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THE NEW INDIAN GOVT. & NATIONAL SECURITY: Likely Policies--Part II

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by B.Raman

The BJP deserves credit for the significant improvement in India's relations with the USA, Israel and China during the six years it was in power.

2. The BJP and its experts understand the USA better than the Congress (I) and the pool of experts at its command. There are three maxims relating to relations with the USA:

* First, you can't have good political relations without good economic relations.

* Second, you can't have good economic relations without good political relations.

* Third, the diaspora of Indian origin, the Jewish community and the business community of the USA constitute important assets, which, if well utilised, could facilitate the promotion of Indian interests.

3. The BJP understood this better than any other political formation in India. It not only succeeded in imparting to Indo-US relations a strategic dimension, which was well reciprocated by the Clinton and Bush Administrations, but also scored important tactical successes. Examples:

- * Its success in having the economic sanctions imposed by the Clinton Administration after the Pokhran II nuclear tests of May 1998 diluted and ultimately removed. The business community in the USA with interests in India and the Indian and Jewish lobbies played an active role in helping the BJP-led Government to achieve this.
- * Its success during the Kargil conflict of 1999 in enlisting the support of the Clinton Administration for securing the withdrawal of the Pakistani army troops from the Kargil heights.
- * Its success in having India projected convincingly not only before the Bush Administration, but also before the Congress and leading think-tanks of the US, close to the Bush Administration, as an emerging power which deserves attention by its own right in US policy-making in Asia.
- * Its success in making the Bush Administration accept that the Pakistani jihadi terrorist organisations active in Jammu & Kashmir were part of the international terrorist network against which the US-led war against terrorism is directed. It was this acceptance, which led to the designation of the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) and the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM) by the Bush administration as Foreign Terrorist Organisations in 2001 under a 1996 law, and to the consequent pressure on the Musharraf regime to act against them, though this pressure has not yet worked.
- * Its success in mobilising the support of an increasing number of Congressmen for India's point of view. Till 2003, this support was more in the House of Representatives than in the Senate, but since the beginning of this year, it had also made progress in creating a reservoir of support for India in the Senate too.
- * Its success in preventing a too negative a view of the anti-Muslim riots of 2002 in Gujarat by the Bush Administration.

4. The general perception that the BJP-led Government was more amenable to US pressure than the past Congress (I) Governments is wrong. This was seen in the determined manner in which it had the nuclear tests carried out unmindful of the political and economic consequences of its action, Shri A.B.Vajpayee's refusal to provide a face-saving formula for Mr.Nawaz Sharif as a quid pro quo for his action in ordering the withdrawal of the Pakistani Army troops from the Kargil heights, its refusal to allow US human rights groups to visit Gujarat, its refusal to make any concessions on the nuclear issue, which would have been detrimental to Indian interests, during the series of talks between Mr.Jaswant Singh, the then Foreign Minister, and Mr.Strobe Talbott, the Deputy Secretary of State in the Clinton Administration, its refusal to consider sending an Indian infantry division to Iraq unless the coalition troops there were under the mandate of the UN and its resistance to US pressures on trade-related issues in multilateral fora.

5. Even the worst detractors of the BJP-led Government have to concede that it is remarkable that it was able to impart a forward momentum to Indo-US strategic relations without letting itself be pressurised by Washington DC on matters of vital interest to India. It would not be an exaggeration to say that for the first time India came to be seen in the US policy-making circles as a power to be reckoned with. It would be too cynical a view to belittle the role of the BJP's policies and actions in this evolution of US thinking and policy-making.

6. The fact that the Musharraf regime managed to have itself rehabilitated in the eyes of the US and emerge as the so-called frontline ally of the US in the war against terrorism with attendant benefits by way of an economic bonanza and a possible military bonanza too as a consequence of its being declared as a Major Non-NATO Ally of the US should not be allowed to detract from the significant gains made by the BJP in bringing about a positive transformation in Indo-US relations.

7. For the first time, one had in New Delhi a Government untarnished, in US eyes, by the pro-USSR and pro-Najibullah Government policies in the past by the Congress (I) Governments. For the first time, one also had in power in New Delhi a political formation, which realised the importance of Indo-US relations if India was to emerge as a major political, economic and technological power in the region. Washington's recognition of the importance of the USA's relations with India was in direct proportion to New Delhi's recognition of the importance of India's relations with the USA. For the first time, one also saw the contours of a consciously worked out strategy to impart meaning and depth to Indo-US relations in various fields.

8. The successful implementation of this strategy would not have been possible but for the valuable support received by the BJP-led Government from the diaspora of Indian origin in the USA and the Jewish community. The Indian diaspora was excited by the fact that for the first time India had a Government which was capable of lucid thinking in matters relating to Indo-US relations and which recognised openly the role which this diaspora could play in the positive transformation of Indo-US relations. The

Congress (I) Governments of the past were widely perceived by large sections of the diaspora as condescending, if not indifferent, in its attitude to the diaspora and as bedevilled in its attitude and thinking vis-a-vis the USA by the vestiges of the anti-US reflexes of the cold war years.

9. A large majority of the persons of Indian origin in the USA are Hindus, an increasing percentage of them born and brought up in the USA. Their long years in the USA have not diluted their pride as Hindus and their attachment to the Hindu religion and culture. This is so not only in the older generation, but even more so in the younger generation. One has to only visit the Hindu temples, which have mushroomed across the USA, to realise that many youth of Indian origin in the USA, both men and women, are even more devoted Hindus than their counterparts in India.

10. This Hindu segment of the diaspora was never able to appreciate secularism as projected by the Congress (I), the leftists and the other so-called secular parties of India. For them, as it is for the BJP, secularism does not mean consciously playing down India's Hindu background and heritage. The good vibrations resulting from their positive perception of the thinking and reflexes of the BJP played an important role in making them activate themselves for promoting a better understanding of India's policies and concerns and a better recognition of India's needs.

11. To the BJP should go the credit for recognising the important contribution which Israel as a State and the Jewish community as a people could play in bringing India and the US together. It was Indira Gandhi, who had initiated the policy of opening up some lines of communications with Israel and it was Shri Narasimha Rao, who had taken the initiative for establishing full-fledged diplomatic relations with Israel. The relations between India and Israel in various fields had started developing even under the previous Congress (I) governments, but they were coy in admitting them and hesitant to establish lines of communications with the Jewish diaspora outside Israel, lest their actions be misunderstood and misinterpreted by the Islamic world.

12. No such inhibitions and concerns marked the policies of the BJP. It openly pronounced its interest in further strengthening India's relations with Israel and took a number of steps in furtherance of this. It had no hesitation in encouraging a networking at non-governmental levels with the Jewish diaspora outside Israel, particularly in the USA. The Jewish diaspora, which felt ignored by the previous Congress (I) Governments, reciprocated these gestures enthusiastically and joined hands with sections of the diaspora of Indian origin in various non-governmental organisations for promoting the common interests of India and Israel. The benefits of these policy changes are there for all to see, despite the criticism of the Congress (I).

13. There would be limits to any improvement in Indo-US relations if any Government in New Delhi does not show adequate sensitivity to the concerns and interests of the US business community and Government, whether it be relating more imports from the USA, a more business-friendly environment, a quickening of the pace of reforms etc. It is a realisation of this which made the BJP Government, which came to office in 1998 with confused ideas on economic policy, take action to remove this confusion and

to convince the foreign business community that it meant business with regard to economic reforms. The favourable turn in the attitude of the US business community to India could be attributed to this.

14. The BJP had an advantage in formulating and implementing this far-sighted policy because there was a broad consensus among all the members of the outgoing coalition Government on the importance of India's relations with the USA and none of them was stymied in their thinking by the anti-US reflexes commonly prevalent in India during the cold war.

15. Would this momentum be maintained under the new coalition Government headed by Congress (I)? Or would the anti-US reflexes of the past re-assert themselves in policy-making? Would the dependence of the Congress (I) on the leftist parties for its survival in power slow down the forward momentum and force the Congress (I) to have a re-look at the policies pursued by the BJP-led coalition? Would the conservatives in the US, who provide the ideological motivating force of the Bush Administration and would continue to do so if Bush retains power in the forthcoming elections, continue to be as enthusiastic as now in their perception of India or would there be a resurgence of their fears and mental reservations because of the Congress (I)'s dependence on the Communists? Many of these conservatives never had a positive perception of the Congress (I) in the past and may not have in future unless the Congress (I) goes out of its way to convince them of its interest in a strategic relationship within the USA? Would the new Government play down India's interest in further developing its ties with Israel and start keeping away from the Jewish diaspora once again in order to reassure the Islamic world of its goodwill towards them? Would the diaspora of Indian origin in the USA, many of whom seem to have reservations about the new leadership of the Congress (I) and its dependence on the leftists, continue to work as energetically as before? Would changes in some aspects of economic reforms such as a second look at the privatisation policy, at a time when China is moving full steam ahead with its reforms including the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, re-ignite fears in the US business community, about the predictability of India's economic reforms and policies, with each new administration seeking to change the policies of its predecessor?

16. These are questions to which it is difficult to give definitive answers at present. The coalition formed by the Congress (I) before the elections was largely a tactical coalition with the single point agenda of bringing down the BJP-led coalition. It was not a strategic coalition with a common vision for the future. Each constituent of the coalition had its own strategic vision, but no attempt was made to identify and remove or reduce the divergences and identify a broad area of convergence on the basis of which they could work together. This important task was postponed to after the elections, lest differences in their policy perceptions come in the way of their pursuing determinedly their objective of bringing down the BJP-led Government. After the elections, an exercise has been initiated to bring about a policy convergence in the form of a common minimum programme.

17. The media hype that the elections resulted in a massive mandate for the Congress (I) and in a massive rejection of the BJP are not correct. Both secured roughly one-fourth of the total number of seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower House of the Parliament. The Congress (I) secured just a few more than the BJP. The remaining nearly one-half of the seats have been won by a hotch-potch of parties, with the leftists securing the largest chunk. More of these seats have been won by parties which had

joined the Congress-led coalition than by the parties in the BJP-led coalition. Hence, the Congress (I)'s return to power. By itself, it holds roughly only one-fourth of the total number of seats in the House and one-half of the number of seats required for a working majority. By no stretch of imagination, can this be called a massive mandate as projected by the media.

18. The parties, which supported the BJP in the 1999 and the recent elections largely belonged to the right side of the political spectrum and this made the task of policy convergence and coherence easier. Those supporting the Congress (I) now belong to both sides, as many to the left as to the right. This could make the task of policy convergence and enforcement more difficult.

19. However, a perusal of the pre-poll policy documents of both the Congress (I) and the leftist Parties indicate a possibly commonly-shared negative view of the BJP-led Government's policies towards the USA and mental reservations on the advisability of the policies followed hitherto.

20. For example, the Congress (I)'s document titled ISSUES BEFORE THE NATION: SECURITY, DEFENCE AND FOREIGN POLICY says: "Of equal concern has been the BJP/NDA Government's policies towards the USA. They have been characterised by a lack of transparency. Till this day, the country has never been taken into confidence about the outcome of several rounds of discussions which Shri Jaswant Singh as Minister of External Affairs had with Mr. Strobe Talbott, Deputy Secretary of State of the USA. Sadly, a great country like India has been reduced to having a subordinate relationship with the USA where the USA takes India for granted. This is the result of the BJP/NDA Government's willingness to adjust the US priorities and policies without giving due attention to India's own vital foreign policy and national security interests. The declaration of Pakistan as a non-NATO ally by the USA recently exposed the BJP's claim of a "paradigm shift" in Indo-US relations. This declaration caught the Government of India by surprise. The subsequent protests by the Government of India have been very weak and have lacked credibility and conviction. The BJP/NDA Government has failed to take the country into confidence about the national security implications of the new tie-up between Pakistan and the USA. It has also failed to dispel the widely-held fears that India has accepted the mediator role for the USA in Indo-Pakistan relations."

21. During the election campaign, the leftist parties were critical of Indo-US military co-operation and called for a second look at all the agreements in this regard entered into by the BJP-led Government. (To be continued)

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