

Publication: The Times Of India Delhi; Date: Sep 20, 2007; Section: Editorial; Page: 18



Atoms and Onions

Instead of opposing N-deal, Left should help government tackle food prices

Prakash Karat's new formula, that New Delhi should wait six months before operationalising the nuclear deal, is disingenuous. As anybody who reads these columns is aware, we disagree strongly with the view that the nuclear deal sells out India's interests and therefore ought not to be signed. The Left holds a political view which it is entitled to hold. By proposing to put the deal in the freezer, however, it appears to want to kill the deal without quite taking responsibility for it.

It knows that election season will be on in the US in another six months. If the deal can be frozen till then it will pass from the Bush administration's and US Congress's priorities. It will also allow time for a subtle Chinese campaign against the deal to work its way through Capitol Hill. Since the deal was announced in July 2005, there's been ample time to debate its pros and cons. Many nuclear scientists who had opposed the deal initially have been reassured by the final text of the agreement. Anil Kakodkar, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission and one of the most influential among the early sceptics, is now at an IAEA conference in Vienna making the government's case on nuclear energy cooperation. But Karat still thinks the country's scientists and politicians need six more months to debate the deal. Clearly, an attempt to shelve it by consigning it to a committee.

Nevertheless there's a window of opportunity here. The Left's view is that the deal should not be operationalised for six more months. If that means the final signature can't be placed on the deal for that period, that should be fine by the government. But Left politicians have been articulating the view that the government can't even negotiate a safeguards agreement with the IAEA, a necessary step for the deal to go before US Congress. That's a hardline position which, if it manages to scotch the deal, is going to cause incalculable harm to the country's prestige.

There are issues more pressing for the ordinary voter which the Left should focus on and work with the UPA government to resolve. Domestic prices of food articles are climbing at 8.4 per cent, a much more rapid clip than the general inflation rate of 4 per cent. Crude oil prices have surged in the international market and domestic fuel prices too could go up. For the ordinary consumer it's the price of onions, which has shot up 91 per cent over the past year, that matters more than an argument over atoms.