

Partnership in a Balance of Power System

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Abstract

The popular perception in India is that with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of one of the two Superpowers, the bipolar international system has become unipolar. The United States is now assumed to be an unchallenged sole Superpower. Consequently, it is felt in some quarters that the Indo-US Joint Statement of July 18, 2005 is a case of US recruiting India as one of its allies for possible future containment of China. Such a perception nurtures suspicion about the US and its motivation about its attempts to befriend India. Unless there is a clear assessment of the US objective and confidence that it will serve Indian interests, the Government of India will have difficulties in implementing the agreement. The US needs to be considered more realistically as the foremost among six major power centres that constitute a global balance of power system and not the sole superpower with unchallenged domination of the international system. In such a context, increasing cooperation with the US in a number of critical areas fully serves India's strategic interests. The US too needs a strong India to pursue its own economic, political, and security goals. A strong Indo-US relationship in no way prevents India from having beneficial partnerships with the other major powers in the current international system.

The popular perception in India is that with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of one of the two superpowers, the bipolar international system has become unipolar. The United States is now assumed to be an unchallenged superpower. Consequently, it is felt in some quarters that the Indo-US Joint Statement of July 18, 2005 is a case of US recruiting India as one of its allies for possible future containment of China. Such a perception nurtures suspicion about the United States and its motivation about its attempts to befriend India. Unless there is a clear assessment of

the US objective and confidence that it will serve Indian interests, the Government of India will have difficulties in implementing the agreement.

While during the bipolar era keeping away from the entanglement with either of the Superpowers was considered the essence of non-alignment, now, with the collapse of one superpower, some advocates of non-alignment argue that continuing to oppose the surviving superpower, the US, is the crux of non-alignment today. This perception needs to be analyzed objectively.

Bipolarity was sustained by two basic factors. The first was the ideological antagonism between socialism and the market economy. Second was a balance of power in terms of nuclear weapons and missiles which made it difficult for either of the two blocs to consider resorting to war against the other in view of the unacceptable damage that would be caused to both sides, irrespective of the final result of the war. The collapse of one superpower did not come about because of military confrontation but due to economic and political factors. Even the erstwhile Communist countries, with a few exceptions, have all accepted market economy as the basic economic philosophy. Most of them, including Russia, have also accepted democracy abandoning the centralised one-party rule. Ideologically, democracy and market economy won against one-party rule and centralised planned economy. While the US emerged no doubt as the foremost power in the international system, a number of countervailing factors developed in the world which tended to limit the US power projection in relation to the rest of the world.

Once the Soviet Union ceased to exist as a single entity and broke into 15 republics and was engulfed into a systemic crisis, it was no longer perceived as a threat by the countries of Western Europe and Japan. Though the NATO survived as a military alliance, the dependency of the West European nations on the US for their security started declining with the end of the Cold War. So was the case in respect of Japanese public opinion about their need for US protection. The Clinton years saw a reduction in US defence expenditure and military capabilities, though these reductions were not as significant as those in Russia and in Europe. US share in terms of industrial and agricultural production and international trade in the world declined as a percentage of global economy, with the growth of economies of Japan, Europe and China. With the end of draft for US military recruitment there were severe limitations on American force

projection capabilities. Further, there was increasing understanding around the world – highlighted first in the Reagan-Gorbachev declaration in 1985 – that a nuclear war could not be won and hence should not be initiated. All these factors, taken together, led to an international system at the end of the Cold War, which was polycentric and not unipolar. The polycentric order initially consisted of the US, Japan, European Union, Russia and China. None of them declared any of the others as an adversary. India became the sixth member of this balance of power system when it conducted the Shakti tests, sustained an average 6 per cent annual growth rate for nearly a decade, built up a significant foreign exchange reserve, started to expand its trade and demonstrated its IT (Information Technology) prowess.

Meanwhile, globalisation of the economy became increasingly effective. The US found that in a globalising economy its foremost rival on trade and commercial matters was the European Union. It also found that it is likely to face a world of increasing competition and innovativeness. In this world China and India are the rising powers, the former growing much faster than the latter. For the first time in its history after 1812, the US homeland was subjected to attack on 9/11 by terrorists who caused more casualties than the Japanese did at Pearl Harbour. American citizens and property all over the world came under threat by members of the International Islamic Front (Al Qaida). The US consequently has declared a worldwide war on terrorism. Most of the countries joined the US in the war on terrorism. However, the US found that unlike the Cold War period or in its war on terrorism in Afghanistan, it could not enlist the support of all its NATO allies for its war against Iraq on the ground that Baghdad possessed weapons of mass destruction. European countries such as France and Germany have plans to raise an independent European defence force outside NATO. For all these reasons the US needs to be considered more realistically as the foremost among the six power centres that constitute a global balance of power system and not the sole superpower with unchallenged domination on the rest of the international system.

In this balance of power system each power tries to develop strategic partnerships and relationships with other individual powers in order to optimize its own economic, political and strategic advantages. In pursuance of this strategy, India has developed partnerships with the US, the European Union and Russia and strategic relationships with China and

Japan. The main purpose of such a web of relationships is for each country to optimize its economic growth and maximize its per capita income. This is to be done within the framework of the World Trade Organisation. In this international system the engine of growth is economic competitiveness and technological and managerial innovativeness. Consequently, in the 21st century, the currency of power is no longer nuclear weapons and missiles but knowledge, which would drive economic competition and managerial and technological innovation.

The arms race has been replaced by a race for attaining technological and managerial excellence. In a globalised and highly inter-dependent international system, wars among major powers armed with missiles and nuclear weapon systems are becoming increasingly unviable as they would result in mutual unacceptable destruction. However, wars between major powers and medium and small powers are possible as demonstrated by Iraq and Afghanistan. But such wars are not likely to escalate into wars among major powers. Moreover, while it is possible for a major power to invade a medium power, occupation of a country is proving extremely costly.

In such circumstances, the US is attempting to plan sustenance of its place as the foremost power in the international system. It is reasonably confident of maintaining its military superiority because of its leadership in military R&D and space technology. But it needs to keep its position as the foremost power in terms of scientific and technological innovativeness and managerial competitiveness. Looking around the world balance of power system the US sees competitors and rivals in Europe and China. Russia and Japan as partners may not be sufficient to ensure that US economy and technology will maintain its pre-eminent position. India is an English speaking, multilingual, multi-ethnic and democratic country which is expected to grow into the third largest economy with the world's largest population. As Ambassador Burns said in his address to The Asia Society on October 18, 2005 India has a demographic structure that bequeaths it a huge, skilled and youthful workforce.

The US leadership has made it repeatedly clear that its strategy vis-à-vis China is one of engagement and not of containment. Condoleezza Rice, the US Secretary of State, in her speech at Sophia University in Tokyo on March 19, 2005 said, "I really do believe that the US-Japan relationship, the US-South Korea relationship, the US-India relationship all are

important in creating an environment in which China is more likely to play a positive role than a negative role. These alliances are not against China, they are alliances that are devoted to a stable security and political and economic and indeed value-based relationships that put China in the context of those relationships and a different path to development than if China were simply untethered, simply operating without that strategic context.”

The US and China have \$ 200 billion worth of bilateral trade. Such a large trade relationship does not lend itself to practicing a containment strategy as was done in respect of the Soviet Union. The US strategy is to help develop a balance of power in Asia so that China would not emerge as the sole superpower in the continent. While Russia and Japan are already major established powers in the international system, India is an incipient power. Hence, the US decision announced on March 25, 2005 that its (US) goal is to help India become a major world power in the 21st century. This is not a new strategy in international relations. China was helped to become a major power in the last two decades as a result of the initiative taken by the US with the visit of Dr Kissinger to Beijing in July 1971. Germany and Japan are major global powers today because of the help extended to them after the Second World War. Today, in spite of the help received in its development as a world power, China is regarded as a rival of the US. Germany, a long-time NATO ally, did not agree with the US on its Iraq policy. While a leading nation building up another for strategic reasons has often happened in history; that effort did not necessarily result in the nation so helped becoming a client state of the former. Britain helped Japan in the Meiji period to become a major power. Germany assisted the Soviet Union following the Treaty of Rapallo at the end of the First World War.

Therefore, the present US offer to help India in its moves to become a major power in 21st century is based on US calculations of its own interests in respect of Asian and world developments. If this is understood in India then the July 18, 2005 Joint Statement will be viewed in proper perspective in this country. The US initiative on extending civil nuclear energy to India is rooted in the strongly held views of President Bush that revival of nuclear energy was essential to solve the energy problem and to ensure that major industrial powers are not held hostage to oil exporting countries. As Dr Rice put it, there could be no hydrocarbon solutions to the energy problem

in the 21st century. The US advocates that it is in the interest of the countries concerned as well as the world if big demanders of energy in this century, China, India and the US, would increasingly resort to nuclear energy generation. It is in this context therefore, the July 18, 2005 Indo-US Joint Statement was intended to help India in civil nuclear energy generation and it was not about accommodating India in a revised NPT arrangement as a nuclear weapon state. That, the US, by itself is not in a position to do.

When the Shakti tests were conducted and the entire NPT community including the US was highly critical of India, we were not in a position to anticipate that some seven years later the US would be offering to India access to civil nuclear power and would have the support of Russia, UK and France. Therefore, the present offer is to be seen as the first step in India breaking out of technological isolationism, which was imposed on it following the 1974 Pokhran tests. If, at this stage, India is accepted as a country which will be helped in its moves to become a major power and for which an exception has to be made in respect of NPT for giving access to civil nuclear energy and in the development of IV generation reactor and the International Thermonuclear Energy Reactor (ITER), then it is reasonable to assume that there is a lot of potential in further enhancing the cooperation between India and other friendly nuclear weapon powers.

The dialogue on the nuclear energy issue between India and the US has also brought out into the open which major nations are more favourably disposed towards India on this country having access to civil nuclear energy. While the US, the UK, France and Russia have come out in favour of India having access to civil nuclear technology, China has denounced the July 18, 2005 agreement. Though China is the original and biggest nuclear proliferator, it has condemned the US for adopting double standards. China proliferated to Pakistan beginning in 1976 when Z.A. Bhutto visited Beijing and concluded an agreement securing Chinese proliferation to Pakistan. In turn, Dr A.Q. Khan of Pakistan has proliferated Chinese nuclear weapon technology, materials and equipment to Iran, North Korea and Libya. After having done maximum damage to Indian national security through its proliferation to Pakistan now China is opposing the efforts of the US and Western powers to make an exception for India in respect of civil nuclear energy cooperation. Even as India, tries to develop its strategic relations with China, it has to take into account the basic hostile Chinese attitude towards India and has at least, at present, to differentiate that attitude from those of others who seem to value Indian partnership more than

China does. While India has no interest in antagonizing China, in the balance of power system, a clear message has to be sent to China that its unfriendliness will have its consequences. Given this Chinese unfriendliness it will be imprudent for India to reject the offer made by the four Western powers for access to civil nuclear energy.

The strategy for security in a balance of power polycentric world is different from that obtained in a bipolar world. In the bipolar world each adversarial side attempted to build up a nuclear arsenal, perceived to be large enough to take on the rest of the world. In a polycentric world with a number of independent nuclear actors, the uncertainty is much greater for each of the actors on the consequences of his using the nuclear weapon – particularly so, for actors other than the US and Russia. The major nuclear weapon powers are reducing their arsenals and this reduction costs a lot of money. Most of the nuclear doctrines of the bipolar era, such as mutual assured destruction, counterforce strike, etc. are no longer viable in a world of eight nuclear powers which are likely to act independent of each other. A country like China, increasingly urbanized, with large cities and high-density populations, vulnerable targets like the Three Gorges Dam are not likely to resort to nuclear wars except when their very existence is at stake. That contingency is hardly likely to arise. Unfortunately, a number of commentators are unable to recondition themselves from the obsolete nuclear doctrines as well as international relations of the bipolar era.

Partnership with the United States in a six-power balance of power system will give India greater leverage in its relations with the other four. This has already been demonstrated. The US announced its intention to help India in its moves to become a major world power in March 2005. Up to that point of time China used to treat India patronizingly and refer to it as a regional power. Beijing did not concede to India a global role. After the US announcement, the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiao Bao changed his tune and started referring to India's global role. It is indicative of China's 'Middle Kingdom' attitude that it was not willing to consider India, the country, which is likely to become shortly the world's most populous country, as a global power and insisted on equating it with Pakistan. Therefore, partnership with the US, in all likelihood, is likely to promote a similar partnership with Japan and finally China too in the long run.

Some in this country welcomed the idea of China-Russia-India partnership to countervail what they considered as US unipolarity. As pointed out earlier, this idea arose out of a mistakenly perceived notion of growing US dominance in the international system while the reality is that the US is likely to lose out progressively its dominance. Secondly, this proposed tripartite arrangement would in fact destabilize the polycentric international balance of power. Any perception of China-Russia and India coming together is likely to trigger off a similar arrangement between the US-Europe and Japan. In fact, that would lead us back to the bad old days of bipolarity. Surely, China does not have its heart in the tri-nation partnership of Russia, China and India. Its opposition to India's access to civil nuclear energy and its thirty year-old proliferation relationship with Pakistan clearly demonstrate that China is not sincere about such a triangular relationship.

No doubt for many Indians, given the history of the last 50 years, in which US military support to Pakistan, US looking away from Chinese nuclear proliferation to Islamabad, the US efforts in the 1990s to cap, rollback and eliminate Indian nuclear arsenals and US help to build up China as a major world power, it is difficult to accept that Washington will be a genuine strategic partner in the coming decades. It is in this respect that India has to learn lessons from China. Though India had its Chanakya, that was some two millennia ago, and Indians appear to have lost the wisdom of Bhishma and Chanakya in the last few centuries. Ethics of statecraft are very different from those for individuals.

Let us look at what the Chinese did when Dr Kissinger made his secret trip to Beijing and offered US partnership to China to wean it away from Communist ideology and the Soviet Union. Hardly two decades earlier, China and the US had fought a war in Korea. 2,00,000 Chinese and 50,000 the Americans lost their lives in that war. Mao Zedong's son – a MiG pilot – was killed in that war. But the with Chinese leadership did not question American sincerity and motives in offering the partnership. They, shrewd pragmatic men as they were – Kissinger used a more colourful and pejorative term for them – readily understood the US compulsions and cast their lot with the Americans. People like Lin Biao who expressed opposition died conveniently in a plane crash when trying to escape from China.

The Chinese realized that the US needed them to apply their containment policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Therefore, in spite of the

past history, they decided to go along with the American offer. The Americans too understood that for Chinese, Communism was only a convenient label to have a one-party dictatorial system and in reality they were highly national chauvinists obsessed with restoring Chinese national power and its glory as a “Middle Kingdom”.

At present, the Americans understand that they need India as a partner to help them sustain their own pre-eminence as an innovative and competitive power. This is a new ballgame in a globalised, multi-nuclear powered world. They do not want an Asia dominated by China over the long term. They do not consider India will pose problems of rivalry as the European Union and China might. Lastly, they find the possibility of having as a partner, India with a demographic structure that “bequeaths it a huge, skilled and youthful workforce” extremely attractive.

The problem for the Americans during the Cold War was, India refused to share a common threat perception with them. In their view, the Soviet Union was the threat. Pakistan accepted it and therefore it was an ally. China, defected from the Soviet alliance and regarded it as an enemy after 1971 and provided bases in Xinjiang for the United States to monitor Soviet missile tests. Therefore, China became a partner. India, which was not with the US in its threat perception, was, in US logic, against them.

Now, in the six power balance of power world, the US has no enemies and does not define its threat perception in terms of specific nations. Today, the US perceives its threat differently and therefore looks at India differently. Again, to quote Undersecretary Nicholas Burns, India, “will continue to possess large and even more sophisticated military forces that, just like our own, remain strongly committed to the principle of civilian control. ... India will also be a natural partner to the US, as we confront what will be the central security challenge of the coming generation – the global threats that are flowing over, under and through our national borders, terrorism, the proliferation of chemical, biological and nuclear technologies, international crime and narcotics, HIV/AIDS, climate change – our interests converge on all these issues.” Since the threats have changed in the US perception, yesterday’s despised non-aligned India becomes today’s most valued partner, just as it happened with China. In the 1950s and 1960s Chinese air space and maritime boundaries were violated and US conveyed nuclear threats to China. Once China became a nuclear weapon power and anti-Soviet, it was accepted as “Eastern NATO” in the words of Admiral

Peter Hill-Norton, the British Chief of Defence Staff.

In international politics – for that matter in our country, even in internal politics – consistency is not a virtue. There was a time our Communist Party, following the Zhdanov thesis of COMINFORM in 1946 was in insurgency against the Nehru government and termed him “the running dog of imperialists” and an “imperialist lackey.” They were imprisoned in the 1940s, 1960s and 1970s; yet today they support the Congress-dominated UPA government. In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma said that among kings (read political parties and nations in today’s context) “No one is anyone’s friend. No one is anyone’s enemy. Circumstances make enemies and friends.” Millennia later, the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston said, “There are no permanent friends nor permanent enemies but only permanent interests.” When nations make a U-turn in foreign policy they call it great statesmanship. When political parties change their coalition partners they invoke great principles and obfuscate their opportunism. Therefore, to look at the present US attempt to develop a partnership with India from the point of view of the history of Cold War, bipolarity and non-alignment is to overlook lessons of history and international and domestic politics.

When China became an ally of the US, Washington did not change its conduct. In fact, China did. Not only it gave bases to the US to monitor Soviet missile tests, it launched an offensive on Vietnam (the country which defeated US only four years earlier) to teach it a lesson. In the process, China was taught a lesson. China cooperated with the US in Washington’s covert support to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. Even today, the US has not changed but the international circumstances have changed. China has not changed but changes in circumstances now compel China to think of India’s global role. Circumstances compel the Communist parties in India to go along with the Congress. So what we have to focus on is the changes in circumstances, which have persuaded the US to proclaim its intention to help India in its moves to become a world power in the 21st century.

No country that practices *realpolitik* (most of them do) looks at the past behaviour of another country while making decisions on issues of current mutual interest. The United States has a history of hegemony. China has a recent history of Maoism killing more than 38 million people and ambitions of becoming ‘the Middle Kingdom’. Russia has a history of

Stalinist genocide of tens of millions. Europeans and Japanese have imperialist pasts. Our own history has partition killings, our caste oppression, communal intolerance, etc. Therefore, labelling a country on the basis of a stereotype is extremely counter-productive in terms of furthering international trade and development.

So what is in our national interest today? Getting out of the imposed nuclear isolationism is in our national interest. Increasing cooperation with the US in R&D, high technology, agriculture, energy and environment, space, defence and increasing the Indian community in the US are all in our national interest. If we can expand our trade with the US by hundreds of billions of dollars as China has done that will be in our national interest. Cooperating to meet the challenges posed by all the common threats defined by Undersecretary Nicholas Burns will be in our national interest. No one disputes any of these propositions. Those who have reservations speak of hidden costs but do not bother to define them specifically. Most of the hidden costs arguments are based on certain unspoken assumptions derived either from historical extrapolations from the past or ideological fundamentalism.

For decades I was accused of being pro-Soviet. I defended non-alignment vigorously. At that time those policies were in India's national interest. Now, with fundamental changes in world politics and economics, it is unwise to stick to the same policies. New circumstances call for new policies. India is today in a position to enter into a partnership not only with the US but all other five powers, including China provided China stops proliferation to Pakistan and accepts India as an equal partner. I would consider that as a development in India's national interest, if it happens.

What is plaguing us today is an obsolete worldview based on linear extrapolation of the past. The advocacy of the 'End of History' was not tenable. But history is not a straight-line evolution as the Sino-American deal of 1971, the Paris Agreement ending the Cold War, and the recent differences between the United States and its European allies have shown. Today the US needs a partner like India in its long-term national interest. If we understand the long-term vulnerabilities of the US, challenged by the rivalries of China and European Union and therefore its stake in the Indian partnership, we would have greater confidence in the American initiative and lesser suspicion about their entrapment plans. Did Americans

take China for a ride or entrap it? Only those who think that a dictatorial Chinese leadership which is cleverer than the Indian one would argue that India cannot manage the US as well as China.

The Americans obviously do not think as poorly of India as some of our ideologues do. That is perhaps why the Americans chose to announce their intention to help India in its move towards great power status in the 21st century. They perhaps appreciated that they were dealing with a democratic India and not a dictatorial China. For me, most of these arguments create a sense of *déjà vu*. In 1971, I had to argue that Indo-Soviet Treaty would not lead to India becoming a Soviet satellite. Subsequently, there was a time when it had to be highlighted that India would never join Brezhnev's anti-Chinese Asian security initiative. The people who put forward those arguments are today talking of hidden costs. It used to be said of Bourbons of France that they never learnt anything nor forgot anything. We have quite a few Bourbons in our country.

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