

Deal remains in limbo

The debate in Parliament on the 123 Agreement has achieved nothing, says CP Bhambhri

The Lok Sabha has clinically scrutinised the pros and cons of the India-US nuclear deal and it is possible that the UPA Government may conclude that the members of the Lower House have endorsed the 123 Agreement at the end of a lively debate on November 28. However, it deserves to be stated that the House in general is not in favour of the nuclear deal.

The Government stands completely isolated from the mainstream Opposition parties. The debate of November 28 has revealed that the Government is following foreign policy which is quite unpopular with the people of India, as shown by the stand taken by the Opposition parties in the Lok Sabha.

The three major political parties -- the Congress, the BJP and the CPI(M) -- have taken positions on the floor of the House which deserve to be highlighted to substantiate the argument that the UPA does not represent majority public opinion on its foreign policy. The Government's stand is a parrot like repeat performance of the past than two to three years by US President George W Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The Government has not put forward any new argument on November 28. The India-US cooperation, according to the UPA Government, is a 'passport' for the country to travel to the world to "conduct nuclear trade". The 123 Agreement, in reality, lays down 'conditionalities' on India and the Government is not ready to face this reality.

Leader of Opposition LK Advani has stated in the Lok Sabha: "The 123 Agreement, as it stands today, is unacceptable... No self-respecting country can agree to it. There is no flip-flop by us and we are not anti-American in our approach like the Left." He also warned that "if they (BJP) came to power, it would 'negotiate' the deal, and if it fails, the BJP would reject it".

The bone of contention between the UPA Government and the BJP is that the post-nuclear deal phase will lead to the erosion of India's sovereignty to "test nuclear bomb on the basis of our security threat perceptions". The BJP has not bought a verbal assurance of the Government that after the IAEA agreement and the conclusion of negotiations with the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, India will have the sovereign 'option' to conduct 'nuclear test' if it is in national interest.

The Left parties have been consistently opposing the foreign and strategic foreign policies of the UPA Government because they have maintained that the Manmohan Singh regime "has completely deviated from India's traditional foreign policy of national independence and non-alignment". The Communists maintain that India has distanced itself from its traditional allies like Iran at the behest of the US.

It is not relevant to suggest that the Communists are ideologically

conditioned to oppose the US and on the basis of this ideological package, they want India to maintain safe distance from that country. Is it non-empirical to be cautious of the US's global designs? Is it being doctrinaire to ignore the US's track record of interventionism in the internal affairs of other countries? Do we need an anti-American ideology to evaluate the carrot-and-stick policies of sole superpower?

Trade alone is not a motive force for the Bush Administration. The CPI(M) stated in the Lok Sabha, "The Americans need India to maintain a balance of power in South and South-East Asia. They are getting isolated in the world due to their policies. Is it in our interest if we be a party to it?" The US's National Security Strategy, 2002, has observed that India and China are "potential US rivals" and in 2007, it is fruitful for the Americans to win over India as an ally.

Mr Manmohan Singh should have launched discussions on the nuclear deal with the BJP and the Communists just after signing the July 18, 2005 India-US nuclear declaration. The UPA is quite concerned about the erosion of India's international credibility if the nuclear deal is rejected. The Government has to blame itself for creating a situation where it finds itself politically isolated because it had not considered it appropriate to resolve political differences with the opponents of the nuclear deal.

The upshot of above narrative is that the Lok Sabha debate has not helped the Government to get political 'endorsement' of the India-US nuclear deal and the blame lies squarely with the Government. After all, on such a crucial national policy, it adopted either the postures of arrogance or of holding selective discussions with selected groups. The India-US nuclear deal is a national issue and the Government completely failed to realise its national importance; else, it would have held broad-based national discussions with major political parties.