

Indo-US Relations – A Strategic Partnership?

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As an emerging free nation in 1947, reaching out to the world, India's expectations from America were high. For the Americans, India was only a small player, even if there was no lack of goodwill. As events played out, Indian disappointment and frustration grew, matched by American annoyance and neglect. Emotionalism ruled the day. Personality compatibility or otherwise at the leadership level also played its part. The two countries drifted apart.

Today, more than fifty years later, we seem to be going through a repeat performance. The coming together of the two countries is being invested with much emotion and drama. The American pronouncements would suggest that America has rediscovered India. The Indian reaction is highly emotional – one of joy at being at last recognised and the other of suspicion and apprehension born out of past experience.

The term describing the unfolding relations, Strategic Partnership, is itself seductive. It is a partnership (signifying that we are both on the same side, but not in an alliance against any third party). And it is strategic because it holds out a long-term perspective, involving resources and capabilities on both sides in a whole range of areas, including key areas of cutting edge high technology in defence, civilian nuclear cooperation and space, etc. It also suggests a partnership in dealing with global and not just bilateral issues.

At the time of independence, Indo-US relationship had everything going for it. Roosevelt was well disposed towards Indian independence and there was enormous goodwill when free India unfurled its national flag. India was one of the few countries outside the Western group with a written Constitution guaranteeing human rights, modelled very much on the American Bill of Rights and Constitution, and a functioning multicultural democracy. But soon

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things started turning sour and during the years that followed, the relationship has been shaky, mostly downward, except in the last few years. Perceptions and policies on both sides had a lot to do with it. On the US side, our refusal to align with the US during the cold war was the biggest crime in the US's eyes. Our non-alignment was seen as deviant behaviour and only an excuse for our pro-Soviet postures and policies. "Anyone not with me is against me" was the American rule applied to others. Our mixed economy and socialist pattern of society, projected by Jawaharlal Nehru, was anathema to them and came in the way of any significant economic interaction. Nuclear non-proliferation became an American obsession following the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In the policy of encirclement of the Soviet Union with Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), Pakistan became the focus of an American strategic alliance. Pakistan could do no wrong in American eyes and in all policies and actions in relation to South Asia, India and Pakistan were hyphenated. India's failure to condemn Soviet action in Hungary shocked the Americans, and years later in 1979, our refusal to condemn their invasion of Afghanistan was cited as proof of India being firmly in the Soviet camp.

On the Indian side, non-alignment was its policy, but India was partial to the Soviets. The US support to Pakistan on Jammu and Kashmir, the supply of weapons to Pakistan against India's earnest appeal, in the belief that they would be used to fight communism, the infamous tilt in favour of Pakistan in 1971 and the sailing of the *USS Enterprise* into the Bay of Bengal, convinced India that the US could see India only through the prism of Pakistan. The goodwill generated by Food Aid and the support extended after the Chinese invasion in 1962 was easily dissipated, leaving a firm undercurrent of suspicion and mistrust. Post-Pokhran 1974, sanctions were accepted by India as the price it had to pay; but the denial of fuel for Tarapur, following the US domestic legislation, in violation of a bilateral agreement, was seen as an act of perfidy.

The end of the cold war in 1989 and after has brought a sea-change in world politics, and Indo-US relations are no exception. It would be fair to say that the change in attitude is more apparent on the US side than the Indian side. Paradoxically, Pokhran 1998, while upsetting the nonproliferation regime, and sending shockwaves around the world, especially in the US, also sparked off a rethinking

towards India and its position in Asia and the emerging world order. This shift became evident in the Clinton era, but has assumed a big thrust under President George W Bush. The neo-conservative think tanks have been busy throwing up the contours of a new vision of the world, in which India has a prominent role. As a result, Indo-American relations have received a major boost.

Recognition of India as a prospective major player in Asia with an emerging global role is central to the new way of looking at India, even if India is not being billed specifically as a counterweight to China. Our record as a democracy and in promoting human rights and freedom is finally acknowledged. But what is new is the liberalisation of our economy, opening up of our market, combined with the burgeoning growth rate of our economy. Vistas of cooperation in the knowledge and Information Technology (IT) sector particularly are opening up, attracting American entrepreneurs, industry and trade. The vast reservoir of professionals that India can harness is one of the main attractions.

A talk given by Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns to the Asia Society in New York in October 2005 and an article by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice set out the American perspective. The former emphasises how, to many policy makers meeting at the Asia Society in the past, Asia meant China, Japan etc. Now South Asia is on the radar screen, and especially India will receive particular attention. He observes "successive Administrations in Washington and Delhi approached each other alternately with episodic engagement on the one hand, but with wariness and even downright opposition on the other". Noting that the estrangement of the past with India is turning into engagement, given the initiative of President Clinton and now pursued under the Bush Administration, he goes over the many aspects it has assumed. He quotes President Bush's succinct summing up of Indo-US relations.

"This century will see democratic India's arrival as a force in the world. The trend lines of the past two decades suggest clearly that India will steadily acquire the economic, political, and strategic capabilities that set it along the path to becoming one of the major centres of global power. As such, it is in our national interest to develop a strong, forward looking relationship with India as the political and economic focus of the global system shifts inevitably eastward to Asia".

From the Indian perspective, opening up of relations with the US across the board is obviously very welcome. It would certainly be to India's advantage to develop cooperative relations with the US, even if it were not the uni-polar, hyper-power that it is today. In fact, it would be foolhardy not to take advantage of all emerging opportunities to this end. Whether America needs India more than India needs America is a moot question which need not distract us now. We can benefit substantially from greater bilateral cooperation and by working together in areas of mutual interest. Rationally viewed, there should be no disagreement on this point.

A whole series of agreements have been signed in the last two years, especially after the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) initiative was launched in January 2004 – to open a dialogue and build mutual trust in a number of sensitive areas as defence, space and nuclear energy, high technology, aeronautics, economic exchange at corporate level and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) dialogue and people to people interaction. More and more Indian students are studying in the US now than in any other country and Indians in the US number nearly two million, many of them professionals of high calibre.

Unfortunately, however, Indians seem to be surrendering to emotionalism. The ideologues have raised anti-US slogans and this has driven the other side into overdrive, seeing more virtue in American declarations and actions than is warranted. The civil nuclear cooperation deal, especially, has sparked off a heated debate.

Doubts about the deal were voiced soon after it had been signed. Official reticence to clarify the issues raised, while lauding the accord in a self-congratulatory mode, deepened these doubts. When details of the separation plan started leaking out, the doubts became real. The scientific community as well as the strategic fraternity is clearly divided in their views. Everyone seems to agree on the principle that the autonomy of strategic decision-making should not be impaired in any way. But, there is a difference of opinion whether there would be such an impact or not. The media is also having a field day; but its partisanship has exceeded normal limits, some of the comments speaking disparagingly of the scientists.

Even admitting that the agreement is a landmark one, which could help boost our nuclear energy production and defreezing of the constraints in technology cooperation, the question of what price India would be asked to pay still remains vague.

It needed the outspoken remarks of an anguished head of the Atomic Energy Department, about the Americans changing the goal-posts, to jolt everyone. Now, it appears that the argument over the Fast Breeder Reactors (FBRs) is over, and it will be kept out. But not entirely, it would seem. It is speculated that it would be brought into the civilian list after 10 to 15 years.

Critics on the American side have argued strongly against bending the rules only to accommodate India, as it would risk jeopardising the entire non proliferation regime. Against this, the Administration strongly contends that it would bring India securely into the non proliferation framework. Even for the Democrat leader, John Kerry, the main attraction is that the deal would strengthen the global non proliferation regime by bringing India into it. It is obvious that the Americans are using the strategy of nuclear energy cooperation to bring us on board. These statements and the whole discussion on what should or should not be included in the civil list would provide the final answer to anyone harbouring the illusion that the deal implies recognition of sorts of India as a nuclear weapon state. The Americans sought to cap, roll back and eventually eliminate India's nuclear weapon and missile programme. This was during the mid-1980s. After 1998, this was no longer tenable. But they are still seeking to contain the nuclear weapon capability of India. The present deal, in conjunction with the Fissile Material Cut Off Treaty (FMCT) as and when it is negotiated, would effectively do this. The obligations undertaken by the five nuclear weapon states (NWS) in respect of safeguards and inspections are entirely voluntary but the obligations India is being asked to assume under the deal are not; they will not only have to get the approval of the US Congress now; but even in the future, they could be subject to scrutiny and regulation by others.

That India has been a responsible nuclear power and has scrupulously refrained from proliferation activity, even though it is not party to the NPT, is acknowledged. We have often alluded, in contrast, to the sins of omission and commission committed by several NPT signatory countries. Our rejection of the NPT still holds.

While we have taken several steps to align ourselves with others by putting in place controls up to the level of Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) and Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), and passed the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Act, there should have been no need for any further demonstration of our commitment to non proliferation. The separation of civilian facilities from the military ones should have been left entirely to India's volition and not have been allowed to become the subject of negotiation as was witnessed during negotiation on the deal.

Similar emphasis was observed in another address in November 2005 by the Prime Minister at the 40th anniversary function of Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA).

"The breakdown of effective international mechanisms also affects the security of individual countries. As long as terrorism was seen as a phenomenon that was 'elsewhere', the international community was unwilling to adopt an effective coordinated strategy to deal with this menace which constitutes a grave threat to the civilised world. Similarly, the international regime against proliferation is also under stress. It is clear that the existing system of unequal and discriminatory rules, based on the nuclear NPT is deeply flawed. It has permitted unchecked proliferation by some, while preventing countries such as ours from acting in its economic and security interests. An effective non proliferation framework that addresses our security interests while simultaneously encouraging peaceful uses of nuclear energy is in our vital national interests".

The reference to an effective non proliferation framework (distinct from the discredited NPT) is significant. India's signing up on the American initiatives such as Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and Container Security Initiative (CSI) are steps in this direction.

The clandestine activity in our neighbourhood has been deplored in the context of the suspect nuclear programme of Iran. Indians were taken by surprise consequent to voting at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna against Iran. The warnings and threats repeated by influential Americans strengthened the impression that India voted under pressure. But the Government has denied this. The statement of the Prime Minister in Parliament stressed that it was entirely India's decision, not

dictated by the Americans. But the grounds on which India determined its enlightened national interest merit analysis. Iran's nuclear programme may be suspect; but while Indians talk insistently of finding a solution through calm reasoned diplomacy, is it reasonable to expect Iran to come back to the negotiating table, under the threat of referral to the Security Council and with an American gun pointed at its head? Presumably, friends of Iran like India are trying to persuade Iran to be reasonable, but isn't there an obligation on the others not to up the ante with attacks and accusations in unrestrained language? Is there any evidence that Indians are similarly persuading their American friends to be more restrained and not to demonise Iran and issue warlike ultimatums? The Prime Minister is on record that India does not want another nuclear weapon power in its neighbourhood. But whoever wanted a nuclear weapon power in the neighbourhood, anytime, anywhere else? Did any of India's neighbours in South Asia want India and Pakistan to become nuclear weapon powers?

How do we prevent another new nuclear weapon power emerging? By riding on the backs of the Americans who are going to bomb the Iranians into submission? Or letting the Israelis do their job? We are reminding Iran that it should honour its international commitments.

Much has been said also about the Walmart type nuclear weapon retailer from Pakistan viz AQ Khan. But despite all the exposures no effort is being made to bring the offender and the powers in control at the time in Pakistan to book, because, for one thing, no American Administration is willing to go down that path.

For thirty years, India suffered under a technology denial regime. As a result of that, we indigenised and managed to develop our own weapons and civilian nuclear capability. Now there is reason to celebrate the prospect of the end to that denial era and the beginning of a cooperation era. But in our enthusiasm, are we not in danger of embracing conditionalities which might constrain or straitjacket us in new ways?

It has been forcefully and correctly argued that we should no longer be guided by the thought processes of the cold war period, that we should move with the times and adapt our thinking and policies to the realities and compulsions of the contemporary world and that we should be ready to seize the opportunities opening up

in this new environment. But it makes no sense to jump at everything that is offered, without subjecting it to a rigorous calculus of pros and cons. Our response should also be tempered by the lessons drawn from our past experience in dealing with the US. It is childish to reject these as manifestations of an old mindset and to categorise anyone who voices such doubts and warnings as living in a time warp.

A dispassionate examination of the American statements and phraseology used would well justify greater caution and pragmatism. The repeated use of "great power" in respect of India is not without tactical motivations. Condoleezza Rice asserts for a balance of power that favours freedom, structured on six powers – the US, Japan and Russia, EU, China and India, which would together build a more durable form of global stability. How far does this fit in with the Indian world view? Does India subscribe to this theory of balance of power of six states? Africa and Latin America find no mention. The "freedom deficit" in the Middle East is highlighted, but the entire Islamic world, as a force in world politics to be reckoned with, is not noted. The dynamics within the weak and failed states are perceived as the greatest threats to international security – freedom and democracy are the prescriptions but there is no mention of poverty alleviation through collective commitment and endeavour. To be sure, freedom and democracy are essential. But, American priorities and methods may not always coincide with ours. From the Indian perspective, the preservation of bio-diversity of humans around the world is important. For the Americans, this would seem to be not too important, in the context of their overall concept of world security and stability. For a country and people whose pride and strength derives from its plurality, America does not seem to give too much thought to preserving the plurality of peoples and cultures, or values, around the world.

At the same time, a better understanding of how the American mind works, their institutions function and the entire system operates is necessary. In this context, I found fascinating a recent book published by the Princeton University edited by Michael Ignatieff on American Exceptionalism and Human Rights. Although its focus is on human rights, the analysis holds equally for other domains. I would like to share a few excerpts with you from his introduction.

Ignatieff argues thus :

"Thanks to Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, the United States took a leading role in the creation of the United Nations and the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Throughout the Cold War and afterward, few nations placed more emphasis in their foreign policy on the promotion of human rights, market freedom, and political democracy...

The same US government, however, has also supported rights-abusing regimes from Pinochet's Chile to Suharto's Indonesia; sought to scuttle the International Criminal Court, the capstone of an enforceable global human rights regime; maintained practices — like capital punishment -- at variance with the human rights standards of other democracies; engaged in unilateral pre-emptive military actions that other states believe violate the UN Charter; failed to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; and ignored UN bodies when they criticised US domestic rights practices. What is exceptional here is not that the United States is inconsistent, hypocritical, or arrogant. Many other nations, including leading democracies, could be accused of the same things. What is exceptional, and worth explaining, is why America has both been guilty of these failings and also been a driving force behind the promotion and enforcement of global human rights.

While the focus of this book will be on human rights, exceptionalism is also a feature of the US attitudes toward environmental treaties like the Kyoto Protocol as well as the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law. Since the attack of 11 September 2001 it has been accused of violating the Conventions as well as the Torture Convention in its handling of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, and other detention facilities.

This pattern of behaviour raises a fundamental question about the very place of the world's most powerful nation inside the network of international laws and conventions that regulate a globalising world. To what extent does the United States accept constraints on its sovereignty through the international human rights regime, international humanitarian law, and the UN Charter rules on the use of force? To what degree does America play by the rules it itself has helped to create?"

Ignatieff distinguishes three separate strands of Exceptionalism: Exemptionalism; Double Standards and Legal Isolationism.

The use of the epithet "strategic partnership" is also very deceptive, though flattering. As of now, given the asymmetry in power between the two, I am not sure if one can have a meaningful partnership in strategic matters. But it could well signify the relationship that we aspire to attain in the near future and let me concede that the Americans wish to build Indian strengths in such a manner that such a strategic partnership can be put in place. But what about the asymmetry in goals and objectives?

Can we say with confidence that we share a common world vision and that we have a common strategy to achieve it? Or is it that India would be expected to go along with American objectives and subserve American interests?

"The US and India are poised for a partnership that will be crucial in shaping the international order in the 21st century," remarked Ambassador Mulford. It is an exciting prospect; provided, our ideas on the shape of the new order are based on a common understanding of each other's interests.

India must identify its interests and strategies, objectives and methods and go into serious dialogue with the Americans. It has been well said that India still does not have long term strategy but only short term goals. In such a situation, India should be all the more careful not to rush into strategic frameworks that the American establishment of the day formulates.