

## **Arms and Politics**

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Before and during World War II, India was one of the many territorial commands of the British imperial defence system. When India became independent, the country was totally reliant on Britain for its armaments for the three services. There was some left over equipment of the US armed forces from the World War II period – Dakota aircraft, some Sherman tanks and transport vehicles. In 1948-49, India attempted to obtain some US equipment, during the Kashmir war, using the personal friendship of Col B M Kaul (then posted as our defence attaché in Washington, who subsequently became Lt General) with then US Defence Secretary Louis Johnson. It did not succeed. However in 1950, India did import one division of Sherman tanks (of World War II vintage) from the US.

In the early 1950s, India obtained Ouragan and Mystere fighter bomber aircraft from France. Most of the armaments of the 1950s were purchased from Britain, including naval vessels, Centurion tanks, Canberra, Hunter, Sea Hawk and Gnat aircraft. AMX-13 light tanks, Alize aircraft, and Alouette helicopters were acquired from France. Only 106 mm recoilless guns and Fairchild Packet aircraft were from the US. Most of the electronic equipment licensed to be manufactured in Bharat Electronics were from British and French firms. Almost all our training programmes for middle level officers were in British institutions

In 1954, the Soviet Union chose India as the first country (ahead of Egypt) to offer to sell military equipment. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru turned down the offer on the ground that any military relationship with the USSR at that stage would complicate India's relationship with the Western Countries. In the late 1950s, India chose to purchase the first Mi-4 helicopters and AN-12 supply dropping aircraft from the USSR, to be used mostly in the Northern front. One wonders whether this was intended as a signal to China that the USSR was on the Indian side in the Sino-Indian border dispute.

The US decision to arm six divisions of the Pakistani Army, and to provide Pakistan with the supersonic F-104 Star fighter, as also the Korean War vintage

F-86 aircraft led to India's search for a supersonic aircraft. Earlier, President Eisenhower's offer to provide India with military equipment, analogous to those supplied to Pakistan, was turned down by India as that would have violated India's non-aligned posture. The search for supersonic aircraft was focused on four models – the British Lightning, the French Mirage, the US Starfighter and the Soviet MiG-21. The British Lightning was not chosen by IAF; the French Mirage would have involved payment in hard currency, which India could not afford; and the US refused to licence production of Starfighter in India. Only the USSR was prepared to licence production of the MiG-21 in India on a five year credit (initially, and then extended to 10 years) to be repaid in non-convertible rupees (earned through Indian exports to USSR).

The decision was largely political and even though the IAF was not happy with the choice, it turned out to be a correct one. While the MiG-21s are still flying, the British Lightning, the French Mirage III and the US F-104 (the Widowmaker, as it came to be known) stopped flying long ago. There are scholars who are of the view that the Indo-Soviet MiG-21 agreement infuriated Beijing as China had been refused the very planes by the Soviets. The arms deal also demonstrated where the Soviet Union stood in the Sino-Indian conflict. Following the Chinese attack in October-November 1962, the Western countries and the Commonwealth promised military aid to India. The UK and the Commonwealth delivered their promised supplies. The US had promised infantry equipment for six mountain divisions, Fairchild Packet aircraft, six old dismantled radars to be installed only on the Northern frontier and not on the West, snow clearing equipment, some obsolescent signal equipment, a dismantled small arms ammunition factory; engineering equipment and such like. Though an agreement was signed between Y B Chavan and Robert McNamara on June 6, 1964, promising India US\$250 million credit and \$250 million grant for five years, it was made clear that the US would not provide India with combat equipment, given Washington's sensitivity to Pakistan's concerns. There is enough evidence to reveal that following the Indian debacle at Sela-Bomdila, the Americans had developed a low opinion about India, thinking that in any war between India and Pakistan, the latter would win. India was also importing PL 480 foodgrains from the US to feed its population afflicted by famine. Yet India was justifiably critical of US bombing of Vietnam thereby annoying the US leadership. Therefore, in US estimation India did not figure very highly.

In 1971, with Pakistan's assistance the US succeeded in weaning the Chinese away from the Soviet Union and enlisting Beijing's support for their strategy of

containment of the USSR, to induce its break-up as was originally envisaged in 1946. India was seen as the Soviet Union's ally. Further, the 1974 Indian nuclear test did not contribute to the promotion of friendly relations between India and US. This was followed by the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan, which witnessed an active alliance between Pakistan and the US with tacit support by the Chinese. In return, the US looked away from Chinese assistance to Pakistan in nuclear weapon development and resumed massive military aid to Pakistan, including the F-16s. There was an attempt in 1980 for India to procure Tow missiles and 155-mm medium guns. But that attempt proved futile.

After 1964, when India was able to formalise its military equipment relationship with USSR, Moscow became almost the sole source of arms for India for all three services. Exceptions were Tom Cat missiles, Abbott self propelled guns, Harrier aircraft, Sea King helicopters, the carrier *Viraat*, HDW submarines, Bofors medium guns and Jaguar aircraft. The Cold War came to an end in 1990, and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the concessional arms supply to India on long term credit and for non-convertible rupees also came to an end. For some years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union there was also a significant breakdown in the supply system of Russia, along with an escalation in prices. In spite of this, since most of the equipment for the three services were of Soviet origin, there was a natural preference for Russian equipment. Further from the Russian perspective, India and China, to which Moscow had resumed arms sales in the mid-1990s, had become the largest arms purchasers.

From the above history it is clear that armament transactions are largely influenced by politics and do not occur in free market conditions. The US withheld arms from India when it valued Pakistan's alliance more than India's and had a poor opinion about India's military capability. It is because of this negative attitude of the US that India had to turn to the USSR for arms in the 1960s though there was considerable reluctance among all three services to accept Soviet armaments. Contrary to popular perception, there had been no major renegeing by the US on arms sales contracted with India. The Star Sapphire radars were gifts. Though the US stopped military supplies under credit and grant in 1965, the agreement between BEL and a US firm on licensed manufacture of ANPRC-215 wireless sets was unaffected. The US just did not generally sell armaments to India for political reasons. In a sense, this US policy turned out to be a blessing in disguise for India. The Soviets priced their arms very low, specially for India and sold them on extended credit terms and non-convertible rupees.

The valuation of Indian arms imports by western think-tanks (on corresponding

western prices) and actual costs to India would reveal the extent of benefit India derived.

As the Cold War came to an end, in US victory and Soviet collapse, the US started preparing to re-evaluate its strategic policy towards South Asia. There were a series of reports on the US relationship with India and Pakistan, which emphasised the desirability of the US improving its relationship with India. However, till India conducted its Shakti and Agni III tests, the US attempted to cap, reduce and eliminate Indian nuclear capabilities. India knew that the LCA programme will come under sanctions when it decided on Shakti tests. During this period there was a deliberate looking away from Pakistan's nuclear proliferation activities by US intelligence agencies for political reasons. The US' trade and commercial relationship with China was also expanding rapidly. However, after the 1999 Kargil War, and realisation of the extent of Pakistani support to US-directed jihad, there was a deliberate attempt by the Clinton Administration to improve relations with India. The visit of President Clinton to India in March 2000 was a success and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee hailed the US as a natural ally. The vision statement issued during the Clinton visit by the two leaders registered a modest improvement in Indo-US relations. Still, the Clinton Administration had its reservations regarding Indian nuclear capability, was soft on China's proliferation to Pakistan and proved incompetent to deal with Pakistani proliferation as well its infrastructural support to jihadi terrorism, Al Qaida and Taliban.

Even before taking office, the incoming Republican Administration had spelt out its plans for reshaping Asia in favour of US national interest. Dr Condoleezza Rice wrote in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, in January 2000: "But India is an element in China's calculation and it should be in America's too – India is not a great power yet but has the potential to emerge as one."

The new Bush Administration did not bother India on the nuclear issue as the Clinton Administration had done. In 2002 the US National Security doctrine, President Bush referred positively to the role of India in international security. The Bush Administration was tougher on China about proliferation issues than Clinton had been. It invoked sanctions 60 times against Chinese entities in four years, as against eight times by the Clinton Administration in its two terms.

The Bush Administration also came up with its Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) with India. Any country with a modicum of foreign policy and strategic planning capabilities would have taken steps to assess why the US policy towards it was changing and what its implications were likely to be. However, in India a National Security Council is established but it never meets. Moreover,

neither our political leaders nor our top bureaucrats place high value on the need for long range assessments of international developments. The US made yet another study on the possibilities of Indo-US military cooperation. The US Armed Forces carried out joint exercises with all three services of India, and the IAF was invited to take part in Air exercises in Alaska, which had hitherto been open only to military allies of the US.

Rice made India the first country she visited in her capacity as the Secretary of State, having earlier accompanied the President to Europe. She informed the Indian Prime Minister on March 15, 2005 of the proposed new US Strategy for South Asia, according to which the US intended to help India to become a major world power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It should be obvious that this is a totally new US strategy towards India, different from that prevailing in the last 58 years of bilateral history since India's independence. Therefore, it would not be correct to make judgments on US arms transfer programmes to India on the basis of past history.

It is a widely accepted axiom all over the world that there are no permanent friends nor permanent enemies, but only permanent interests for a nation. This formulation was articulated by British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston in the mid nineteenth century and is often quoted by students of international relations. Another 2000 years before Palmerston, as recounted in the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma, on his death bed, told the Pandavas that for a king no one was his friend or enemy but only circumstances determined the status of an interlocutor. Therefore it is futile to talk about the reliability of the US in terms of arms sales. For the last 58 years the US had never declared its intention of helping India become a major world power. Even President John F. Kennedy, much adored in India, did not do it.

Obviously Bush has not announced this radical shift in US policy to India because he suddenly loves India or has developed a liking for our culture, or admiration for our philosophy and civilisational tradition. The US must have done so in its own self interest and as the sole superpower interested in maintaining that status into the indefinite future. Recently, a number of studies have concluded that the threat to US pre-eminence would arise only from China, which is likely to overtake US in its aggregate GDP in the next two to three decades and later in R&D capability. There is also general agreement that wars among major world powers are unlikely to occur in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the next three decades, the US, China and India would be the top three markets in the world. Thereafter, the power of nations will grow in accordance or commensurate with the knowledge pool they are able to develop. The US looks at China as the possible challenger to

its pre-eminence and hence, is interested to ensure that China is kept in the second place.

If in India we start making assessments about the long range evolution of international developments, it would be possible to understand why the US is developing its new strategy and why India has a large role in it. The US is a unique multi-cultural country with a large immigrant population from different parts of the world. The US is in a position to import some of the best brains from the rest of world by offering citizenship and using them to augment its knowledge pool. India happens to be an attractive source of knowledge for the US, being an English-speaking country, democratic and multi-cultural. Further, the Indian population profile in the next three decades makes it younger than both China and the US. India is likely to overtake China in terms of total population with a younger age profile because of the latter's one-child policy and is likely to have a much larger pool of talent. The contribution of the Indian community in the US to its GDP and its knowledge pool encourages the US to look on Indian talent favourably. There are also uncertainties about the future stability of an un-democratic China. Some American business leaders and economists have taken the view that entrepreneurship and R&D flourish better in democratic India than in China with its highly centralised political culture. For these reasons the US leadership appears to have decided to help India in becoming a world power and, in return, expects to gain from Indian brainpower and through collaboration with India in science and technology.

If this is the case, where do India's interests lie? What would India prefer – a world order in which the US continues to be pre-eminent or one in which China overtakes the US? While there is no doubt that the US has been hegemonic in its external policies, it is internally relatively more democratic than most other democracies, is multi-cultural and has a million and half Indian community, which is growing in strength steadily. While the US, after 58 years, is prepared to help India become a world power of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China, till recently, considered India a regional power. For China, Pakistan is its Israel. While India should try to improve its trade with China as well as its political and technological relations, there can be no two opinions that the majority Indian preference will be for a world order in which the US rather than China is the pre-eminent power. Even in that world, India can play a balancing game between the two. In terms of contacts among populations, the magnitude of people-to-people contact between the US and India is significantly greater compared to those between China and India.

In a globalised world, where the currency of power will be knowledge instead

of military might, the great game of nations will be played differently from the one we have been familiar with since the Napoleonic Wars. 'Soft power' will play a significant role in international politics.

Therefore, one has to look at the radical change in Indo-US relations not on the basis of the experience of the past but on the basis of an assessment of the future. Just as Bhishma emphasised, the prevailing circumstances have changed. The US would still like to be the pre-eminent power of the world, with the highest per capita income for its citizens, and will use its technology, economy and soft power to exercise this dominance. The evolving circumstances are such that the US will need India more to sustain its pre-eminence than India would need the US to keep its ranking in international hierarchy.

In history, most countries, which rose to be world powers, did so only by depending initially on another. The US itself became a great power on the wings of imperial Britain and the protection of the Royal Navy. Japan became a great power by depending on the US after the Meiji restoration and becoming an ally of the US after its defeat in World War II. So did Germany. Communist Russia concluded the Treaty of Rapallo and invited German R&D to help them in their industrialisation and military development during the initial five year plans. China, under Mao Tse-Tung, gained from Soviet help in their industrialisation and development of military might up to the time of the Sino-Soviet split. Thereafter, the US helped China during the period of Deng Xiao Peng. Incidentally, while the Soviets were very dependable in their arms supplies to India, they broke off with China in 1960-61, highlighting that the arms relationship is not independent of political relationships. Within that context, Russia and China have now resumed their arms transfer relationship. Post-War Germany could not have become a world power without the Marshal Plan and US help. Therefore, there is no need for India to feel patronised because of the US announcement of its intention to help India become a world power.

India should count on its strengths in playing the 21<sup>st</sup> century game of nations in a globalised world, where knowledge will be the currency of power. Already it has been acknowledged that India will have the largest population with a younger age profile than China and the White nations. That would mean that other nations will soon reach a situation when their ratios of non-working population to working population would be more unfavourable than in India's case. A Planning Commission study had concluded that in two to three decades, India would be the largest service provider to the world. It is logical to expect that India could also be the largest knowledge provider to the world as well.

In order to understand the globalised international system of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many shibboleths of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century have to be shed. Unfortunately, that is not happening fast enough in India. While Prime Minister Manmohan Singh claims that the external environment had never been more favourable for India's economic development and global financial flows are readily available to be tapped for India's development, critics mired in schools of conventional thinking wax eloquent against speeding up the development process in this fashion – the strategy adopted by China.

Various leaderships in the world community have expressed their concern about the hegemony of the sole superpower and have declared their preference for a multi-polar world. Others have talked about a balance of power system involving US, Japan, European Union, China, Russia and India. The period between the Congress of Vienna and World War II saw a unipolar world – Pax Britannica. The bipolar world was an aberration caused by the fact that both the USSR and the US developed their nuclear-missile capabilities at the same time and were unable to go to war with one another. Once the US overtook the USSR in terms of dominance in military and civil technologies, and in economic power, the world became unipolar. Today the US has succeeded in developing better relations with each one of the other five powers than they have with each other. The US faces no military challenge from any of the other powers and has reason to worry only about the long term challenge from China, at a time when military might will no longer be the primary currency of power. But for the next two to three decades the US will be in a position to flaunt its military superiority and dominance over outer space as a currency of power and overwhelm military resistance from any developing nation, though it would have a lot of problems in stabilising an occupied developing nation. In these circumstances, the exercise of unilateral power to shape the international system, especially in respect of the developing world, by the US cannot be prevented by other major powers however shrill their rhetoric may be.

Given this reality, US unilateralism may be disapproved of by India but it need not come in the way of the development of Indo-US relations, so long as US actions do not hurt Indian national interests. Today US power operates in the vicinity of India. Unlike its predecessors, the Bush Administration is more mindful of Indian sensibilities. It collaborated with India on the tsunami relief operations in Sri Lanka, made common cause in respect of the royal coup in Nepal, and has expressed a desire to develop congruent policies with respect to Bangladesh. Whatever may be our differences in respect of the policy towards Pakistan, it is difficult to deny that General Musharraf's relatively more restrained behaviour and reduction in terrorism in Kashmir are partly due to US pressure on Pakistan.

Once the US is reconciled to India's nuclear and missile status there are no direct conflicts of interests between the two countries. Even during the years when we needed Soviet help, we disapproved of many Soviet actions such as those in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan. However, we kept our criticism private and muted. Therefore it is not beyond our capability to cultivate close relations with US, even while disagreeing with Washington on specific issues. India, for its own national interest, dealt with Stalin and Mao Tse-Tung with their genocidal records. Ideological posturing was not Nehru's style of foreign policy. That came about later. In terms of realpolitik there should be no insurmountable difficulty in having positive and mutually beneficial relations with the US in spite of its unilateralist proclivities.

Let us not make too much about the lack of UN approval for every security related action. We continued and completed successfully the Bangladesh war in spite of 110 nations voting against us in the UN. The UN majority approved of genocidal Pol Pot when we decided not to. Moreover, we know to our own cost (in Kashmir) that the UN cannot be expected to be objective and have therefore never gone back to the UN on any issue that affects our interests and security.

As the international community becomes increasingly globalised and economic and technological power replaces military might as the primary currency of power, unilateralism will slowly become dysfunctional. An international community with five or six major economic and technological power centres cannot be subjected to unilateralism.

An important aspect of the proposed US strategy towards India envisages the transfer of civil nuclear energy technology to India. No doubt, this too is being done in US' own interest. The demand for fossil fuels in India and China are growing. The US, unlike the European countries has not joined the Kyoto protocol. There are signs that US itself may go back to nuclear energy. Moreover to reduce China's demand for fossil fuel, the US is to supply China with \$5 billion worth of nuclear reactors. Pursuing the same logic, the US proposes to consider transfer of civil nuclear technology to India, and the details are still to be worked out. However, the proposed US policy is more internally consistent than that of the European powers and China. The latter still insist on India being penalised for conducting the 1998 nuclear tests and being subjected to Nuclear Suppliers Group sanctions. It would be imprudent on our part if we do not explore the US proposal and find ways and means of obtaining civil nuclear technology from the US without in any way undermining our status as a nuclear weapon state.

It should be understood that the policies of the present Bush Administration mark a watershed in US foreign policy towards India. Until now, the US has been dominated by an ideological foreign policy which was essentially anti-Soviet, and focused on a brutal struggle for power. The US prejudices against India arose out of its wrong assessment about perceived Indian alignment. (The US is not new to faulty intelligence assessment, now highlighted by the 9/11 Report and the Iraq Report. There is a long history to such experience). The Clinton Administration did not totally shed its Cold War baggage in its perception of India, though perhaps Clinton himself may have developed a better perspective in the last 18 months of his presidency.

The current Bush Administration has declared its intention to pursue its national interest in the non-ideological world of today. Therefore, it would be a mistake to judge it by our experience of the last 58 years. In the US eyes, I was labelled as anti-American and pro-Soviet while in reality I was and am fiercely pro-Indian. Now I recognise the fundamental changes in US policy and their need for India. Therefore I am advocating an Indian foreign policy that will continue to be pro-Indian and take full advantage of the changed circumstances in the world.

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