

From Non-Alignment to Dependence: Shifting Paradigms of Indian Foreign Policy

Sukumar Muralidharan

P. Sundarayya Centenary Seminar

Hyderabad, May 4-6, 2013

Thank you for the honour of addressing the centenary seminar for a great figure of our contemporary history. Many thanks also for formulating the subject in such a challenging manner. “Shifting paradigms of foreign policy” implies that there are certain paradigms that foreign policy conforms to. But to begin with, I would like to propose that foreign policy analysis is a theory-free area. If at all there is a theoretical framework that could be applied, it would only be a very generic one which correlates the internal polity of a nation and its particular features at any point to the manner in which it thinks through and implements its foreign policy.

I think that this would not be a particularly contentious point since any organism would relate to its external environment in a manner determined by its internal structure. This fairly well accepted viewpoint from the sciences could be adapted to the study of international relations by adding the important proviso that the organism in question here – which is the nation-state -- has the important attributes of agency and volition. But then choices are not unlimited. In fact, they are severely constrained by the material realities of a post-colonial society and the limitations on the imagination that these impose.

India’s foreign policy – in its evolution over the years -- could then be charted in accordance with the changing perceptions and priorities of the political and bureaucratic elite over the years. And these changes could be considered in terms of two specific dimensions of domestic policy: capital accumulation, or more broadly put, the strategy of economic growth, and national security.

“Non-Alignment” by definition cannot be a deeply held principle. It is defined by negative association and does not yet propose any positive agenda that it is committed to. Within the Indian political elite, there was no clear understanding of its fundamentals right from the moment that it was coined as a principle. J.B. Kripalani for instance, is known to have described it as a “doctrine born in sin”.

“Non-alignment” was in a loose sort of way, about the defence of newly won freedoms for the former colonies. And as they embarked on the pathway towards development, they needed to exploit every possible option that could be of benefit. Aligning with any one global power would have limited these choices. Aligning with the erstwhile colonial ruler would have meant reversing all that their freedom movements were about. In a context in which “dependence” was a reality in the economic sphere, neutrality was not about the principled political disavowal of the doctrines enunciated by the rival camps, but about seeking best advantage from both.

By a happy coincidence, it happened to be the case that in the first fifteen years of India’s independence, the Soviet Union offered greater sustenance on both dimensions of domestic policy that were crucial in determining the direction of foreign policy. India’s developmental strategy – its capital accumulation strategy – recognised the immense gulf that separated it from the ideal state of “development” that the western powers in particular represented. The modernising Nehruvian vision required that India should catch up and establish itself on exactly the same economic and technological plane as the west. And this required what was then called a “boot-straps” operation – that the country could lift itself up from the depths of poverty by recreating the constellation of industries that had propelled the second industrial

revolution in the west. This meant that India needed to build up, in the space of one generation or less, the industrial capacities and capabilities that the west had spent three generations acquiring.

Alongside “boot-straps”, another metaphor was floated to describe this ambition: the leap-frog. Using the knowledge already acquired in the west – not to mention the deep civilisational wisdom it already had -- India could leapfrog generations and rapidly ascend the learning curve, establishing the country on a level of technological sophistication that could rival the west. India had a narrow stratum of highly skilled scientific knowhow, which encouraged the belief that it could achieve this technological leap without great effort. All it took, seemingly, was for the initial impetus to be imparted. The rest of the process would be handled by Indian ingenuity.

Key in the constellation of industries that the post-colonial Indian elite imagined as the ticket to national salvation, were steel, electricity, machine tools and petroleum. At the bottom of the pyramid, there was a recognition that the rural-agrarian sector, where much of the country lived, needed to be reformed in a manner that supported the push towards heavy industrial investments. But those worries were banished with the cursory attention devoted to “community development” in the first of Nehru’s “Five-Year Plans”. From then on, the focus was relentlessly on the heavy industrial sector. And that is where some crucial choices on India’s foreign policy were made.

The U.S. was insistent on making sure that no assistance that it rendered would be commandeered (as it tended to see things) by an absolutist state for its own aggrandisement. Private enterprise and its sustenance were the essential preconditions for its assistance. But India could not agree to those terms, since unlike now, the political and administrative elite remained a little distant from the business elite. The business elite moreover had little inclination to take on the massive investment commitments that were deemed essential to the capital accumulation strategy chosen by the political leadership. And the relationship between the two was in fact, one of mutual suspicion, with the business elites in some manner being seen as willing accomplices of the imperial countries in any cause which promised a profit.

The Soviet union suffered none of the false scruples of the U.S. and came forward quite willingly to support the Bhilai steel plant (and subsequently Bokaro, though that was several years in the future). Consistent with the principle of non-alignment being another definition of self-interest, the Indian government also successfully obtained German assistance in Rourkela and British involvement in Durgapur.

Machine tools was the industry perhaps where the spirit of non-alignment in action was best represented. The Heavy Engineering Corporation in Ranchi which was supposed to build the mother machines for India’s industrialisation, depended mostly on Soviet assistance. HMT, which was set up in the early years of Indian independence, retained an ability to bid between different suppliers for its basic requirements. In the vital sector of energy -- both electrical equipment and petroleum extraction and refining -- the Soviet Union and more generally, the eastern bloc, were the key sources of technology and knowhow.

Things did not go too sweetly with the planned development process. But in the decade-and-a-half in which it took the early optimism to fade, there were serious events in the realm of national security which cast a long shadow over foreign policy priorities.

A recent essay on the violence that continues to be the living legacy of the circumstances of India’s freedom, speaks of three kinds of nationalist anxieties that have been bequeathed by the disorderly retreat of colonialism from the country: the McMahanian and Radcliffian (after the British bureaucrats who respectively, laid out the borders with China and Pakistan) and

Kashmirian (arising from the circumstances of that region's accession to India).¹ Each of these has generated a particular kind of violence, visible most sharply in the borderlands, where the natural affinities of community and kinship have entered into violent confrontation with the territorial imperatives of separate nations.

Radcliffe continues being a positive blight on the daily lives of ordinary people in the eastern sector, where they are exposed to the excessive and arbitrary violence of border guards, mostly it must be said, on the Indian side. Besides, the unsettled topography and riverine terrain make constant human migrations a livelihood imperative, one which often collides with the arbitrarily drawn and harshly enforced boundaries, where officials who wear the *khaki* of the Indian state are more often seen as active violators of human rights than their defenders.

But Radcliffe does not really challenge the notions of identity that the Indian elite has nurtured. It does not pose an existential threat in any sense, because Bangladesh, as the country that harbours the reciprocal anxieties, is seen as weak and inconsequential. The McMahanian and Kashmirian anxieties are by far the more threatening to the self-perception of the Indian political and administrative elite. And this is why national security imperatives have for long been defined in terms of how best these two anxieties could be assuaged.

In the early years of independence, it was a happy coincidence that the capital accumulation dimension and the Kashmirian anxiety were both addressed by one among the two putative superpowers that had emerged from World War II to establish the bipolar world order that seemingly determined the whole range of choices available for lesser nations. At the time the Kashmir crisis erupted and the United Nations became an active player in seeking its resolution, the Soviet Union remained hostile or at best indifferent. Whichever side gained from U.N. mediation, was immaterial in the Soviet perception, since both outcomes would be adverse to its interests.

Current historical scholarship has established that the received wisdom about the circumstances of Kashmir's accession to India, may have served a purpose as nationalist mythology, but has now become an active enemy of human rights, peace and reconciliation. Far from being the outcome of a perfidious Pakistani effort to snatch Kashmir valley by force and India's principled response to the cry for help of a besieged people, there may have been a deeper strategic intent behind the whole choreography of the forced accession of Kashmir to India in near insurrectionary conditions against the despotism of the Dogra ruling dynasty. This may have indeed, been the parting kick of the British *raj*, anxious to preserve a strategic vantage point from where it could exercise some measure of influence over the Central Asian region and beyond.²

1

Willem van Schendel, "The Wagah Syndrome: Territorial Roots of Contemporary Violence in South Asia", in Amrita Basu and Srirupa Roy (editors), *Violence and Democracy in India*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2007.

2

Alasdair Lamb in *Kashmir, A Disputed Legacy, 1846-1990*, (Oxford Pakistan, 1993) presents this point of view, which was challenged by Prem Shankar Jha in *Kashmir 1947, Rival Versions of History*, (Oxford India, 1996), a book dedicated rather implausibly, to ruler of Kashmir at the time, Hari Singh, whose effort to put down a near insurrection by a savage reign of terror and the ethnic cleansing of the Rajauri and Poonch districts was really where the problem originated. Andrew Whitehead in *A Mission in Kashmir* (Penguin, 2007) has questioned Jha's rather laboured effort to render the Dogra ruler's actions legitimate. And most recently,

India's seeming utility in the imperialist game plan for Central Asia did not endure for long in the shifting sands of Cold War politics. The switch in loyalties occurred in the years following 1953. In August that year, Nehru dismissed Sheikh Abdullah as prime minister of Jammu and Kashmir and imprisoned him on charges of sedition. Civil disturbances that erupted in Kashmir were put down by force. Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Bogra of Pakistan sought urgent consultations with Nehru and travelled to Delhi despite initial Indian hostility. The two sides reaffirmed their determination to settle the Kashmir dispute without further delay. Meanwhile, the U.S. fleet commander in the Pacific theatre during World War II, Admiral Nimitz, who had been appointed plebiscite administrator in Kashmir in 1949, resigned his position. And the expert appointed to advise on the best conditions for carrying out a plebiscite in the state, Owen Dixon, had turned in a report which indicated that it was an unimaginably difficult task to render an outcome that would be fair to the vastly mixed and diverse people of J&K.

These were the circumstances in which Pakistan signed up with two military pacts floated by the U.S. and Britain: the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (where its membership defied the realities of geography) and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO, where it kept uneasy company with Turkey, Iraq, Iran and the U.S.). Soviet indecision on Kashmir ended here. In December 1955, Soviet Prime Minister Bulganin and General Secretary Khrushchev travelled to India, pointedly choosing to spend two effusive days in Kashmir to underline their conviction that the people of the state had irrevocably thrown in their lot with India.

That completed the conjunction of happy circumstances for India. In terms of both the capital accumulation objective and the national security dimension, the perceptions of its political and administrative elite had achieved a high degree of congruence with the interests of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, from then on, the Indian elite acted as if the benediction of the putative superpower spared them the onus of seeking the consent of the people of Kashmir, for the regime that they were preparing to impose.

But as Kashmirian anxieties receded temporarily under the benign protection of the Soviets, McMahanian anxieties began boiling over. Between 1955 and 1962, the story of the McMahanian frontier of the Indian nation is one of rapidly deteriorating relations between the two sides and a confused – if not deluded -- response from India. This remains an understudied aspect of India's foreign policy, a no-go area because a rigorous examination here is likely to undermine several of the icons of the early years of independence. What is again a rather indifferently studied part of this episode in Indian history, is that it occurred against the backdrop of the greatest potential flashpoint in superpower rivalry since World War II: the Cuban missile crisis.

This is an aspect that the BJP's former minister and principal foreign policy ideologue Jaswant Singh, rightly highlights.³ It is Jaswant Singh's case that China had secured an assurance of Soviet neutrality before it launched a series of punitive raids on Indian military posts in the disputed areas. Then engaged in a face-off with the U.S. that was bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war, the Soviet Union had little inclination to offend its fraternal

Christopher Snedden has in *Kashmir, The Unwritten History* (Harper Collins, 2012) has squarely placed the whole sequence of events in clear logical and temporal succession, suggesting that the crisis was underway since at least June 1947, with the Indian leadership, notably Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel being fully aware of its full dimensions and preparing for a range of contingencies, including a possible military deployment to deal with it.

socialist neighbour. Whether the Soviet preoccupation with the Cuban missile crisis was decisive or not in determining the timing and the range of the military operations that were carried out, is not clear. There is much that is unclear about the 1962 incidents. Jaswant Singh draws the right inference from here, that it was naive on India's part to depend on the fickle favours of the Soviet Union to defend its territorial interests. But then he wrongly concludes that an alliance with the U.S. would have served India better.

The immediate impact of the Chinese military incursions into territory claimed by India, was to bring forth a literal rush of U.S. military assistance. A number of decisions made by Nehru at the time bear eloquent testimony to his state of complete disorientation: a rather vivid example would be his invitation to the RSS to send a marching contingent to the Republic Day parade in 1963. Here was a Prime Minister who was clearly adrift of all his basic political convictions.

The military pipeline with the U.S. did not stay open for long. Soviet neutrality was dropped soon after the Cuban missile crisis and the military relationship that is today – even in post-Soviet times – the principal bulwark of the Indian armed forces, really began then. The Soviets though, were careful to maintain their neutrality on the Kashmir issue. The effusion of the Khrushchev years was replaced by a decidedly more cautious and discrete approach by the bureaucratic duumvirate of Brezhnev and Kosygin. This is part of the reason why the Soviets were able to play a credible role as mediator, post the 1965 conflict between India and Pakistan.

India broke out in a severe attack of the Kashmirian neurosis, soon after the McMahonian anxieties had abated. This was very much and visibly, a consequence of festering issues that had been left unsettled despite all the passage of years since Partition. In December 1963, civil disturbances broke out in Kashmir over the disappearance of a sacred relic from the Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar. Within days, violent reprisals began against the minority Hindu community in East Pakistan, provoking in turn, retaliatory attacks on Muslims in Calcutta and other parts of West Bengal. A tide of refugees crossed in to West Bengal from East Pakistan. After a short period of confinement in camps, the displaced were dispatched by rail to their places of resettlement in Dandakaranya. As the trains carrying the refugees traversed the eastern states, halting at a number of stations *en route*, revenge attacks were launched against Muslims in proximate settlements, notably in the emerging industrial towns of Ranchi, Rourkela and Jamshedpur. Even by the standards that seen in subsequent years in Ahmedabad in 1969, Bhiwandi in 1970 and 1984, Nelli in 1983, Delhi in 1984, Meerut in 1987, Bhagalpur in 1989, Mumbai in 1993 and Gujarat in 2002, these were riots of extreme brutality and cruelty. Yet they do not usually figure in the analytical and descriptive literature on violence in India since they are regarded to fall within the prehistory of communalism.

This action-reaction sequence of violence originating in Kashmir and rapidly engulfing a vast swathe of territory in the sub-continent, finally dispelled Nehru's complacent belief that time and generous doses of the medicine of modernisation, would be the best cure for the scars and schisms of partition. Soon afterwards, he released Sheikh Abdullah from detention, giving him the authority to travel to Pakistan with a very wide mandate and explore a possible settlement of the Kashmir dispute. This was also the time when the idea of a confederation between India and Pakistan was mooted. It was an idea that never gained much traction, but spoke of an appreciation in some quarters of the complexity of the matter and how a resolution called for creative and innovative thinking.

This particular initiative, despite its seeming promise, was aborted with Nehru's death in May 1964. His successors had neither the political imagination nor authority to pick up the threads of the attempted rapprochement with Pakistan. And aside from the leadership vacuum, there

were a host of events that followed, which contributed to a considerable darkening of the national mood. In October 1964, China tested its first nuclear explosive device. In 1965, India suffered a monsoon failure of near catastrophic proportions, and the whole strategy of planned industrialisation – already in trouble because of the exhaustion of foreign exchange reserves and growing deficits in the internal and external accounts – went into a tailspin. And then came Pakistan’s Operation Gibraltar: the effort to foment an insurrection in Kashmir against Indian rule, and India’s own retaliatory military offensive through the Punjab sector, all of which ended, after weeks of fighting and visible demonstrations of military incompetence on both sides, in a stalemate and the restoration of an uneasy *status quo*.

In 1966, a newly installed Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, undertook her first official visit abroad, travelling through Egypt and Yugoslavia on her route towards Washington D.C. The itinerary demonstrated a clear intent to reaffirm a commitment to non-alignment, just when it seemed that India was being compelled by straitened circumstances, to seek some form of a special dispensation from the U.S. According to K. Subrahmanyam – a former bureaucrat, national security ideologue, media commentator and witness from close quarters to these events -- part of her agenda was to obtain ironclad security assurances from the U.S. at a time of serious territorial vulnerability.⁴ And at a time when the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) had been placed on the global negotiating agenda – China’s forced entry into the nuclear club had convinced the membership that preserving a limited nuclear monopoly, even across the ideological divide, was an objective greatly to be desired -- India was in a limbo in terms of its national security perceptions. Indira Gandhi’s trip to the U.S. produced great atmospherics, but nothing of substantive benefit.⁵

Under relentless pressure from the multilateral financial institutions, India devalued the rupee and decreed a series of sweeping import liberalisation measures in 1966. And then in seeming exasperation at a food crisis that seemed absolutely intractable, a new agricultural strategy was unveiled, focusing a package of measures on a limited number of fertile tracts where immediate returns in terms of surplus product would be maximum. This package of policy measures – both at the fiscal and monetary level and in terms of sectoral approach in agriculture – meant a greater degree of integration, indeed dependence, on the western hegemonic power, in reality if not yet on the terrain of theory or ideology.

Over the next few years, as the economy stabilised, the Congress rediscovered its initiative, reconnecting with an older stream of populist mobilisational politics. It swept to power in the 1971 general elections, on a wave of popular acclaim for its promise of a direct attack on poverty through a massive public spending programme. There had been no more euphoric moment in the Congress party’s history. By now liberated from the need to work with the old guard, who she had effectively isolated and expelled from the Congress through its epochal split in 1969, Indira Gandhi made an explicit foreign policy switch, concluding a treaty of “peace and friendship” with the Soviet Union in August 1971 that made explicit the informal alliance forged in the mid-1950s. This would have been a project that Indira Gandhi might have found impossible to conclude if she had been working within the Congress party she inherited from the so-called “Kingmaker”, K. Kamraj. It necessarily had to occur only after

4

K. Subrahmanyam, “India’s Nuclear Policy, 1964-98: A Personal Recollection”, in Jasjit Singh, (editor), *Nuclear India*, Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, Delhi, 1998.

5

See Katherine Frank’s *Indira* (Harper Collins, 2001), for a description of the atmospherics of this visit.

she reinvented the Congress after her own image, and perhaps after what she imagined her father would have wanted.

Perhaps also, the Indo-Soviet treaty was part of the preparation for a military operation acquiring definitive contours by then. In March 1971, Pakistan had plunged halfway towards its own dissolution when the western wing launched a brutal military crackdown on the east, rather than accept an electoral verdict that would have transferred the political centre of gravity of the creaky federation to the east. At the end of 1971, India turned this serious self-inflicted wound in Pakistan to decisive military advantage, driving a dagger deep into the ideological project of a country that had emerged with the self-proclaimed identity as the homeland of the South Asian Muslim. This seemed to prepare the terrain for resuming the long neglected task of completing the integration of Kashmir into the Indian union and concluding a new compact with the Muslim minority in the country, based on mutual trust.

Things did not quite work out that way. Though the G. Parthasarathy-Mirza Afzal Beg accord paved the way for Sheikh Abdullah's triumphal return to Kashmir as chief minister in 1975, the new concord soon began wearing thin, partly because of the implacable clash of wills between the Sheikh and Indira Gandhi, but also because of Sheikh Abdullah's determination not to accept any deal that imposed on him the obligation to keep vigil over the legacy of a partition that neither he nor the people of Kashmir had any role in or responsibility for.

Pakistan meanwhile, had fallen into a limbo. It had served a useful purpose as a springboard for the Nixon-Kissinger overtures towards China in 1971, but was soon after that left with no conceivable utility for the western bloc. China continued being its indispensable ally through these years, but otherwise its only way out of the deep existential crisis occasioned by the separation of the eastern wing, was to seek closer integration, ideologically and economically, into the Islamic bloc then emerging into global prominence under the petro-dollar funded munificence of the medievalist Saudi dynasty.

Pakistan discovered a new place for itself in the affections of the U.S. with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. India meanwhile had plunged into another phase of turbulence and crisis, with the monsoon failures of 1973 and 1974, the political breakdown that the Emergency in 1975 represented, and the failure of the Janata Party government that followed in 1977, to securely institutionalise the democratic norms that would enable a restoration of political harmony.

The reconciliation in Kashmir ran aground thanks to the relentlessly centralising tendencies of the Congress in that period, where state governments were expected to function as vassals of the supreme leadership at the centre, when tolerance for oppositional politics in the states was especially low. Communalism became mainstreamed in Indian politics, with the inauguration of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, and the effort to build up a sense of solidarity based on the Hindu identity, when national unity seemed threatened by fissiparous tendencies in the state of Punjab. There was an assassination of a Prime Minister in 1984 and an election fought in the bitter aftermath of a state-sponsored pogrom of a small but politically voluble and socially well entrenched religious minority. It was an election when campaign rhetoric scaled new peaks on the borderlands of what could be called "hate speech", and an election that handsomely rewarded the crimes of incitement and actual participation in acts of barbaric violence.

There is a widely shared perception that 6 December 1992 was a turning point, a crucial moment of inflexion in Indian politics. That of course is true, but the pathway towards that point was set through a sequence of prior events. It is difficult to set down definitive markers in the continuous progression of historical time. But the *shilanyas puja* sponsored by the Rajiv Gandhi government in November 1989 was certainly part of that prior sequence.

Before that we could identify the riots that engulfed various parts of the country beginning with Meerut in 1987 and reaching new heights of virulence through the following two years. Still prior to these events, we could halt at that moment in 1986 when a judicial injunction that had stood for many decades was dissolved under political direction, and Hindu communal parties allowed to celebrate the triumph of securing access to the Babri Masjid for the faithful. We could go still further back to the 1983 launch on a very quiet and lowkey note, of the movement for reclaiming the Babri Masjid as a Hindu place of worship. This could go on indefinitely, but to cut a long story short: the 1980s were a decisive decade. Political values and practices underwent a qualitative change over that period.

A new middle class assertion was evident through the 1980s, when hubristic visions that India could soon emerge as a power player on the global stage were unleashed. This too was the time when the first overtures towards the diasporic Indian in the west were made, and an effort launched to tap into the vein of long distance nationalism, that like all forms of emotional affiliation exercised at a distance, tended to excess and fantasy.

Capital accumulation strategy too went through a significant change in this period. The Congress government that came to power in 1980 had bought itself a cushion on the fiscal front by negotiating a multi-billion dollar loan from the IMF in 1981. This was among its very first major economic policy initiatives. The imprimatur of approval from the IMF bolstered the confidence of global finance – then running out of custom because of the Latin American debt crisis -- that India was a bankable proposition. The government had bought itself, at least temporarily, the luxury of fiscal imprudence, since the growing budgetary deficits could be fed out through the balance of payments account, and bridged through external borrowings. As long as global finance saw advantage in lending to India, the strategy would remain workable.

Through the decade of the 1980s, India's foreign debt rose rapidly, though without causing any serious political turbulence or exciting any comment from economic policy experts. Those were days of blissful denial, when Rajiv Gandhi, with a majority in parliament that even his grandfather did not enjoy, seeming to symbolise the brave new potential of a new and emerging India, well before the term "emerging" became accepted currency of international financial institutions seeking to sell dreams of future bounties to gullible governments.

The complacency of the Rajiv Gandhi years evaporated with the general elections of 1989, though it could credibly be argued, that his Congress party was laid low in this contest by political maladroitness, rather than the visible prospect of an economic meltdown to come. With the oil price shock that followed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, years of denial, of living in make-believe, came to an end. Fortuitously, it was not Rajiv Gandhi or the Congress party that was in authority to deal with the turbulence, but a government headed by the man who had challenged the Rajiv Gandhi absolutism when it seemed most impregnable. V.P. Singh was a man widely admired for his integrity and the government he led may have pulled through the crisis had it been even remotely viable in terms of parliamentary arithmetic. The realities of the 1989 general elections, with its sharp polarisation along two axes – communal and populist – ensured though, that V.P. Singh had a tough balancing act to perform. The party that he nominally led had fewer than a quarter of the seats in parliament. For the rest, he had to depend for sustenance on both forces of the right and left, with the former enjoying a formidably greater share in the balance of power.

Following the decade of transformation, the 1990s opened on a bleak note. It is impossible to make inter-temporal comparisons of an intangible attribute, but we could argue that since the mid-1960s, the early-1990s saw national morale plunge again to a new low. Certainly the

argument would need to be seriously considered in terms of the conjunction of the state of domestic political consensus, the economic situation and the uncertainties of the global environment. In addition to the ferment in Punjab, Kashmir was in a state of insurrection. There were bitter divisions between mainstream political parties. The economy was in tatters. And on the global stage, the Soviet Union had passed into history. The U.S. for its part remained committed to an alliance with Pakistan, to which it had delegated the task of managing the complex political transition underway in Afghanistan since the retreat of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the regime it had installed prior to withdrawal.

Liberalisation and globalisation were the responses fashioned to the economic crisis. But the political rewards of integrating into the world economy, now under the unequivocal dominance of the sole superpower, seemed elusive. In the mid-1990s, the U.S. brought relations to the verge of breakdown by openly aligning itself with the Pakistan position in global councils, about Kashmir being a “disputed territory”. With the Taliban seizing power in Afghanistan in 1996, the bond with Pakistan seemed to only strengthen since the U.S. saw the pacification of the territorial vastness of that country as key to tapping the rich mineral resources of the Central Asian states recently liberated from Soviet control.

It took a while for disillusionment with the Taliban to set in. Promises to deliver a petroleum pipeline running into Central Asia remained unfulfilled. And the Taliban’s medieval political practices, especially its treatment of women, led to worldwide moral recoil. It was a moment for India to capitalise on and the opportunity came with the inauguration of a BJP-led coalition government in March 1998, headed by Prime Minister Vajpayee. Concerned over campaign rhetoric that the BJP would positively conduct a series of nuclear explosive tests if voted into office, the U.S. administration sent its Energy Secretary Bill Richardson to Delhi for a series of high level meetings in April 1998. Following a series of discussions, what Richardson seemed to gather as the authoritative position of the Indian government was what Defence Minister George Fernandes told him: that a strategic review was underway whose outcome would determine the decision on nuclear testing. And then Richardson had, outside his formal schedule of meetings, an unexpected visitor. As Strobe Talbott, Deputy Secretary of State in the same administration and the principal U.S. interlocutor in a later series of dialogues with the Indian government narrates it, Jaswant Singh met Richardson with a discrete message. If the U.S. needed to convey anything to India that was especially sensitive, involving its strategic interests, it could take up the matter with Jaswant Singh. Using the formal and established channels would risk exposing delicate matters of mutual interest to undue public scrutiny. A measure of discretion, Jaswant Singh advised, would be useful to both sides. It was by all criteria an extraordinary intervention from a man who at that time held no official portfolio other than Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission.

Less than a month later, the BJP-led government carried out a series of nuclear explosive tests in the Rajasthan desert. As the world reacted in horror, a secret letter written by Prime Minister Vajpayee to U.S. President Clinton was leaked to the *New York Times*. And the text of the letter had the tone of a cry from the heart, the sigh of a helpless creature caught haplessly in the throes of its existential anxieties, both McMahanian and Kashmirian. And its subtext was a plaint to the U.S. that despite all that united it in terms of values with India, it had been none too friendly or supportive of India’s legitimate security needs. The U.S. reacted with little sympathy to begin with, but after a period of assiduous courtship, opened up a strategic dialogue in which Jaswant Singh and Strobe Talbott were the principal actors.

Several months into this open-ended series of conversations, Talbott figured out roughly the destination that his interlocutor Jaswant Singh, by now appointed India’s Minister for External Affairs, had fixed his mind’s eye on. It was a destination where the “estrangement”

of the Cold War would be left behind and a new global order forged. The polarities of that phase of human history would be forgotten, and a new hierarchy of power constructed on a foundation of “civilisational virtues”. Among other things, this involved, in Jaswant Singh’s reckoning, U.S. recognition of India as a “major power with an internationally recognised right to bear nuclear arms”.⁶

Talbott was sympathetic, but bound by what he thought was the need to lay down realistic rules of engagement. And the plain fact was that the destination in Jaswant Singh’s imagination did not exist on the U.S. map. The worldview of the U.S. was circumscribed by the NPT, which accorded only five states the right to bear nuclear arms. And whatever its credentials or its other ambitions, India could not make a forced entry into this exclusive club. That would only open up the floodgates for an epidemic of nuclear breakouts.

It is not clear when the motif of containment of China came into the strategic dialogue. It was implicit in Prime Minister Vajpayee’s letter explaining the Pokhran tests to the privileged audience in the U.S. that India saw China as a threat, especially in the alliance it had forged and the putative nuclear technology transfer linkage it had established with Pakistan. By 1998, the U.S. was undoubtedly also beginning to turn a little wary about China, though it had a rather different catalogue of worries.

U.S. concerns with China grew over the following years. Soon after the George W. Bush administration assumed office after being elected by a one vote majority in the Supreme Court, a U.S. spy aircraft seemingly engaged in monitoring military communications in southern China, collided with a fighter jet which challenged it. The Chinese plane plunged into the sea taking its pilot to his death. The U.S. aircraft, hobbled by the collision, was forced to land on the Chinese island of Hainan, where it was held, along with a twenty-four member crew, for ten days. An administration that had partly won election on promises of getting tough and aggressive in global affairs, rapidly ratcheted up the hostile rhetoric. The matter was defused only after Washington proffered what it called an expression of regret and sorrow at the death of a Chinese airman, which China interpreted as an apology.

Clearly, with the ascendancy of the extreme right-wing (or neo-conservative wing) in the U.S., China became more than a worry. It began to be actually perceived as a potential threat that needed to be neutralised. In May 2001, the U.S. announced plans to put in place a “national missile defence”, reinstating the “Star Wars” fantasies of the right-wing icon Ronald Reagan, that had long been laughed out of court because of sheer infeasibility and impracticality. Russia and China were unimpressed since a missile defence system in the U.S., effectively challenged them to multiply their offensive nuclear arsenals, to maintain the delicate balance of the deterrence equation. As India’s Minister for External Affairs, Jaswant Singh responded with unseemly applause to Bush’s resurrection of a Reaganian fantasy. And a world which was grappling with the prospect of a new arms race, looked on with bemusement at India’s irrational exuberance for the most reactionary tendencies in U.S. politics.

Jaswant Singh’s prolonged series of conversations with Talbott did go some distance towards changing the atmospherics of India’s relationship with the U.S. But it had not created a substantive basis for strategic engagement. Through the 1990s, India had with increasing urgency, been seeking salvation from its Kashmirian anxieties by connecting these to the existential worries that Israel suffered in seeking to impose a one-sided settlement on the Palestinians. On a visit to Israel in June 2000, Jaswant Singh had after a display of piety at

6

the wailing wall in Jerusalem, unburdened himself of the wisdom that India's prolonged estrangement from the Zionist state was a consequence of "vote bank" politics pandering to the Muslim minority. His ardour for a new relationship with Israel won some sympathy from the right-wing establishments both in that country and the U.S., but no real switch in strategic perceptions.

All that seemingly changed with 9/11. The longstanding Indian plea that the world should extend its unconditional support in the suppression of the movement in Kashmir, now seemed to win a more receptive audience worldwide. Visiting the U.S. in 2004, National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra, took the opportunity to address the American Jewish Committee with an effusive message of the common endeavour of Israel and India in defeating global terrorism. Those who looked for "root causes" for terrorism, he pronounced, were effectively acting as accessories of terrorism. In one broad sweep of this brush of "terrorism", the Palestinian struggle was delegitimized, simply because Mishra hoped for salvation from India's Kashmirian anxieties through the same application of the standard of judging when legitimate assertions of rights ended and terrorism began.

The elite discourse in terms of both economic growth and national security was by this time irrevocably transformed. A change of government in 2004, with the BJP being voted out and the supposedly more centrist Congress coming back to power, did not substantively change the terms of engagement. The ardour of the courtship that began with the Pokhran nuclear tests of 1998, began to yield its results by 2005, when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited the U.S. The key event of this visit was undoubtedly the diplomatic contrivance by which the two countries managed to create a point on the international geostrategic map that till then did not exist. The joint statement adopted by Manmohan Singh and George Bush referred to India as a "responsible state with advanced nuclear technology", which should "acquire the same benefits and advantages as other such states". In effect, this created a special niche exclusively for India, in the limbo between the nuclear haves and have-nots.

Events since then are recent enough to be summed up rather quickly. The expected flood of investment in the nuclear energy sector has not materialised. In fact every intended investment has unleashed popular protests and worries about safety and sustainability, not to mention deep anxieties about large-scale human displacement. These have been met by serious security operation that have booked a number of dissenting individuals and groups under sections of the law as harsh as "sedition". The country remains as energy deficient as ever and severe infrastructural constraints are now recognised to be a potentially fatal obstacle to the economic growth strategy.

At the political level, the continuing need to look tough on terrorism has created an unaccountable police force and seriously eroded the civil liberties space. Institutional biases against the religious minorities, which were once subdued or obscured under florid rhetoric about secularism, are now cruelly and blatantly out in the open. Overt violence is rare and acts of mass violence are unlikely. But the systemic violence inflicted through the processes of the law that are increasingly treading the path of lawlessness, is mounting. Kashmirian anxieties remain unassuaged and the McMahanian neurosis is even as we meet here, erupting once again.

In several respects – a breakdown of domestic political concord and civility, growing economic insecurities and looming uncertainties in the global scenario – the current conjuncture represents a reprise of the crisis years of the mid-1960s and early-1990s. No two situations can of course be compared beyond a point. But in terms of these three parameters, we could see certain similarities between the three conjunctures. How India will emerge from these is naturally, not predetermined or predestined. It depends upon how political praxis

responds to these diverse challenges. Continuity with the existing pattern would mean closer integration into a global order that is rapidly turning authoritarian, intolerant and almost Darwinian in its “devil take the hindmost” attitude towards the poor. There is also the option of changing the path, of shedding the fantasies of joining the clubs of the rich, of reasserting the solidarity of the poor that was incipient at the time of Indian independence, but deprived of the oxygen in which it could grow and make a difference to the lives of the many.

The fight goes on. But with mutual solidarity and strength, we shall fight and we shall win.

May 4 2013