

Conservative Think-Tanks Offer Bush the Wrong Policy Toward India

by Ramtanu Maitra

Washington's conservative and neo-conservative think-tanks are busy peddling their version of geopolitics to the incoming Bush Administration. Their recommendations, vis-à-vis the Indian subcontinent, range from reiterating shop-worn views to outright re-adoption of Cold War postures. One thing, however, is evident: None of the thinking is adequate; nor does it take into account the economic crisis now hitting the United States.

In a paper on how the Bush Administration must deal with New Delhi, "India as a World Power: Changing Washington's Myopic Policy," Cato Institute policy analyst Victor M. Gobarev urges the United States to forget India's Third World poverty. Gobarev claims that Washington ignores the fact that "India has a nuclear arsenal, a large military budget, a sophisticated space program, and a booming high-tech sector." Gobarev argues that the "U.S. clumsiness has led India to pursue a Russia-China-India nexus aimed at preventing the U.S. global domination."

Chinese parliament chairman Li Peng is going to India to prepare for an early visit of Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, essentially a summit of the leaders of the world's two most populous nations. But Gobarev falsely asserts that the backbone of India-China-Russia relations is *military collaboration and alliance*. Consequently, claims the Cato Institute, "if the United States wants to have India as a friend, Washington must accept India into the club of nuclear states and enthusiastically endorse New Delhi's bid for permanent membership in the UN Security Council."

While Gobarev's advice will be lauded in certain circles in India, these are mere trimmings which may enhance India's "prestige," but would do little else otherwise. The fact remains that India, with its 1 billion people and its geopolitical importance, should not only become a member of various world fora. It must also be allowed to have its say on such important issues as the international monetary system, the World Trade Organization, global nuclear disarmament, regional security, and measures to facilitate maritime trade, among others.

The Cato Institute instructs Bush, without providing a shred of evidence, that India is forming a military nexus with Russia and China. It is evident that Gobarev has little understanding of the Indian economy, in which the "booming high-tech sector" he referred to in his paper, plays only an insig-

nificant part. The fact remains that about 300 million Indians—or about 60 million households—live below the poverty line, and about 65% of India's workforce are tied to the agriculture sector. India still harbors about 300 million illiterates, although that number is receding faster than ever before.

The Cato Institute's thinkers fail to recognize that Washington struck up vacuous friendship with many nations during the Cold War years. In some cases, as with Pakistan, friendship was forged entirely for geostrategic reasons. The Pakistani establishment allowed the country to be "used" by the Western countries fighting the Russian communists. This client-customer relationship, which formed the basis of the U.S.-Pakistan friendship, did not work, and Pakistan remained a weak nation. This became clear to many, only with the end of the Cold War.

During the same period, however, Washington successfully cultivated friendly relations with a number of Asian nations, such as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (Washington then considered Taiwan an independent nation). The United States had responded effectively to these countries' economic, social, and security needs, and as a result, these nations benefitted immensely from their friendship with the United States.

Poor Observation

The neo-conservative view presented by the Heritage Foundation to the incoming Administration, is downright nasty. Penned by Larry Wortzel and Dana R. Dillon, the report, "Improving Relations with India without Compromising U.S. Security," says that although an improving Indian economy and increasing U.S. business opportunities is good foreign policy, Washington must not, for its own good, provide India with space-based or high-quality technologies. Heritage recirculates the claim, spectacularly discredited by such as the Wen Ho Lee case, that by providing such technologies to China earlier, Washington has helped Beijing to develop its ICBM capability, which may pose a threat to the United States in the future. Thus, the report directs President Bush to take note of this "mistake" and avoid its repetition—by refusing India technologies which might help build up its ICBM capabilities.

On the Indian economy, the Heritage "thinkers" assert that the manufacturing processes on which the Indians rely, are obsolete and poorly managed. They caution President Bush not to push the American investors into trading or investing in India, until it dismantles its centrally planned sectors and reduces barriers to trade.

In addition, the Heritage report implicitly pitches the concept of "regional rivals," i.e., India and China. The objective of this part of the report is self-evident. It says that while China is involved in spreading its hegemony in the region by supplying Pakistan with nuclear weapons, India needs support. However, India must remain a junior partner to the United States in their joint effort to contain China. If India is given the technology it seeks, Wortzel and Dillon caution



Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, who is expected to visit India soon. India's options to protect its economy by cooperating with the "Survivors' Club," may throw all think-tank scenarios out the window.

President Bush, India may turn out to be *another* China, ready to threaten the United States.

RAND Corp. Weighs In

Another conservative group, the Rand Corp., has a foreign policy paper which touches upon the South Asian scene. The 14-page introduction to the report is written by Zalmay Khalilzad, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense in Sir G.H.W. Bush's Presidency (1988-92) and now a member of the Bush-Cheney transition team. Khalilzad, in the introduction, makes the point that, with India's economy growing at a respectable rate, and with its nuclear capability, it would be wise for Washington to develop a strong relationship with New Delhi. He points out that both India and China are emerging as major regional powers seeking their places on the global scene. For this reason, claims Khalilzad, Asia has the potential to pose serious problems to President Bush's administration.

The shortcomings in these type of reports, which are often dictated by the think-tanks' profit motives and ideological underpinnings rather than U.S. national interest, are inherently obvious. The reports touch upon too briefly, or ignore, the areas where interactions between the United States and India are an absolute necessity. The most urgent and immediate areas of such fruitful cooperation, are the current Indian peace initiative aimed at stabilizing the India-Pakistan border in Kashmir for the first time in decades, and the recent Indian attempt to open to the nations of Southeast Asia, by coopera-

tion in building large-scale water-management and transportation corridors — the Eurasian Land-Bridge idea.

Too many words have already been written on the kind of relationship these think-tanks proposed. The test of time proves that a stable and fruitful relationship between two large nations can develop only when there exists an environment of total trust. Providing military protection, or using one nation against another through enticements of military hardware or cash, can only build up a level of friendship which does not survive strenuous circumstances. The issue, then, for the United States as well as Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, is how to earn each other's trust.

The prevailing circumstances that bind India-U.S. relations are somewhat tenuous, simply because the conditions are so very different. India is a populous nation with a very high percentage of illiteracy. India has a weak physical infrastructure, and an industry which still depends heavily on low-wage manual labor. Most Indian manufacturers, bereft of advanced technologies, cater to the domestic market, while New Delhi actively seeks foreign exchange — dollars — in order to pay for its imports, the most urgent of which are petroleum and petroleum products. India has a small tax base, hence low budgetary allocations and large budgetary deficits. While a large section of India's population is mired in illiteracy and poverty, there exists a significant section of the population that is highly skilled and relatively wealthy. In addition to the developmental requirements, reduction of economic disparity within the population is a major preoccupation of New Delhi. These issues are politically and economically volatile.

It is evident to New Delhi that India cannot prosper, or even attain any of the desirable plateaus of economic success, as long as 40% of its workforce remain tied to marginal or semi-marginal agriculture. At the same time, this economically weaker section of the population, along with a vast number of people working in the low-margin small-scale sector, must be protected. Ways must be found to provide the productive weaker section of the population, or their next generation, an adequate skill-set to make them more productive. The impact of globalization on the poor of India, and throughout the subcontinent, will continue to be negative. Minimal societal protection that the poor presently get, will be destroyed.

These conditions addressed above are quite different from the conditions that worry or disturb the American people. It is evident that President Bush does not have a clue about these Indian realities. It is also true that the so-called thinkers are also clueless about India, which is powerful, and yet weak; self-confident, and yet vulnerable; illiterate, but it also possesses many millions of highly skilled people. A lot of India's past failures, and future successes, are premised on India's geographical and historical realities.

It is certain that the Indo-U.S. relationship will be an empty one if it is based upon narrowly conceived "mutual benefit." While mutual benefits are important in the short term, a lasting relationship must be built on helping to remove the obstacles that each nation faces.