

Nuclear weapons, nuclear power, corporate globalization, and the role of cities: some preliminary observations

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We likely are facing the beginning of great crisis of our time. Both the economy and the ideology of the great wave of corporate globalization that has come to dominate most of the planet has been greatly shaken, and may be on the verge of collapse. This clearly is a moment of great danger. It should be a moment of opportunity as well for people working for a global economy that is more fair, more democratic, and more ecologically sustainable.

One of the saddest and most disturbing things to me about this moment is how little the strategies chosen in recent decades by these kinds of movements here in the U.S. have done that would make this a moment of opportunity. We need to start a new discussion about how we work on issues like nuclear disarmament and global warming, both because the global context is changing fast and because our strategies have not been successful.

As a tentative beginning, I want to focus on one of those missed opportunities--the recently completed US India nuclear deal. That agreement allows India full access to trade in nuclear fuel and technology, despite the fact that it has refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

A few weeks ago, as I was working on various things, I had C-Span 2 on in the background, showing the Senate debates and votes on the financial industry bailout and US-India nuclear deal. In many ways it was a historic day. But it was a sad and frustrating day for anyone who cares about democracy, or about creating a future that is more economically fair, more ecologically sustainable, and in which the danger of catastrophic war no longer is an everyday presence. The Senate debate on the financial crisis was marked by distortions and bald-faced lies (such as that the legislation under consideration provided meaningful controls on executive compensation and other measures to prevent the bailout from being a straight up redistribution of wealth to the rich from the rest of us). The debate on the U.S.-India nuclear agreement was marked by its superficial nature, with the deal being jammed through under cover of the financial crisis and in a manner so rushed as to require a waiver of the time requirements of the Atomic Energy Act.

These votes illustrate the power of immense interests to easily crush the single issue "progressive" groups on all but small things in business as usual politics, and even to override massive outpourings of public sentiment amidst a crisis and rising levels of political attention and mobilization. They show that it will take far more organized social power than we now have to make real change. There also were many connections to be made between the U.S. India nuclear deal and the global economic crisis. No Senator even mentioned them. I want to focus on these connections, because I think that they illustrate the nature of the real obstacles we face in making progress on nuclear disarmament, and in general towards a way of life that is more fair, more democratic, and that might be ecologically sustainable over the long run.

Almost a decade ago, two colleagues of ours from India, Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik, wrote one of the best books on the global nuclear dilemma, and on India's role in it. They wrote:

With the collapse of the Nehruvian paradigm, consisting of democracy, secularism, non-alignment and "socialism," the top ten to fifteen percent of Indians, the upper-crust of society, have set their face against the rest, especially the poor. Culturally, economically, and politically, they are closer to Northern elites and their own kin in North America and Europe. Strongly influenced by social-Darwinist ideas, they see the poor as a drag on "their" India. They want a shortcut to high global stature. What better route than the military one? Greatness here is defined purely in terms of power untempered by civilized conduct or compassion. Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik, *New Nukes: India, Pakistan, and Global Nuclear Disarmament* (New York: Interlink Books, 2000), p.136.

The collective decision of what we think of as the "middle class" to turn its back on most of the rest of the population is not limited to India. In the broader global context, nuclear power and high technology weapons are both elements in and help to sustain a global circulation of trade and investment devoted to the production of goods and services that only a fraction of the world's population can afford to buy. Large organizations whether "public" or "private" increasingly provide services and buy and sell mainly to each other or to "consumers" who are the upper-echelon inhabitants of those same organizations or perhaps their contractors, the "new classes" of technocrats, bureaucrats, managers, and professionals who constitute the modern middle class. This dynamic pushes much of the world's population towards the margin, with luxury crops, resource extraction, and now biofuel production driving hundreds of millions off the land into burgeoning urban slums. Yet development efforts continue to center on energy and transportation infrastructure designed to serve global supply chains for up-market consumer goods, with urban areas world-wide competing to stay or become stable nodes in the top-tier economy. The result is a world characterized by islands of great wealth in a deepening sea of poverty.

In this kind of world, weapons and military services always will be a growth industry. And nuclear technology, with its potential for the ultimate in weaponry, provides one way for certain elites and sectors of the new middle classes to make themselves a profitable place within the current wave of corporate-capitalist globalization. The nuclear road provides them with privileged access to their own country's resources, a development context that can be shielded from foreign competition, and an entree to forms of trade that are seen as increasing in importance as fossil fuels diminish. The powerful tools of nationalism and "national security" secrecy both facilitate the extraction of wealth from the rest of society and prevent scrutiny of national nuclear enterprises that whether in "advanced" or "post-colonial" states have been rife with technical problems, corruption, and widespread, intractable environmental impacts. Nuclear technology, with its vision of near-magical, limitless power (an image its purveyors energetically promote), casts a positive aura over other big, centralized "high-tech" development programs that are profitable for elites, but have little or even negative value for most of the population in an ever more stratified world.

Looking at the broader context, the current global scene in some ways resembles that

which brought the devastating world wars of the last century. New economic and military powers are emerging, seeking an increased share of the means needed to create wealth for their elites and to raise the standard of living for the rest of their populations sufficiently to avoid unrest. Older powers are determined to hold on to advantages acquired through centuries of war, conquest, and hard-driving forms of technological and economic development that have enabled them to accumulate great economic and military power, but also have rapidly depleted the resources they directly control. The United States, while still very powerful, is on the downslope, a debtor nation dependent on imported resources that has seen much of its manufacturing capacity slip away at the moment of its greatest military ascendance. In the past, transitions of this kind have brought wars. These wars, like the economic system that in large part drives them, have become more intense, more total, with both the terrain contested and the energies unleashed encompassing more and more at each turn.

Today, there is no visible alternative on the horizon to global competition among state-centered or regional aggregations of wealth. All states with significant power are controlled by elites who are either ideologically committed to or at the very least seem unable to offer any alternative to the immense power and inertia of the global corporate capitalist system. Over all looms the United States, its rulers self-consciously committed to preserving this system, and possessing a military machine unparalleled in human history.

What is new in the current conjuncture gives little cause for comfort. Resource competition has reached unprecedented intensity, with little left of the planet to explore and exploit. Ecological stresses aggravate the growing polarization of wealth in a corporate capitalist economy that now encompasses most of the planet. Finally, nuclear weapons now make it possible for an incumbent “great power” to destroy an adversary entirely, and perhaps itself along with it. And even lesser wars in which nuclear weapons are used risk catastrophe that defies comprehension.

In addition, the unprecedented complex of large-scale science, the military, and high-tech industrial capacity possessed by the United States will take a long time to match. All of this makes it appear possible for a declining but still militarily powerful dominant global power to sustain a status quo favorable to its interests for far longer than its economic capacity might otherwise allow. And great danger lies in its elites believing that they can do so, whether it is true or not.

Those in power in the United States appear to be determined to exploit the structural advantages conferred by the immense U.S. aerospace-military-industrial complex to extend their dominance for as long as possible— with a particular emphasis on assuring access to oil, whose control confers key advantages given the technology base and physical organization of both modern economies and militaries. U.S. policy, as declared in the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States, is to sustain a level of military development and production sufficient to “dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”¹ Unfortunately, there does not appear to be much dissent on the fundamentals of this approach among U.S. political elites, with the presidential candidates and the “national security” and foreign policy establishments of both parties

proclaiming their allegiance, loudly and frequently, to keeping all aspects of U.S. military power second to none.

Added to all this is the power of the U.S. military-industrial complex itself, a virtual state-within-a-state determined to keep its disproportionate piece of the pie even as the U.S. economy declines.² And there is strong evidence that they will fight to do so. Amidst the gravest financial crisis since the Great Depression the US military reportedly is preparing requests for large spending increases from whatever administration comes into office, seeking to represent any departure from endlessly increasing military spending as being a reduction, and somehow a threat to our “national interest.”³

The path of economic development that the world is on can not be sustained over the long run, either ecologically or politically. It has been driven on one end by expanding debt, particularly in the United States, propping up a mass consumer society at the expense of the vast majority of the workers in the countries that make the products we Americans consume. This can last only as long as the new elites who are growing rich in those countries can get away with cycling their profits back into the United States, rather than investing them in some alternative development path at home, one more beneficial to the majority of their own populations. This cycle could be broken in many ways— by a financial crisis (perhaps the one we now are in) brought on by reaching some threshold of debt imbalance, or by renewed social conflict caused by wealth polarization and the negative effects of rapid development within one or more of the countries pursuing export-driven development paths forcing the re-direction of a significant amount of investment onto internal development.

Many countries would then be forced to find solutions for mass unemployment and social unrest, relying more heavily on internal economic development and resources. There could be positive solutions in such circumstances. In the United States, for example, conversion to more efficient, low-carbon emission transportation and energy systems could provide ample employment for American workers for decades, while improving our carbon footprint and significantly reducing competition for key resources with the rest of the world.

But still-dominant U.S. elites are not likely to choose such a path, and in fact are likely to resist it. They also have created and sustained political conditions that make it difficult to swiftly shift direction— everything from the ideologies of mass consumption and the purported “freedoms” that come from an auto-dependent society to decades of propaganda campaigns fostering widespread hostility to the kind of regulation and government-directed and tax funded investment that would be necessary to fundamentally change energy and transportation infrastructure. Far more likely is a resurgent militarism, with arms production to drive economic growth, military service as employer of last resort, and a search for external scapegoats to blame for the end of the mass consumption dream sold to Americans for the last century.

Here in the U.S., professional arms control elements dominate arms control and disarmament work, and this broader context remains largely outside the limits of the discourse. Arms control activity, including much the work of most NGO’s in the field, remains focused on government initiatives, which in the current conjuncture mainly means a focus on nonproliferation

rather than disarmament. Broader discussion of “disarmament” consists mainly of aspirational statements and the reshuffling of proposals for the proper sequencing of arms reductions. In the U.S., organizing and outreach consists mainly of lining up already existing— and shrinking— disarmament constituencies to favor or oppose particular government or legislative initiatives. These are at best incremental steps that would do little to change the fundamental threat that the possession of thousands— or hundreds or even tens— of deliverable nuclear weapons pose. Further, the pace of nuclear arms reduction envisioned in this approach of this kind is at best very, very slow, measured in decades, not years. But the pace of the kind of dynamics that has led to wars among major powers in the past appears to be accelerating.

The US India deal, unfortunately, provides an example of how our predominant approaches are ineffective even in what essentially are defensive actions, ones that at best keep things from getting much worse. It should be noted that the Washington, D.C.-based arms control and disarmament groups did an excellent job of documenting and publicizing the likely impacts of the deal on the global non-proliferation regime. They provided information that was in-depth, accurate, and timely, and had considerable success getting that information into first-rank mainstream media outlets. Their talking points appear to have been taken up by the few legislators who actively opposed the deal in both the House and the Senate. Nonetheless, the vote tally in the Senate was not much different from two years before, when it approved the Hyde Act in which Congress initially authorized the executive branch to finalize the deal.

There is no question that the strategy chosen was well executed— it was. But in the wake of this and other failures of disarmament strategies over the last decade and a half, we should be asking whether we need new strategies. The narrow focus on the deal’s proliferation impacts did not address the other forces lined up in favor of the deal, and did not construct any narrative, or provide any analysis, that could make the connections to other issues and build broader alliances. In a time where large, mobilized peace and anti-nuclear movements are absent, business as usual politics— the politics of lobbying and money—will prevail. And in the U.S. at least, other constituencies in a fragmented political scene never were given much reason to think that the U.S. India nuclear deal affects anything they care about.

It is true that this deal is likely to further erode an already shaky nuclear non-proliferation regime. It allows India, a country which has refused to join the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, to have full access to nuclear technology and trade. Access to international sources of nuclear reactor fuel will allow India to devote its scarce domestic uranium supply to expanding its nuclear arsenal. And it is a further example of the United States, which has ignored its own obligations under the non-proliferation treaty to negotiate for the elimination of its nuclear arsenal, claiming to right to decide who should and should not have access to nuclear technology.

But US-India nuclear deal is part of a far larger set of changes in the U.S.-India relationship that elites in both countries are seeking, each with an eye to maximizing their own wealth and power. The 2006 U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review declared that “India is emerging as a great power and a key strategic partner.”⁴ U.S. Military planners envision India as a possible forward base for operations from South Asia to the Middle East, and perhaps as a partner in those operations as well. Arms makers see huge potential profit from increased arms sales, with India

being one of the world's largest importers of high-tech weapons. U.S.-based multinationals are gearing up for expansion into India, hoping to use the enhanced "security" partnership as a wedge to further open India to foreign investment and sales, not only in nuclear technology and services but in everything from food and agriculture to banking and finance to big box retail stores.

The nuclear deal was represented by India's elites as the lynchpin for the larger set of deals, essential to establishing confidence that the US views India as a reliable strategic partner. How strong the linkages in fact were between the nuclear deal and broader initiatives for the opening and deregulation of India's economy remains an unanswered question. What is clear is that the alliance pushing for the nuclear deal extended far beyond the nuclear and even the defense industries, encompassing a variety of major US and Indian corporate interests that would benefit from binding India more closely to a US-led neoliberal development path.

The ambitions of elites in the two countries to strengthen an array of military and economic ties is reflected in the set of initiatives announced by U.S. President Bush And India's Prime Minister Singh in July 2005 together with the agreement in principle on nuclear trade and cooperation. A few weeks earlier, the two countries had agreed to a "New Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship." The "New Framework" called for increased military cooperation across a wide range of activities, from joint exercises and intelligence exchanges to increased weapons trade to collaboration in missile defense development.

The July 2005 agreements also established a "CEO Forum" to "harness private sector energy and ideas to deepen the bilateral economic relationship," an agreement for closer cooperation in space technology and commercial space activities and a "Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture." The U.S. private sector members of the Agricultural Knowledge Initiative governing board are Archer Daniels Midland, a diversified giant that takes agricultural products from the world over and turns them into commodities ranging from processed foods to biofuels and industrial chemicals, biotech giant Monsanto, and Walmart, the world's biggest retailer. The agreements did not create a small farmers forum, or a labor forum, or an urban poor peoples' forum.

The CEO Forum's agenda since 2005 has been a kind of wish-list for the deregulation and opening of India's economy. This includes, for example, greatly expanding the degree to which foreign banking and financial services companies can do operate in India. This position was duly echoed by the U.S. government, with a Treasury Department fact sheet stating that "the development of the financial sector and trade in financial services will play a key role in promoting private-sector led growth and economic stability in India."⁵

These deals are likely to reinforce the circuit of trade and investment focused on global supply chains for goods and services that only a fraction of the world's population can afford to buy. Nuclear power requires very large investments that then commit you to using that technology at its particular level of development in large quantities for long periods of time— a number of decades. Nuclear power today provides only 3% of India's electricity generation, and 1% of its total energy use. It is not likely to more than do more than double or triple for decades, given the real costs and difficulties of building and operating nuclear power plants. Both energy

conservation measures and decentralized, alternative energy technologies like wind and solar and small scale hydro can be deployed in far smaller increments, and thus can more easily take advantage of constant improvements in technology. Renewable energy technologies also are more likely to give the hundreds of millions of people in India and elsewhere living in rural areas not served by an electric power grid a chance to move up the energy ladder, and to do so in ways that do not contribute to global warming.

These less capital intensive technologies also create more jobs, and a wider variety of jobs in a broader range of social settings. Increased global trade in these technologies would accelerate their development and also encourage their adoption in the United States, where energy generation is highly centralized, inefficient, and dependent on fossil fuels.

Most of the other agreements also focus on industries that are highly concentrated, where expanded trade and economic activity are likely to intensify disparities of wealth both in the United States and India. High tech arms production, for example, in addition to contributing to further militarization of international relations in a context of growing global military tensions, creates relatively few jobs per dollar of public spending. Increased arms trade further concentrates wealth and political power in military-industrial complex sectors in both countries.

If arms control and disarmament groups had made the connections to this and other aspects of the US-India agreements that are intended to cement both countries firmly to the neoliberal development path, the fact that the nuclear deal came up in Congress at a time when that development model itself was in crisis might have provided an opportunity. But instead the deal drew opposition only from a narrow set of relatively specialized, professionalized nongovernmental organizations, and hence could be pushed through relatively easily under cover of the larger, and in the view of most, unconnected, financial crisis.

Making significant progress towards nuclear disarmament and ending reliance on nuclear power for energy likely will require deeper, broader social change. We we who work on these issues pursue narrow, supposedly “pragmatic” strategies and lose (as we have for the most part in recent years) we not only lose, but lose twice. If we had been making these kinds of connections throughout our work on this issue, and on other issues for the last several decades, we would have had a better chance of at least forcing real debate on what the deal meant— and if not, at least we would have gone further in advancing understanding of the relationships among nuclear weapons, nuclear power, and the nature of an unfair and unsustainable global economic order.

How is all this expressed at the level of cities? Indian Economist Amit Bhaduri described the urban development path most commonly chosen in the world of corporate globalization:

“Mammoth projects create the impression of urban gloss, with fancy express-ways, underground metros, flyovers etc. at public cost.

We take it for granted that many of these public utilities are essential for efficiency, saving time in travelling, improving the quality of life, even for attracting investment....

Manhattan-like world-class cities are set as our goals, when 25% to 60% of the urban population lives a subhuman existence in slums. So why this bias, and whom does it benefit? It certainly benefits the urban elite population, and leads to uncontrolled urbanization and mega cities with growing hunger for energy, water and other resources. Slums are cleared without providing resettlement options, poverty banished only from sight.⁶

Bhaduri was talking about India, but his description should have a familiar ring for Americans as well. Here too, politicians compete to build types of public transit and transport gateways that mainly meet the needs of the globalized corporate new classes, linking suburbs to elite entertainment venues and airports. They compete to shower subsidies on the enterprises that serve and coordinate the globalized supply chains of an increasingly insular globalized economy. And they compete to attract the organizations and enterprises that design, build, and coordinate the immense military that plays a leading role in enforcing the polarized order of things that this pattern of investment and trade continues to generate. And here too, a growing proportion of the population is being pushed to the margin, the term “middle class” mainly being used to conceal the great economic divide that has been deepening in this country now for several decades.

The challenges we are facing today, both ecological and economic, should provide us with an opportunity move in a new direction. But just getting mayors to place their signatures on a list opposing continued arms racing means very little, unless their cities are willing to say no to a development path that depends on endless growth, generates increasingly inequality, and that is ultimately enforced by military might.

How far have we departed from the path towards any kind of fair and peaceful future when many of our most skilled people work to support endless wars because it seems the safest career choice, and where public officials compete to bring home military contracts, because they seem the safest development choice? Our cities and towns are, I think, at the economic level and scale of politics where an alternative vision for the future can emerge— really, can be negotiated. For it is here that the people affected can talk to each other about the hard questions— what kind of jobs we should try to create instead of that weapons factory or that nuclear waste dump or power plant, and where we will find the resources to make it happen.

It is long past time for us to choose a different path. A first step is to abandon the myth that we all are “middle class,” and to acknowledge we can not change our course until we all are willing to share equally the risks of building a different kind of world, one that works for all of us.

Notes

1. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2002, p.30.
2. There are various recent appraisals, varying in optimism, regarding the implications for the rest of the world of a U.S. in economic decline, but still in possession of a dominant, nuclear-armed military. See, for example, the assessment by David Harvey in *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.183 et seq, and the response by Giovanni Arrighi in “Hegemony Unravelling II,” *New Left Review* 33, May-June 2005, at p.113 et seq.

3. Josh Rogin, "Pentagon Wants \$450 Billion Increase Over Next Five Years," *Congressional Quarterly*, Thursday 09 October 2008 <http://www.truthout.org/101108Z>
4. U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (2006), p.28.
5. Fact Sheet, Department of Treasury Washington, DC March 2, 2006 U.S.-India Economic Dialogue: U.S. - India Financial and Economic Forum <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/fs/2006/62494.htm>
6. Amit Bhaduri, "Special Economic Zones" *Seminar* #582, a symposium on the recent economic policy initiatives, February 2008 http://www.india-seminar.com/2008/582/582_amit_bhaduri.htm