

Danger to India In Anti-Muslim Policy

by Ramtanu Maitra

A major flaw in India's foreign policymaking showed up in the wake of the U.S.-U.K.-led invasion of Iraq. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee recently told the Cabinet of his coalition government that a stridently anti-U.S. posture is not in India's national interest. This was the cited reason for turning down the opposition's plea to pass a parliamentary resolution condemning the invasion.

The inability of New Delhi to pass a resolution in parliament stems from the fact that a group within the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the dominating party in the coalition government, has become rabidly pro-United States and pro-Israel. This group, exemplified by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a powerful faction within the BJP, has made its mark in the Indian political scene as the torchbearer against the Muslim population. The VHP-influenced domestic policy of the country in recent years has strayed far from the path of removing abject poverty and building up the nation. It has hurtled down the path of least resistance into the abyss of exploitation of Hindu-Muslim conflicts, temple-mosque conflicts, Gujarat killings, building of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, Jammu and Kashmir, and so on and so forth.

The Triangular Cooperation

The anti-Muslim policy exhibited by New Delhi in recent months is in direct conflict to the overall foreign policy of the country. Since the end of the Cold War, India has developed strong economic and bilateral relations with the United States which benefit both nations. However, there is a realization in New Delhi that the United States is not a reliable ally. Washington's opposition to India's nuclear weapons program and New Delhi's market protection policies, shows up from time to time, often in the form of imposition of, or threats to impose, economic sanctions. Moreover, Washington's policy towards the nations of the Indian subcontinent is fraught with narrow American interest. Washington is not generous to share this interest with New Delhi, most Indians complain.

This understanding of the United States has also pushed India to seek cooperation in the Asian region with the larger nations—Russia and China. Russia had been for years a close ally, even throughout the Cold War days. A significant part of India's military hardware comes from Russia. Relations

with China, however, were strained following the border clash in 1962. The relationship began to improve since the mid-1980s. Having ridden through a few troughs along the way, Sino-Indian relations are now on an improving track. New Delhi has watched with amazement the pace at which China developed in the post-Mao years, and has realized that a meaningful collaboration with China, and Russia, would help India to develop its economy assuredly and at a faster pace.

Also notable in recent years was India's initiative to have a closer relationship with the nations in Southeast Asia and Indochina. India's then-External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh went to Indochina in 2001 to inaugurate the Mekong-Ganga Development Plan, which if pursued, would develop effective infrastructure linkages between India and Southeast Asia.

BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation) established in 1998 at the Indian initiative, was an attempt to forge cooperation with India's neighbors in the East and to start cooperation among the littoral states of the Indian Ocean region. The policy has remained moribund due to lack of focus.

It is vitally important for India to pursue these relationships, particularly from the viewpoint of ensuring a more stable regional economic process and improving the security situation in the region. The vast Central Asian plains that link Asia to Europe to the north have great potential, but need concerted developmental efforts to make them flourish. China is already actively involved, linking up with Europe by land through Central Asia. Russia is already there, and it is now a necessity for India to participate in this trilateral cooperation to develop that area. The success of that vast developmental project will ensure energy security to India and China, in particular; provide Europe with an opportunity to grow, play a useful role in the region's security, and keep the out-of-region big powers from colonial-style powerplays in the region. The main thrust of India's foreign policy still is in that direction. However, some very serious flaws have emerged which can marginalize India on the world scene.

War on Terrorism, Jammu and Kashmir

Within India—particularly within the BJP—exists a very strong group of Muslim-baiters. These blame India's failure to emerge on the world scene, on the Muslim nations in the region, Pakistan in particular. During the Cold War days, India was close to the erstwhile Soviet Union, while Pakistan was virtually a colony of the United States. Since the 1970s, Pakistan also has gotten friendly to China. Both the United States and China, at the time, were considered as adversaries by the Indian authorities.

Following the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of a weak Russia, India began to mend its fences with the United States. India's testing of nuclear devices in 1998 strained the

Indo-U.S. relations. At that time, the BJP-led government set about to restore the once-friendly relations with Washington. What followed, however, was the spectacle of grovelling at Washington's feet. At the end of ten rounds of talks, projected in New Delhi as diplomacy, and after a loud endorsement of the war on terrorism, India's foreign policy got onto the wrong path.

A section of the BJP, represented by the VHP and Interior Minister L.K. Advani, seized upon this opportunity to push India's foreign policy to meet American approval. According to this group, the key necessity for India is to settle the Jammu and Kashmir issue—exactly what Washington wants, though for different reasons.

While the extension of India's support to the United States' declared war on terrorism was not an unreasonable move, what followed from there was a spectacle. According to the VHP—which heartily approved the U.S. stand on Iraq—close cooperation with the United States in rooting out the Muslim terrorists would help India curb Pakistan's support of Kashmiri militants.

Obsessed with Pakistan and clinging to the U.S. promise, this group then enmeshed India's policy with the U.S. policy toward Pakistan. When the Indian Parliament was attacked on Dec. 13, 2001, the VHP and the other anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim fanatics wanted to invade Pakistan, but Washington prevented it. Subsequently, India assembled more than 700,000 troops with armaments along the India-Pakistan borders, threatening to invade. After six months and billions of rupees, the troops were brought back. That, too, was done under pressure from Washington.

It is evident that the VHP-led group has moved India down the proverbial primrose path. New Delhi's failure to extract any concession from Pakistan in the war on terrorism has made it more anti-Pakistan than ever. Having come to realize that Washington would not lift even its finger to help India on the cross-border terrorism, it has begun to dawn on New Delhi that Pakistan is the cornerstone of Washington's "war on terrorism." The Pakistani Army and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had nurtured and strengthened the two elements that the United States was keen to eliminate—the Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists. Without Pakistan's help, Washington had virtually no ability to achieve even a nominal level of success in this venture.

The Bush administration's double-talk and the anti-Muslim fervor of the Indian policy group, also exposed a deep flaw in New Delhi's subsequent analysis of the Pakistani domestic situation. It did not seem to be evident to New Delhi that Washington hopes to derive maximum benefit from its relationship with Pakistan in the future, only if Islamabad continues to remain under control of the Pakistani Army. It did not occur to New Delhi that Washington does not have enough latitude to play around with the Pakistani civilian leaders because of the growing emergence of anti-American Islamic fundamentalists in the region.

In other words, although the Bush Administration's policy toward Islamabad clearly indicated that the Pakistani Army will continue to have a firm grip on the nation's foreign policies, New Delhi believed otherwise. That means that the Kashmir issue will be kept alive, and the Pakistani policy of bleeding India, in revenge for India's role in breaking up Pakistan in 1972 to create Bangladesh, will continue.

Dangerous Waters

This obsession with Pakistan, and trust in the United States in the post-Sept. 11, 2001 period to help India to get rid of the "Muslim terrorists," led to another policy distortion. For instance, a number of members in the present Indian government have found a new ally in Israel. Maj. Gen. Uzi Dayan, head of Israel's National Security Council, visited India last year for a "joint strategic dialogue." Former Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, during his visit to India last year, dubbed India "Israel's best friend" in the region.

A delegation from the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), a U.S.-based pro-Israel lobby that has become increasingly powerful in light of the war against Iraq, was in Delhi early this year. It included a number of high-level Israeli military officers. From the United States came Gen. Wayne Downing, an important member in the cabal of hawks in the Iraq war, and former FBI counterinsurgency chief Steve Pomerantz, who is known to partner with Islam-baiters in the United States. The JINSA group, during its stay in India, participated in a conference organized by one Indian chamber of commerce, and met with many senior leaders in the government.

The pro-Israel group in India is growing and drawing in a large number of military personnel. For years now, oodles of arms deals signed between India and Israel with the blessing of the United States have muted India's voice in support of the Palestinian nation. In total, more than \$2 billion in arms contracts have been signed between Israel Aircraft Industries and the Indian Defense Ministry, with Israel selling surface-to-surface Barak missiles, pilotless planes and radar systems, and renovating hundreds of MiG-21 and MiG-29 planes and Russian-made T-72 tanks. India is also in the process of acquiring Israel's Arrow Theater Missile Defense System. Significantly, Israel is also providing consultancy to India on how to deal with the cross-border terrorism influx from Pakistan into the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir.

By directing India's foreign policy to align with the anti-Islam, anti-Muslim cabal, New Delhi has set itself on a dangerous path. India, with a billion-plus people and a well-developed technological base, may soon be identified as an anti-Muslim nation—a prospect it can ill afford. Should India get bogged down as an anti-Muslim nation, with two large Muslim nations—Pakistan and Bangladesh—totalling more than 250 million people, to its west and east, the country will be truly, permanently straitjacketed.