya Janata Dal (21 seats) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (16 seats), supported from outside government by the Left Front (Marxist Communist Party of India with 44 seats, and the Communist Party of India with 10 seats) together with other regionalist and ethnic parties.

The Bush administration began the process of agreement with India on the nuclear issue in March 2006, at the same time as the beginning of the nuclear crisis with Iran.(2) That rapprochement consisted of the recognition by the US of India's nuclear capacity, justified as part of an effort by Bush to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons, avoid an arms race between India and Pakistan and reinforce India-US ties. It put an end to the 30-year embargo on nuclear material imposed on India in 1974 when India - which is a non-signatory of the Nuclear Arms Non-Proliferation treaty, while Iran is - carried out its first nuclear test. In accordance with the agreement, which is up in the air for now, India would accept the presence of International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) inspectors in 14 of its nuclear installations and would clearly separate the civilian and military aspects of its nuclear programme.

But the agreement went even further : it sought to have India break off all its energy and military agreements with Iran. The US offer included stronger trade links with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, two Central Asian states with large energy reserves, especially gas, and likewise with Afghanistan and Pakistan to make good India's energy deficit if it were to

break with Iran.

Both India and Pakistan have signed an agreement with Iran to build an oil pipeline, “the oil pipeline of Peace” worth US\$7bn, to distribute gas to the three countries and this is expected to be formally signed on June 30th. This is something the US is trying to avoid at all costs since at the end of June it intended to return to the UN Security Council asking for a new set of harder sanctions against Iran for not halting its nuclear programme. Already early pressures are being applied by the US to the member countries of the UN Security Council so as to include gas companies within the sanctions.(3) As usual, US foreign policy carries an undeniable element of coercion and in this case more than usual : in exchange for the signing of a nuclear agreement, the Bush Administration would support India’s entry into the Security Council as a permanent member, although without veto rights.

According to the UN reforms timidly initiated by Kofi Annan, the UN Security Council would be enlarged taking into account new global realities and would include as permanent members, without right of veto, Germany for Europe, Nigeria or South Africa for Africa, Brazil or Mexico for Latin America and India or Japan for Asia. The criterion used by Kofi Annan was demographic and economic weight, dressing it up with criteria of greater representation in the UN’s executive body for different peoples and cultures.

Maoist insurrection and the struggle for land

India aspires to become an unrivalled regional power by 2015. But, to achieve that, guaranteeing its energy needs (oil and, preferably, gas) is vital and it is in this regard that nuclear energy plays an important role. Since its independence from Great Britain, India has tried to set out from what one might call “an economy of size”, taking advantage, in other words, of its geographic and population potential. However, despite enormous social differences revolutionary forces, or the Left, if you like, have had difficulty making progress given that capitalism has developed slowly but constantly. The explanation for this situation is that since independence in 1947 India had relatively developed industry and a wealthy, powerful bourgeoisie very adept both at international politics (one should not forget India’s importance in creating the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries) and national politics, integrating social measures – although without abolishing the caste system – with outright capitalist ones.

However, during the last 18 years, India has implemented neoliberal policies, gradually dismantling its centralized economy and privatizing its main sectors under the wing of a battery of laws to protect Direct Foreign Investments, especially those from the United States that have now increased from US\$76m to US\$4bn. At the moment, India’s gross domestic product is about US\$786bn, four times that of the rest of countries in South Asia.

This policy has led to an increase in the middle classes to around 300 million people, the Bollywood movie watchers and migrants to Europe or the United States and who are more and more isolated from disadvantaged classes not only along traditional caste divisions but in economic matters too. It is reckoned that more than 700 million Indians live in the most absolute poverty. Almost all of them are rural workers who live on small plots of land of less than one hectare and who depend on big private businesses for supplies of seed, fertiliser and other inputs. Furthermore they have to survive amidst impressive industrial projects (especially mining projects) and water projects that flood their land or else expropriate them at absurd prices. To that one has to add the traditional oppression that lower castes have

suffered since time immemorial and the ever-increasing presence of paramilitaries in the service of big landowners.

So it is no wonder then that a Maoist insurrection is spreading across India like an oil stain across paper, already affecting 14 of India's 28 States (Chatisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Asma, Uttaranchal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra and Bihar). In figures, that means the Maoists are in control in 165 districts out of the total of 602 into which the country is divided. In fact in the last five states mentioned one can say that "popular new democratic power" is a reality, given that they are the ones who control the countryside, collect taxes from large businesses within their zones of influence, build dykes and irrigation systems, impart justice, decide land disputes among rural families and have suppressed, for example, child marriage. Prime Minister Singh recognised the Maoist advance on August 23rd 2006 when he declared solemnly to Parliament that the Maoists "have become the biggest internal challenge to security that India has." (4)

To deal with the Maoist surge the New Delhi government put into practice the well known US strategy from Vietnam, later perfected in Central America during the revolutionary processes in El Salvador and, above all, in Guatemala : the creation of strategic hamlets and the formation of paramilitary patrols to defend them (in Guatemala, the Civilian Self-Defence Patrols). In India they are known as Slawa Judum (that translates as "Peace Hunters") and have the status of "special police agents" in rural communities. They are especially active in Chatisgarh and it is against them that the guerrilla offensive is currently aimed. An ambush on March 15th killed 50 out of a joint force of police and paramilitaries.(5) The main activity of the paramilitaries is the forced displacement of rural families to "temporary camps" set up in the areas of Bhairamgarh, Gedam y Bijapur and in which 50,000 people are currently crowded. (6)

Paid by landowners and by the Indian government itself, the paramilitaries earn about 1500 rupees a month (about €26 or US\$35). The counter-insurgency war, as in the Central American countries mentioned or in Peru or Colombia, uses terror to try and cut off the guerrilla advance. It is estimated that Salwa Judum has 5000 members and the ideologue, just as with the Colombian paramilitaries protected by current President Alvaro Uribe during his time as governor of the Antioquia province, was the main Congress Party leader in Chatisgarh. This is the party of Prime Minister Singh. To those 5000, one must add about 2000 "anti-terrorist " police who have undergone a similar training programme to that given to the Atlacatl battalion, in El Salvador, which committed countless mass murders, outrages, intimidation and forced displacements. In case this paramilitary force is insufficient to stop the guerrilla, the government also offers bounties of up to a million rupees (about €17,000 or US\$23,000) for the betrayal of the main guerrilla leaders.

This strategy is favoured in the "red zone", a category applied by the Indian government to the states of Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra y Bihar, although in the last few months an impressive guerrilla military campaign has begun in Chatisgarh which has made the new Delhi government focus on this state leaving its plans for the other states in abeyance. The reason the guerrillas are prioritizing Chatisgarh is that this state, along with Jharkand, is turning into the spearhead of the government's neoliberal policies following the signing of juicy, million-dollar contracts with big national and multinational industrial corporations, on steel, iron, coal and electricity, which presuppose a new wave of rural families in exodus to wretched slums in the cities. In fact, the most recent guerrilla attack was on June 3rd against the electricity plant of Narayanpur, a district of Chatisgarh.

(7)

The Maoists say little when they carry out their actions. It is a fact that guerrilla control in this state is almost complete, with 10 of its 16 districts in their power (8) and that their military actions are more and more daring, including attacks against officials, police, politicians and strategic economic and industrial targets.

The government's aim is to confine the Maoist presence to that "red zone" and avoid it spreading with equal force to the rest of the country. Once that objective is achieved, repression will centre on what can be called "support bases" or liberated zones. Nonetheless, it is the different States that have responsibility for security matters, not central government, which explains why police implement the repression rather than the army, and there are different opinions about the best way to confront the guerrilla. In Andhra Pradesh the tendency is to negotiate directly, while in Chatisgarh the paramilitary phenomenon is used, to mention the most extreme examples. These positions are influenced by the role the moderate Left has in different State governments and even in the central government which would collapse without the Left's support, as was pointed out earlier. This is the reason why timid agrarian reform is being advanced throughout India and which has as a pilot experience the one implemented in 2005 in the mother State of the guerrillas, West Bengal.

For the moment the guerrillas are ignoring the cities to focus on total control of the countryside, following the old strategy of surrounding the cities from the countryside. The strategy is to penetrate rural areas, consolidate in them and, once the bases of support are deemed secure, to go on building up effective and efficient links with different cells in other states. It is the classic strategy that has given such good results in Nepal. As with their Nepalese comrades, the Indian Maoists respect local officials - including the police - if the people think they are honest and not compromised by cases of corruption or repression. They also respect businesses established in their zones of influence but they collect from them a "revolutionary tax", which varies between 15% and 20 % of their profits, to fund their operations.

History of the Naxalites

The Indian Maoists are known as Naxalites from the town of Naxalbari in West Bengal, where the first armed actions occurred of an organization called the People's War Group, the armed wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) which, with the slogan of radical reform of land ownership, forced a stand-off through the 1960s with the Indian government. Although the rebellion they led - land occupations, burning of catastral property registers, forgiveness of rural families' mortgage debts and execution of the most important oppressors and usurers - only lasted three months, it ended with a very severe repression that caused more than 100,000 deaths and the virtual disappearance of the organization's members. But some groups carried on operating, although without mutual contact. This led to the fragmentation of the CPI-ML which lasted until 2003 when the Maoist Communist Centre and the Indian Revolutionary Communist Centre united to form the Maoist Communist Centre of India (CCMI) and, one year later in 2004, the integration of a tendency of the CPI-ML called "Popular War". That is how the Communist Party of India (Maoist) came into being with its main slogan as "the fight against feudalism and imperialism".

If one can believe reports of the Indian intelligence services, the country's Maoists have

been tempered in the revolutionary popular war in Nepal where they have won greater political training and military experience. The intelligence services reckon that the People's Guerrilla Army (the Indian Maoists military wing) last year counted on 8000 combatants, 25,000 militia members - protecting support bases, carrying out intelligence work and logistic support for the combatants - and 50,000 political members. Small numbers if one considers that India is a country with 1bn inhabitants. But the rapid development of the Maoist movement has set off alarm bells among India's political elite.(9) The immiseration of two thirds of India's people and their social oppression counteract elite desires to turn India into a regional power via nuclear weapons and an agreement with the United States. Today the Naxalites are a reality that has to be taken into account. Perhaps westerners looking to India have been able to learn that "naxa" in the Indian vocabulary now means "rebel rural worker" and that the current and past struggles of the naxalites are part of modern Indian culture, even of its cinema.

Notes

(1) Rajiv Sikri, "Are the leaders of India, China and Russia ready for radical development?"

(2) Alberto Cruz, "India e Irán: otra muestra de la hipocresía occidental "

(3) Asia Times, 1 June 2007.

(4) Christian Science Monitor, 28 August 2006

(5) Agence France Press, 15 March 2007.

(6) The Indian Express, 7 June 2007.

(7) The Hindu, 3 June 2007.

(8) Prensa Latina, 15 March 2007

(9) The Pioneer, 27 April 2006.

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First published in Spanish by Centro de Estudios Políticos para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Desarrollo www.nodo50.org/ceprid. Translation copyright by tortilla con sal.

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