

# INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY ORIENTATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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## Introduction

It is a truism that the foreign policy of any major state will be predicated upon and shaped by its perception of what constitutes the core national interest as leavened by the principles and value systems that the state in question adheres to. The related extrapolation is that the national interest, disaggregated into its principal constituent elements, viz: political, military and economic determinants, would have to be protected, nurtured and advanced, as the case may be, in a complex and on occasion contradictory manner. State itself as an entity is located in a definitive spatio-temporal context and this provides the backdrop against which individual states evolve distinctive foreign policies. The regional and global strategic systemic consequently becomes a referent that defines the contours of domestic foreign policy and the latter evolves in a dynamic manner. The temporal determinant acquires greater salience when we note that both the state and the systemic have their own transmutative trajectories in the long cycle of history.

This paper seeks to examine the past evolution and current orientation of India's foreign policy (FP) and dwells in some detail on certain regions and countries. The paper argues that there is an element of continuity and change that is discernible in India's FP and that this has been impelled by a combination of factors specific to the Indian experience. If FP is perceived as a 'strategy' to realize the larger national interest, a useful and succinct definition (for a word that has elicited a plethora of multi-disciplinary interpretations) is provided by John Lewis Gaddis who defines it as: "the process by which ends are related to means, intentions to capabilities, objectives to resources."<sup>1</sup> In relation to the process of evolving a FP, it may be added that the strategic culture of the state and its ruling/governing elite play a central role and this is very noticeable in the Indian case.

India's strategic culture, as is the case of many other states, is a distillate of two ontological features - geography and history – filtered through the cultural impress of its ruling elite at any given point in time. As a civilizational-state (a characteristic it shares

with China) there is an inherited, albeit burnished dominant narrative about the past even as it seeks to grapple with modernity in all its manifestations. To that extent, while independent India post 1947 sought to outline an appropriate FP, its genealogy goes back to the immediate and buried past – which in this case links the DNA of imperial British India with the tenets of the Arthashastra that goes back to circa 302 BC! Hence this paper argues that there are certain elements of continuity by way of tangible objectives in India's FP that are inexorable and dictated by existential characteristics such as geographical location and size. These are further transmuted by contemporary politics and the constraints and opportunities exuded by the prevailing international strategic systemic.

This paper is confined to the trends in the evolution of post 1947 Indian FP and its current orientation and the first significant articulation about India's objectives, interestingly, precede 1947. India which was coming out of the colonial yoke through the Gandhian path of 'ahimsa' (non-violence) had a set of nationalist leaders led by Pandit Nehru and in September 1946, while providing an outline of the interim government's objectives on the cusp of Indian independence, Nehru stated: "It is because of this expectation of an early realization of full independence that we have entered this Government and we propose to function so as progressively to achieve independence in action both in our domestic affairs and our foreign relations....as a free nation with our own policy and not merely as a satellite of another nation."<sup>2</sup> There is further elaboration of the Nehruvian vision of Indian FP and a few months after he became Prime Minister of independent India, he observed: "Foreign policies.... are not just empty struggles on a chess board. Behind them lie all manner of things. Ultimately, foreign policy is the outcome of economic policy, and until India has properly evolved her economic policy, her foreign policy will be rather vague, rather inchoate, and will be groping."<sup>3</sup>

There is a sense of prescience in Nehru's later articulation for the effectiveness of India's FP in the early decades – the objectives it may have set for itself – were not backed by adequate and appropriate national resources and capabilities. Hence many of the lofty aspirations were not realized, thereby resulting in the chequered nature of India's foreign policy effectiveness in the period 1947-62. However this paper argues that there is a core consistency by way of the security and strategic concerns that under grid foreign policy and in the Indian case, the linkages and departures with the policy of imperial British India are instructive. 19th century European geo-strategic rivalry among the major powers became

the 'Great Game' (a la Arthur Conolly and not Rudyard Kipling) and the central objective of then ascendant Britain was to keep the Russian Bear from accessing the Indian Ocean through the Central Asian region. Historians aver that even the Moghul emperors had much the same unease about any Russian foray to the sub-continent and this geo-strategic chess-game informed much of the foreign policy of the then major powers.<sup>4</sup> Theoreticians introduced the 'heartland versus rim land' theory and the dictates of the continental power and the salience of maritime power.

Post World War II, when the mantle of the dominant power had passed to the USA, the 'game' continued but with a different packaging – namely the containment of communism. The former Soviet Union was the new 'bear' whose advance was to be resisted and the global systemic evolved along the grid of bi-polarity. Here one may introduce the co-relation between the foreign policy of individual states and the manner in which it is shaped by the compulsions of the global systemic. The proposition is that very few states barring the hegemon have the ability to conduct truly autonomous or independent foreign policies and the thumb-rule for all other states – to the extent they are relevant to the systemic – is that their maneuverability and space is shaped by the power compulsions of the systemic. Bi-polarity was the flavor of the Cold War decades and most of the world was divided along the East-West axis and their related military alliances. India, under Nehru, which had already anticipated this power block divisiveness had made its fundamental choice. Non-alignment. In his December 1946 speech, Nehru had already asserted: "We propose, as far as possible, to keep away from the power politics of groups, aligned against one another, which have led in the past to world wars and which may again lead to disasters on an even vaster scale."<sup>5</sup>

Consequently the existential force of bi-polarity and the postures of the two superpowers shaped the choices for the rest of the world – including the non-aligned group. India, as a nascent post colonial state had its own internal consolidation to address as a first priority but its foreign policy, this paper argues, flowed from an innate sense of how best to manage its more relevant strategic space. This was most succinctly summed up by the British High Commissioner to India at the time (1951) in a secret cable to London elucidating India's security-foreign policy orientation. Sir Archibald Nye opined that the Indian policy could be perceived as "operating in three concentric circles, the principles governing each of which bear little or no relation to the principles followed in the others."<sup>6</sup>

This has been further interpreted as the innermost circle of contiguous states – viz: Afghanistan, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Nepal, Tibet and Burma – where it was perceived that India had 'vital' interests. The second circle included the rest of the world minus the four major powers at that time, namely the USA, USSR, UK and PRC. The second ring was prioritized as areas that were more relevant such as SE Asia to minimal relevance as say South America. Sir Nye added, even at that time, that Pakistan was a 'unique' case. The more detailed elucidation that followed suggested that the policies – security and foreign – followed by India were very different for each set of circles and that while the innermost elicited a kind of hard-nosed realpolitik approach a la Bismarck, while in the second circle, "Indian policy was characterized by anti-colonialism and support for nationalism, with perhaps a smattering of realism in Asian countries like Malaya and Iran, where India's interests were engaged." And with regard to the outermost circle, India's foreign and security policy posture was "to a great extent determined by her passionate desire to keep out of conflict and to stand aside from Great Power struggles."<sup>7</sup>

This paper argues that Indian FP was and is shaped by a set of three determinants – namely the external international systemic and the dominant strategic discourse and practice; the Indian perception about what constitutes the core national interest and the national resources and capabilities it can bring to bear to protect or advance this interest; and finally the cognitive perception of the ruling/governing elite at the time. Within this matrix, there is both continuity and change by way of specific trend lines and initiatives taken by India over a 60 year period – from 1946 to 2006. I would further aver that this entire policy response trajectory is to be located within the domain of India's distinctive strategic culture – which has also been evolving over this period.

Broadly disaggregated, the trends in Indian FP may be divided in the temporal periods 1947-1962; 1962-1991; 1991-1998; and 1998-mid 2006 and refereed along the three elements identified earlier. The early phase from 1947-1962 was a period when nascent India was seeking to consolidate its identity as a free and independent state with the attendant mix of aspirations and anxieties and to that extent the immediate priority was internal and domestic. The aftermath of partition and the grapple with participative democracy when economic and fiscal resources were modest, consumed greater part of national funds and energy – but it would be fair to state that on the foreign policy front – the Nehruvian approach was followed. A degree of realism where India's vital interests

were affected was one component, while issues such as de-colonization and support for freedom struggles comprised the other. On larger global issues such as nuclear weapons, a normative, humanistic approach was preferred and vis-à-vis the super-powers, non-alignment was the preferred stance. If the domestic ambiance and the persona of a leader like Nehru were two of the drivers, the ambiance of the external global strategic systemic as manifest in the early phase of the Cold war (post Cuban missile crisis in 1962, I would argue, the Cold War entered a different techno-strategic phase) was the more significant determinant in shaping Indian FP.

The rationale for the creation of an independent Pakistan is beyond the scope of this paper but suffice it to note that the reality of a Pakistan in August 1947 brought the Great Game DNA through the Cold War filter into the calculus of Indian FP. Pakistan's willingness to join the US led military alliances such as the CENTO and SEATO during the 1950's and 1960's made it the problematic 'other' for India and a number of Indian FP initiatives including those relating to Kashmir were directly affected by this Cold War under-current. One may hypothetically aver that an undivided British India would have perhaps adopted a different kind of FP orientation for there were no fundamental divergences with the US led Western alliance. Nehru himself had no special love for the ideology of communism so much so that India would have crossed over into the red camp in retrospect appear misplaced. On the international canvas, India acquired a certain profile that belied its nascent political pedigree and under-developed economic profile. This was evident in the Indian support to Japan immediately after Hiroshima, the Indonesian freedom struggle, the Korean and Indo-China wars, the mantle of Asian leadership et al.

The brief 1962 Sino-India war punctured this self-image and is a major punctuation in the evolution of India's strategic culture, security perceptions and foreign policy orientation. Disillusionment and a rude awakening were the leit motifs of the trauma and humiliation of 1962 and this experience scarred Nehru personally and the Indian polity collectively. Bitter recrimination followed about the great Chinese betrayal and the invalidity of Asian solidarity on one hand and a realization that India's inherent national resources and tangible capabilities – in this case military – were woefully inadequate to underwrite the foreign policy contours that had been earlier envisioned. To go back to Gaddis, there was a mismatch between the objectives and the availability of resources.

Post 1962 was a period of consolidation for India and Nehru died a broken man in 1964. His successors – Lal Bahadur Shastri briefly and later Indira Gandhi were wedded to the mantra of non-alignment on the global stage but introduced certain nuances in the practice of foreign policy. The external dynamic of the Cold War entered Asia through the Vietnam war and later the nettlesome issue of Cambodia. Both these events had considerable negative impact on India's relations with the USA and SE Asian nations – the focus of this paper. In the post Nehru decades – that is from 1964 till the tragic assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1984 – India engaged in two wars with Pakistan – in 1965 and 1971 – the latter leading to the birth of Bangladesh – and the 1974 Peaceful Nuclear Explosion, and here one notes a certain caution and assertiveness in Indian FP.

The Indian disillusionment with the US and other western powers – such as UK (which in any case was becoming more and more dependent on the trans-Atlantic alliance and the US) in the aftermath of the 1962 war and the subsequent Chinese nuclear test in 1964 led to a gradual tilt towards the former USSR and in about a decade – from the mid 1960's onwards, the USSR emerged as India's major supplier of military inventory and a trusted friend over issues such as Kashmir when they came up in the UNSC. This tilt had its corrosive impact on India's relations with the USA and its allies – leading to what is often described as the 'estrangement' between the world's oldest and largest democracies – ironically when the values that were being contested in the Cold war were freedom and the threat to democracy. Subsequently the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 and the Iranian Revolution brought the Cold War closer to India on its western flank and the estrangement with the USA was further enhanced through India's muted response over Afghanistan and the call for the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace among other foreign policy responses.

The period 1984 till 1990 was one of further consolidation for India under the stewardship of Rajiv Gandhi (this was the period when India embarked upon its Peace Keeping operation in Sri Lanka) and some significant regional FP initiatives were pursued including a thawing of relations with China (which had gone into the deep freeze after the 1962 war) and improved relations with the USA. This was also a period when India's fiscal prudence was not as astute as it may have been and while on one hand there was a visible element of India's military capability being effectively enhanced – as perceived in the Indian Navy's expansion and the swift assistance to Maldives in Nov 1988 which was

threatened by a renegade takeover – the macro economic and fiscal indicators were deteriorating. This was also a period of considerable internal turbulence for India and there was a quick succession of Prime Ministers and short-lived Central governments. Political instability was compounded by the terrorist assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and a very complex internal security environment. Apart from Jammu and Kashmir, the prosperous state of Punjab witnessed a rash of separatist violence that was finally quelled.

This was also the period when the Cold War was coming to an unintended end and Gorbachev's glasnost-perestroika and the rapprochement with the USA led to a dramatic turn of events. Overnight on December 8, 1991, the Soviet Union became 'former' and Russia emerged with a very different geography and political identity. Bi-polarity was relegated to the pages of history and a very new global strategic systemic was born. Unipolarity – or so it seemed. The USA which had just led a very successful coalition in early 1999 for in Gulf War I – the War for Kuwait, was perceived as the sole hegemon with no challenger in sight – China was still recovering from the opprobrium of Tiananmen.

It is the contention of this paper that while the end of the Cold War led to a complete review and re-orientation of the FP of most nations, for the global strategic grid was completely transformed, it was the equivalent of a double-whammy for India since the domestic situation was also undergoing considerable turbulence. PM Narasimha Rao assumed office in June 1991 succeeding two predecessors who had served for less than a year each. India's economic health was frail and the fiscal indicators were alarming with a balance of payment crisis looming. India's forex reserves were down to a few weeks. Thus the country was faced with an exigency wherein all three determinants that shape and influence FP were in a state of flux - namely the global systemic, national capabilities and resources, and a new leadership that was grappling with political, economic and social turbulence – the right-wing BJP party was gaining ground in India at the time.

India's major FP transformation came about in the Narasimha Rao years (June 1991- May 1996) and much of it was impelled by the economic liberalization that Delhi was embarked upon. India's socialist command planning model and the license-raj permit economic and trade system gave way to a more liberalized approach and in many ways the Indian economy was freed from the politico-bureaucratic shackles imposed upon it for decades. The macro-results were very favorable. The inflexible Hindu rate of growth suddenly accelerated and this was also enabled to a great extent by deft financial planning

led by then Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and the global techno-commercial wave related to the computer and information revolution. As Baru has noted: "after recording virtually no growth in the first half of the 20th century, the (Indian) economy grew at an annual average rate of 3.5 percent in 1950-80 and 5.4 percent in 1980-90 and 6.2 percent in 1990-2000."<sup>8</sup> Thus the economic sinews were strengthened under the Rao-Singh stewardship and I would argue that to achieve this objective, necessary changes were brought about to India's FP orientation. Trade and investment were accorded a higher priority as opposed to ideological positions and much of this is reflected in India's relations with the USA, ASEAN and China – the later focus of this paper.

### **Relations with the USA**

As noted earlier, the India-US relationship during the Cold war decades was described as one of 'estranged democracies' and this was largely due to the very divergent national security perceptions that the two countries had and consequently the security and foreign policies they adopted were often at variance to each other. In the early decades, India's policy of non-alignment was met with angry bewilderment by a US leadership that sought clarity from the world's largest democracy. However it merits notice that India's relations with the USA during the Eisenhower and Kennedy presidencies were relatively stable and it was only with the eruption of the Vietnam War that relations soured visibly. The Nixon years were particularly strained and subsequently India's 1974 PNE led to the creation of a very stubborn bone of contention. This was the legacy of the Carter years to a great extent, though in hindsight, it may be suggested that both Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her successor as PM, Rajiv Gandhi had very cordial relations with Ronald Reagan. It may be posited that the 1983 Cancun meeting between Mrs. Gandhi and President Reagan marks the beginning of the rapprochement between the two countries and that this is now poised to reach fruition in the Bush-Manmohan Singh agreement of July 2005.

With the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the USSR, India had to re-order its relations with the remaining super-power and while Delhi was seeking to find the right balance, Washington was to be punctuated by the Clinton years – two terms from 1993 to 2000 – and an instructive overlap emerges. While the nuclear nettle continued to dominate the state level interactions (India had refused to sign the NPT and was outside of the global nuclear regime and it was the Clinton intent to 'cap, roll-back and eliminate'

India's nuclear weapon capability), paradoxically, the Indian business and intellectual elite were building a robust relationship with their US counterparts. This was facilitated by India's cautious economic liberalization and the dynamic of globalization in trade and commerce where India's inherent affinity with the computer revolution proved to be an advantage at a time when the US economy was maximizing the opportunities provided by the IT revolution. The India-US relationship was strained in the first Clinton term and much of this was evident in the CTBT debate in India. Ironically, the two countries that had been bitterly estranged over the nuclear issue – with the Indian 1974 test leading to the US introducing stringent nuclear legislation – actually co-sponsored the draft of the CTBT in the UN. This contradictory convergence ensued since both countries saw the CTBT as a leverage for advancing their respective interests – for India it was a means towards global disarmament, while for the US it was a means to place fetters on new nuclear powers. At the level of the global systemic it is worth recalling that France and China joined the NPT only in 1992 and the US, post the Iraqi Scud scare of 1991 during Desert Storm, had a larger strategic objective wherein India was only a modest target.

However in the period 1993 to 1996, the CTBT debate within India became more animated impacting the India-US relationship. Various related developments including the Sino-Pak WMD co-operation pattern and the indefinite extension of the NPT resulted in a crystallization of India's posture on the nuclear issue. As more recent disclosures suggest – the Narasimha Rao government had planned to conduct a nuclear test in December 1995 – but was deterred from doing so due to the adverse economic consequences. However, by mid 1996 the fault lines were visible when India distanced itself from the CTBT and the US and its allies pushed the treaty through in the CD and later at the UN. The official relationship was brittle both over the nuclear issue and terrorism but this was at odds with the economic ties. Two way bi-lateral trade that stood at US \$ 5.68 bn in 1990 moved steadily to US \$ 9.02 in 1995 proving the tenet that in the post Cold war systemic, the market does not follow the flag.<sup>9</sup> Economic liberalization was paying dividends in the politico-diplomatic domain and very imperceptibly, India and the US were becoming cognizant of each other's complementary potentialities.

May 1998 marks a defining moment in the evolution of India's foreign policy formulation. India's nuclear weapon tests established it as a state with nuclear weapons – SNW – as opposed to the NWS semantic of the NPT. This 1998 shift in India's security

and foreign policies may be interpreted as an extension of the continuity and change paradigm, while allowing for the causal factors that brought about the transmutation. India had crossed the nuclear Rubicon but this was not sudden. True, a BJP led NDA government headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee was at the helm in Delhi but the intent to acquire nuclear weapon capability was discernible in the late 1980's during the Rajiv Gandhi years and was impelled by the determination that India was at a WMD disadvantage in the regional grid and that progressively, the international systemic was proving to be inimical to Indian interests. I would argue that even if a non BJP party had headed the coalition government (a coalition at the Centre being one of the existential characteristics of Indian politics by about the mid 1990's due to the decline of the major national parties and the rise of regional parties with single state credibility such as the DMK, AIDMK and the TDP among others) the Indian government of the day would have acquired nuclear weapon capability by the late 1990's.

India-US ties plummeted to an all time low and Washington spouted harsh word denouncing India. The 1998 tests (Pakistan followed suit a few weeks later) were followed by what later turned out to be a false dawn of India-Pakistan amity as noticed in the Lahore pact of early 1999 signed by PM Vajpayee and PM Nawaz Sharief. Regrettably the Kargil War followed in the summer of 1999 and while India was caught by surprise by this Pakistani intrusion into Indian territory, the fall-out of this limited war between South Asia's two nuclear armed neighbors was a strategic gain for Indian foreign policy. The global community took note of the restraint and extreme responsibility with which India conducted itself and I would suggest that the end of this war which was negotiated by a dramatic meeting between US President Clinton and Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharief on July 4, 1999 (the US Independence Day) in Washington marks a turning point in the seemingly irreparably damaged India-US relations. This is reiterated by a perceptive analysis of the impact of the Kargil War from Washington. The Schaffers – Teresita and Howard – two former US diplomats with long experience of South Asia commented: "The United States saw the facts as India did, and pursued its own national interests. The fact that these coincided with India is not unique, but illustrates how, in a changing world, both countries need to look for opportunities where their agendas overlap.....Pakistan had started the (Kargil) problem by playing with fire; the remedy seemed clear: push Pakistan hard to end its provocation. India handled the situation with care and restraint; there was no reason to

call for the usual reciprocating gesture."<sup>10</sup> The last phrase is significant for now Washington did not find it necessary to 'balance' its South Asian policy by admonishing India – a familiar pattern of the past. One may further aver that this marks the beginning of the de-hyphenation of US foreign policy as regards the sub-continent and this is taken to its logical conclusion by the Bush administration that was to follow the Clinton years in the White House. On the economic front, the bi-lateral trade continued to post modest but impressive gains and by 2000, this had further increased to US \$ 14. 3 bn.<sup>11</sup>

Post Kargil, there was a significant improvement in the bi-lateral relationship and the culmination was the very successful visit to India by President Clinton in March 2000. A broad statement of intent was agreed to by the two nations and the potential for a partnership between natural allies was the rhetoric of the day. However, the dark nuclear shadow loomed large and despite many rounds of talks between Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and the US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, there was no satisfactory resolution. The US was keen to lasso India and bring it into some kind of nuclear restraint regime that would be similar to the NPT for non-nuclear weapon states, such as signing the CTBT and the FMCT but India remained firm in its refusal. Consequently there still remained a glass-ceiling to the potential of the bi-lateral relationship but the texture of cordiality was palpable – a welcome change from the bitterness that marked the earlier relationship. In January 2004, India and the US agreed to a new techno-strategic framework – the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) – that included hi-tech areas like nuclear energy, space and missile defenses. However this was at a preliminary stage and many US regulations and laws prohibited any meaningful co-operation in these sectors.

The arrival of the Bush administration with its very different world-view laid the foundation for dramatically altering the framework in which the US-India relationship was located. Even before the tragic events of 9-11, the Bush team signaled its intent to pursue a very different nuclear and missile path from that of the Clinton administration. The CTBT was rejected and the ABM abrogated and this removed two visible elements of discord between the US and India. Subsequently, in May 2005 Indian FP made an uncharacteristic departure when it was among the first major countries to cautiously endorse the new Bush strategic doctrine to go beyond the ABM and make missile defense the centre-piece of US nuclear strategy.<sup>12</sup> Relations with the Bush administration appeared to be poised for a

definitive improvement but the enormity of 9-11 intervened. US security and foreign policies underwent a dramatic change and the US embarked upon its GWOT. It is pertinent that one of the first military actions taken by the US – the removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan – was in India's immediate security interests. The acknowledgement by the US that state sponsored or nurtured terrorism was a major security challenge for all liberal democracies was a vindication of the long standing Indian stand on the subject.

The truly radical shift in the US-India bi-lateral relationship came about in the second tenure of the Bush administration beginning January 2005. A new government was in place in Delhi – the Congress led UPA coalition with Dr. Manmohan Singh as the PM had assumed charge in May 2004. However despite the presence of the Indian Left in the coalition, the essential continuity in India's FP orientation initiated by the NDA regime with the US continued. It was the US that initiated a major shift in the bi-lateral ties, when in March 2005, the new US Secretary of State Ms. Condoleezza Rice made India the first stop in her whistle stop-tour of Asia. On March 16, 2005 Ms. Rice met with Indian leaders in Delhi and alluded to the new salience being accorded to India in the Bush 2 foreign policy overhaul. The import of a significant but veiled reference to the need for the US and India to enter into an "energy dialogue" was perhaps not adequately understood at the time but this became more clear a few days later.<sup>13</sup> On March 25, 2005 the US State Department unveiled a new blue-print for re-structuring US ties with India and asserted that it "will help India become a major world power in the 21st century"<sup>14</sup> – and further added that it was aware of the implications of such a commitment including the military aspect.

The determination to provide a robust defence and security underpinning to the March 25 statement was reflected in the landmark agreement signed between the US and India in June 2005. The new framework for India-US Defence Relations was signed by Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee with his US counterpart Donald Rumsfeld in Washington on June 28 and the scope of the agreement has the potential to positively re-cast the nature of the bi-lateral relationship. The two page document outlined an ambitious framework predicated on advancing "shared security interests." The preamble also added that this is derived from "a common belief in freedom, democracy and the rule of law."<sup>15</sup> India and the US identified their areas of convergence – namely the maintenance of security and stability in the region; defeating terrorism and violent religious extremism; preventing the spread of WMD and related material (AQ Khan episode?); and finally protecting the

free flow of commerce via land, air and sea lanes. To realize these objectives, it was added, the two militaries would work towards inter-operability and engage in combined operations – if required.

The last aspect aroused considerable disquiet in some quarters in India – particularly among the Left parties – and the anxiety seemed to be that India would become part of the next US military action – hypothetically against Iran or North Korea. This was perhaps misplaced for the exact reference reads as follows: "strengthen the abilities of our militaries to respond quickly to disaster situations, including in combined operations."<sup>16</sup> It may be recalled that when the tsunami disaster struck in December 2004, the Indian relief response by the Navy, Coast Guard and the Air Force was noted with professional interest both regionally and by the US security establishment.

The more important but ignored aspect of the Defence framework agreement is about the expansion of defense trade between India and the US. The document notes among its objectives: "in the context of defense trade and a framework of technology security safeguards, increase opportunities for technology transfer, collaboration, co-production, and research and development."<sup>17</sup> This section has the potential to facilitate India's growth and credibility in the defence production and R&D field. For India the long term challenge is not about buying a few squadrons of F-16s or more advanced fighter aircraft from the US but about acquiring the production and design skills associated with the US military-industrial complex. Indian foreign policy, it may be inferred, had internalized the tenet that any major power has to become militarily credible and this profile needs the assimilation of new technologies that currently only the US can provide.

However, in keeping with its cautious posture of not putting all its eggs in one basket and making haste slowly in its defence procurement relations with the US, India reiterated that it would continue to sustain its military supply ties with Russia – but observed that it needs to seek assistance in the new areas of military technology and the US is the logical choice in the years ahead. It is instructive that the US has opposed the supply of such technologies to China – which it sees as a future challenger – but is willing to provide the same to India.

The more formal endorsement to the improved nature of the bi-lateral relationship between Washington and Delhi is contained in the July 18, 2005 agreement signed during Dr. Manmohan Singh's visit to the USA.<sup>18</sup> The most significant aspect of this was the

manner in which the contentious circle of the nuclear nettle was sought to be squared. US President Bush decided to adroitly convert the divisive nuclear issue from one of contestation to one of co-operation. The agreement noted that the US would recognize India as a nation with 'advanced nuclear capability'<sup>19</sup> – a euphemism for India's SNW capability – and without compromising US commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, it would enter into a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement by effecting appropriate changes in existing US nuclear and related export control legislation. This was a very radical departure in US policy and India had reason to be more than satisfied with this breakthrough for it meant that the many technology denial regimes that it had been subject to since 1974 would be gradually lifted – and in consultation with the other NSG members, it would be slowly brought into the ambit of global nuclear and hi-tech commerce.

Predictably there was a strong protest and rejection of this exceptionalism being provided to India by the Bush administration – most visibly from among the non-proliferation lobbies within the US – but there was a deeper consensus in the Beltway that a closer and nuclear-nettle-free relationship with India was in the abiding US strategic interest in the early part of the 21st century. Paradoxically, there was concern in India also that the fine-print of the new agreement with the US would lead to long term negative consequences including fetters on India's strategic and foreign policy autonomy but the UPA government stayed the course. Instructively, it was the personal political conviction of Mr. Bush and Dr. Manmohan Singh that brought about the requisite changes in the foreign policy orientation of the two states. This trend is in keeping with the formulation of this paper, that a very significant factor of changes in foreign policy is the personal cognitive perception of individual political leaders, who with astute staff support – in this case the US State Department and the Indian MEA – can effect such changes in the face of conventional and received wisdom that prefers to maintain the status quo.

The July 2005 agreement was followed by a low key but successful visit of US President Bush to Delhi in March 2006 and the India-US nuclear deal – as it now being referred to – was kept alive by the political determination of the political apex on both sides. Down to the wire, is the off the record summarization of both July 2005 and March 2006 and at this point, while the Indian side has announced its separation of nuclear facilities plan, the US side is engaged in bringing about the necessary changes to US legislation that would allow a fruition of the civilian nuclear cooperation agreement. As of

end August, the draft legislation has been approved by the US House of Representatives and is awaiting the approval of the US Senate before it is reconciled. However, it is not a done deed and the passage of the nuclear cooperation agreement between the US and India may be termed as a complex work in progress that involves many players and constituencies.

### **Relations with ASEAN States**

India has had very old ties with the SE Asian states that precede the formation of ASEAN as an entity and one set of linkages are civilisational. The spread of Buddhism and the rhythms of trade punctuated the medieval period. With the arrival of Western colonization, British India's policies were dictated by London and this pattern prevailed till the end of World War II. However in the modern period, post 1947, as argued in the earlier section of the paper, India's foreign policy orientation towards SE Asia was an extension of the three determinants identified – viz: the domestic politico-strategic orientation; the perception of core national interests; and the international systemic. In the early decades, India was championing the end of colonization, support to nascent nations and the spirit of non-alignment and these determinants were applied to SE Asia. Hence there was unambiguous support to the freedom movement in Indonesia for instance. Similarly India provided assistance to the civilian government in then Burma and played a major role in the Geneva Accords and the related Indo-China International Commission of the mid 1950's.

However, the compulsions of the prevailing global security dynamic and the East-West confrontation gradually permeated the Asian canvas. The US was not very happy about the outcome of the Geneva Accord and what it perceived as a Sino-Soviet convergence and promoted an anti-communist collective security pact of the South East Asian nations. Consequently SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization) with its HQ in Bangkok was born in 1954 and by what may be termed an extreme oddity, Pakistan – despite its geographical location also joined the Philippines and Thailand as part of SEATO. Predictably Nehru regarded SEATO as “harmful to Asia as well as the cause of peace.”<sup>20</sup> Later on, the advent of the Vietnam war and India's own insular preoccupation after the 1962 war saw a dilution of India's relations with the SE Asian states – who themselves were at different stages of internal consolidation.

The Vietnam War and the estrangement between the US and India had its corrosive influence on India's ties with the SE Asian states who were also polarized along the bi-polar grid. While the original five ASEAN states (established in August 1967) were aligned with the US in the containment of communism, others were tilted towards the socialist model a la USSR and or China. The mid 1970's turmoil in Cambodia which pitted China against Vietnam marked a defining moment of deterioration in India's relations with the ASEAN states. As one comment notes "India's support to Communist Vietnam and its recognition of the Vietnamese installed Heng Samrin government in July 1980, once again reconfirmed India's deep alliance with the Soviet Union and made her unpopular among the members of ASEAN."<sup>21</sup> The prevailing Cold War dynamic impelled India to a take stand that was at variance with that of the US and this animosity continued till the end of the Cold War.

The early 1990's marked a major shift in India's FP overall orientation and under PM Narasimha Rao there was a concerted attempt to improve the texture and tenor of relations with the ASEAN as a group. PM Rao was determined to increase India's economic space and opportunities and ASEAN with its proven trade-economic profile was a natural choice for Delhi. India embarked upon what is now called its 'Look East' policy in 1991 and this was consolidated by a series of high level visits by PM Rao to individual states. The pragmatism exuded by India and its economic liberalization program struck a chord of empathy in the ASEAN and gradually specific trade-commerce complementarities were arrived at. It is relevant that the Indian MEA Annual Report of 1992-93 noted that: "India decided to give a special policy thrust to its relations with the ASEAN."<sup>22</sup> India joined ASEAN as a sectoral dialogue partner in 1992 and slowly became a full dialogue partner and was admitted into the ARF – the security arm of ASEAN in June 1996. India's economic potential and performance and its military – particularly naval – capabilities were noted by ASEAN and gradually greater content was imparted to individual bi-lateral ties. Understandably, there was an asymmetry in ties with different ASEAN countries – who had increased in numbers progressively – that were evolving their own individual policies in relation to India.

The trade fall-out was very positive and it merits note that after the ushering in of the Look east policy by PM Rao, the rate of growth of India's total trade with ASEAN over a 22 year period was impressive. In the period 1975 to 1997, India's growth of trade with ASEAN was 11.77 percent as against 8 percent with the world as a whole. Disaggregated

further, after the economic liberalization program, India growth of total trade in the period 1991-97 with the world was 9.95 percent while with ASEAN in the same period it was 18.15 percent. And among individual countries, with Indonesia alone, India's trade growth post liberalization registered a staggering 129 percent in the 1991-97 period.<sup>23</sup>

India's nuclear tests of May 1998 altered ASEAN's perception of its western neighbor and though within the extended region, Australia was among the most vocal critics of this initiative, the inherent strategic balance that India provided apropos China was noted. The specific Indian military capabilities – naval and professional training in military schools – was acknowledged and slowly, there was the injection of greater military contact along the bi-lateral route. As an illustration of this facet, it is relevant that Indian naval ship visits to ASEAN ports (counted by individual ship and port index) increased as follows: in 1995 – ports 2 and ships 4; and in 2005 – ports 24 and ships 51. On the ASEAN side, total number of naval ship visits to India ports increased from 6 in 1998 to 19 in 2003.<sup>24</sup>

In summary it may be opined that ASEAN's relations with India at the macro-level will be shaped by the forces of globalization on the trade and economic front. India's gradually improving indicators in this domain are being monitored by the relevant sectors within ASEAN which is going through its own internal transmutation through the ASEAN plus 3 and other initiatives such as the East Asia Summit formulation. On the strategic and security front, much will depend on the trajectory of US-China relations and the manner in which they impact ASEAN as a collective and on the specific interests of individual states. However, it would be reasonable to identify some immediate common concerns such as terrorism linked to radical Islamic jihadism, maritime threats such as piracy and pollution and natural disaster response capabilities. The ARF is a viable forum but India will, to my mind, keep a low profile and wait for ASEAN to arrive at an appropriate comfort level before it increases its security engagement with the region.

India's relations with ASEAN have now acquired a level of satisfaction and exude promise for further mutually beneficial growth. India held its first annual Summit level meeting with ASEAN in 2002 and more recently Indian PM Dr. Singh participated in the 4<sup>th</sup> such summit in Malaysia in December 2005. This was followed by the first East Asia Summit where India was an invitee. PM Singh reiterated India's stance as regards ASEAN and noted: "We attach great importance to our relations with ASEAN, which constitute a

central element in India's 'Look East Policy'.<sup>25</sup> Thus it may be inferred that from a tentative beginning in the early 1990's, India's foreign policy orientation vis-à-vis the collective of ASEAN is now more definitive and will be shaped by the larger global and regional framework as it unspools along the economic and strategic strands. Here the role of the US and China will be significant factors and India will nuance its own policies accordingly.

## **Conclusion**

The Indian elephant, it may be surmised, is on the move and the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century hold considerable promise for India to realize its many potentialities and hone its latent capabilities in keeping with the dynamic of the century. By about 2030 or thereabouts, macro-economic projections suggest that the world will be tri-polar with the US, China and India constituting the three nodes.<sup>26</sup> This exigency will have its own strategic ramifications. Consequently India's foreign policy is also adapting to the changing context – domestic, regional and international. The track record of the last decade – particularly since May 1998 has been encouraging and currently an emerging India is the flavor of the times. Much of this quiet confidence of how India will deal with the world at large is aptly reflected in a little noted but comprehensive overview offered by PM Manmohan Singh, which is being cited in some detail, for it offers very illuminating cues about the orientation of India's overall strategy and related external policies.

Speaking to the apex of the Indian military at the annual Combined Commander's Conference in October 2005, PM observed:

The end of the Cold War, increasing global inter-dependence and the trans-border nature of many threats have made strategic concepts developed in a bi-polar world somewhat irrelevant. The United States is today the dominant economic, military, technological and cultural power. However, it can be anticipated that the European Union, Russia, China, Japan and India will consolidate their individual positions to play a global role. We must evolve a new paradigm of security cooperation relevant to an emerging multi-polar world in which global threats obtain global responses.

This is precisely what India has sought to do. We have entered into strategic partnerships with the United States, Russia, Japan and the European Union and are pursuing strategic cooperation with China. Today, nations are engaged simultaneously both in competition and cooperation. ...., our (Indian) strategy has to be based on three broad

pillars. First, to strengthen ourselves economically and technologically; Second, to acquire adequate defence capability to counter and rebut threats to our security, and third, to seek partnerships both on the strategic front and on the economic and technological front to widen our policy and developmental options.

With this in perspective, India too is reciprocating positively to overtures of other major players in the global balance of power. No doubt this involves sophisticated bargaining with each of them. It is unrealistic to expect nations to act for altruistic reasons. International relations are in the final analysis, power relations. This balance of power politics in international relations is more sophisticated than during the Cold War era. We must learn to deal with this new reality and plan our long-term security based on a proper appreciation of these evolving trends. Consequently, we should develop friendly interactive relations with as many major powers as possible.<sup>27</sup>

India's world view and its own orientation to the external as enunciated in 2005 bears strong resemblance to what Nehru had outlined in the early years after India attained independence. Friendly and mutually productive relations with all the major powers without being drawn into any kind of 'alliance' that would fetter India's autonomy remains the lodestar that provides continuity to India's evolving foreign policy. The dynamic of change is evidenced in the manner in which India's own capabilities and resilience has been enhanced. After almost 60 years, India may have arrived at the appropriate harmonization of its resources and objectives as it strategizes to pursue its core national interests.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in "Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947-1964"; by Andrew J Rotter; Cornell University Press; 2000; pg. 39

<sup>2</sup> "Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches Vol I", Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India; 1949; rpt fourth ed. 1983; pg. 2

<sup>3</sup> Cited in "Strategic Consequences of India's Economic Performance"; by Sanjaya Baru; Academic Foundation, New Delhi; 2006; pg. 455

<sup>4</sup> Rotter pg. 48-49

<sup>5</sup> "Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches Vol I", Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India

<sup>6</sup> Rotter pg. 46

<sup>7</sup> Rotter pg. 47

<sup>8</sup> Cited in "Strategic Consequences of India's Economic Performance"; by Sanjaya Baru; Academic Foundation, New Delhi; 2006; pg. 37

<sup>9</sup> [www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5330](http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5330)

<sup>10</sup> Cited in "Impossible Allies" by Raja Mohan

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5330>

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<sup>12</sup> see 'Bush Outlines New US Nuclear Policy'; by C Uday Bhaskar ; "Strategic Analysis"; Vol XXV No. 3 June 2001; pg 331-341

<sup>13</sup> 'Condi Rice Visit to Delhi: Landmark in India-US Ties' by C Uday Bhaskar; Dainik Jagran of 24 Mar 2005.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/43853.htm>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/43853.htm>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/43853.htm>

<sup>17</sup> ibid

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/43853.htm>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/43853.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Cited in *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies* by Dennis Kux; NDU Press; 1992; pg. 121

<sup>21</sup> cited in "India and ASEAN: Foreign Policy Dimensions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century"; ed. K Raja Reddy; New Century Publications; New Delhi; 2005; pg. 58

<sup>22</sup> cited in "India and ASEAN: Foreign Policy Dimensions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century"; ed. K Raja Reddy; New Century Publications; New Delhi; 2005; pg. 62

<sup>23</sup> Cited in "Strategic Consequences of India's Economic Performance"; by Sanjaya Baru; Academic Foundation, New Delhi; 2006; pg. 248

<sup>24</sup> Collated from news reports

<sup>25</sup> <http://pmindia.nic.in/speeches.htm>

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC\\_globaltrend2020\\_s2.html#page53](http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_globaltrend2020_s2.html#page53)

<sup>27</sup> <http://pmindia.nic.in/speeches.htm>