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## THE NEW INDIAN GOVT. & NATIONAL SECURITY: LIKELY POLICIES---PART III

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 09/28/2012 - 07:17

**Paper No.1003**

**18.05.2004**

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The Congress (I)'s policy document titled "ISSUES BEFORE THE NATION: SECURITY, DEFENCE AND FOREIGN POLICY " is strongly critical of the outgoing BJP-led coalition's handling of India's relations with Pakistan and the USA, but contains hardly any criticism of its handling of relations with China, Russia, the ASEAN countries and the rest of the world. One is also struck by the paucity of reference to India's relations with South Asian countries other than Pakistan, particularly Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal.

2.While the absence of any criticism of the handling of relations with China, Russia, the ASEAN countries and the rest of the world could be interpreted as the Congress (I)'s (not openly stated) endorsement of the handling, the lack of highlighting of India's relations with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal could be an indicator that the Congress (I) is not yet clear in its mind as to what should be its approach to these countries in view of the sensitivities arising from the controversy with Bangladesh over India's allegations of Dacca's support to anti-Indian terrorist and insurgent groups, the Sri Lankan Government's talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and their possible impact on India's efforts to get Prabakaran, the LTTE leader, extradited for trial in connection with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and the activities of the Maoists in Nepal and the tug of war between the King and the political parties, which have been agitating for the restoration of democracy.

3. The party apparently wants to reserve its judgment till it assumes office and has had an opportunity of studying the facts of the case relating to these three countries before deciding on its approach and publicly articulating it. For the party's survival in power, the support of the leftists, who constitute the third largest group in the Lok Sabha, the lower House of the Parliament, after the Congress (I) and the BJP, and Tamil Nadu's Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK--Dravidian Progressive Party ) is crucial. While the leftists have had no strong views on foreign policy issues other than those relating to the USA and Israel, the DMK's interest would be focussed on the LTTE.

4. In the past, the DMK had come in for strong criticism from the Congress (I) for its perceived sympathy for the LTTE. The DMK was a strong critic of the decision of Rajiv Gandhi in 1987 to despatch the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka and its opposition to it, which was shared by the BJP, was instrumental in making the Government in New Delhi led by V.P.Singh, which came to power in 1989, withdraw the IPKF from Sri Lanka after it had suffered a number of casualties in its unsuccessful operations against the LTTE. Shri M. Karunanidhi, the leader of the DMK and the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, had carried his opposition to the IPKF to the extreme length of refusing to participate in a function at Chennai to welcome the return of the IPKF and to support a subsequent proposal for the construction of a monument in Tamil Nadu in memory of the Indian soldiers who had lost their lives in the operations against the LTTE.

5. It was under the pressure of the Congress (I) that the Government in New Delhi headed by Shri Chandrasekhar, which had held office for a brief while in 1990-91, had dismissed the DMK Government headed by Karunanidhi, which was then in power in Tamil Nadu, for allegedly failing to control the activities of the LTTE from the territory of Tamil Nadu. After the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and the enquiry into it by a one-man commission constituted by Justice Jain, the Congress (I) had been repeatedly demanding further enquiries into the suspected role of the DMK as brought out by the Commission in its report and had kept up pressure on the outgoing BJP-led Government on this issue.

6. On the eve of the elections, the Congress (I), in the interest of its tactical alliance with the DMK to bring down the BJP-led coalition, did a surprising volte face and totally absolved the DMK of any responsibility or suspicion in connection with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. Would the Congress (I)'s future dependence on the DMK for surviving in power have any impact on its policy towards Sri Lanka?

7. Like the BJP, the Congress (I) too has been a strong supporter of a peacefully-negotiated solution to the problems of the Tamils of Sri Lanka, which would meet the legitimate aspirations of the Sri Lankan Tamils without affecting the territorial integrity of the country. There is unlikely to be any change in this respect. While the BJP-led coalition made periodic proforma statements reiterating its continued interest in securing the extradition of Prabakaran, it really did not seriously pursue the matter, apparently because of its keenness not to rock the boat vis-a-vis the peace negotiations between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE.

8. The BJP did not have political favourites in Sri Lanka and got along well with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of Mrs. Chandrika Kumaratunge as well as with the United National Party (UNP) of Mr. Ranil Wickremasinghe, the former Prime Minister. When Wickremasinghe was in power, the BJP-led Government had made many gestures to his Government by supporting his policies on the peace negotiations with the LTTE, by strengthening bilateral trade with Sri Lanka and by responding positively to its requests for limited military assistance.

9. At the same time, it had refrained from taking any well-articulated public stand on issues such as the LTTE's demands for an Interim Self-Governing Authority in the Tamil-speaking Northern and Eastern Provinces, its efforts to obtain a de facto recognition of its Navy and its right to patrol the seas off the coastal areas of the two provinces, the increasing role of external powers such as Norway, Japan, the USA and the European Union (EU) in Sri Lanka and the contacts of all of them except the USA with the LTTE, the frequent harassment of fishermen from Tamil Nadu straying into Sri Lankan waters by the Sri Lankan as well as the LTTE's navies etc. The DMK, which was a strong ally of the BJP in the outgoing Government till it broke away from it on the eve of the elections and formed the tactical alliance with the Congress (I), had gone along with the BJP's policies in these matters without making them serious issues in inter-party relations.

10. However, some strategic analysts in Tamil Nadu were critical of what they perceived as the disinterest of the BJP in the national security implications of developments in Sri Lanka, particularly the efforts of the LTTE to get de facto recognition of its Navy and the increasing role of the USA and Japan there, and its failure to ensure the protection of fishermen from Tamil Nadu. At the same time, they were appreciative of the BJP's action in obtaining from the Wickremasinghe Government the lease of the petrol storage tanks in Trincomalee and securing for the Indian Oil Corporation retail distribution rights in Sri Lanka.

11. The Congress (I) and its allies, for the sake of the success of their tactical alliance to bring down the BJP-led Government, have avoided taking a well-considered stand in public on any of these issues. Traditionally, Congress (I) has had closer relations with the SLFP than with the UNP. Now that the UNP-led coalition in Sri Lanka has been replaced by an SLFP-led one, this should facilitate a good equation between the leaderships of the two countries.

12. In the past, the Congress (I) had been extremely suspicious of the role of the US in Sri Lanka, a suspicion, which was and is shared by the leftists, who are now the electoral allies of it. It was the perceived insensitivity of the UNP-led Government in power in Colombo in the 1980s to India's security concerns, particularly in respect of the US interest in the petrol storage tanks of Trincomalee and in securing for the Voice of America an expanded presence in Sri Lanka that led to the decision of the Indira Gandhi Government in 1983 to play a more active role in supporting the aspirations of the Sri Lankan Tamils. It is unlikely that these suspicions have disappeared.

13. Many questions relating to Sri Lanka have remained unanswered and would, most probably, remain unanswered till the new Government in New Delhi settles down. These are: Would the Congress (I) succumb to pressure from the DMK to scrap the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), a special legislation which is in keeping with the provisions of the UN Security Council Resolution No. 1373 on the war against terrorism? The BJP's refusal to accept this demand was one of the factors, which contributed to a parting of the ways between it and

the DMK and the latter's gravitating towards the Congress (I) and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi. If it concedes this demand, what impact it would have on the activities of the LTTE's sympathisers in Tamil Nadu? In view of its dependence on the DMK, would it be as relentless as it was in the past in its efforts to have Prabakaran brought to trial in India? If not, would it do business with an interim self-government in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, of which Prabakaran, the absconding mastermind of Rajiv Gandhi's murder, may emerge as the head? In its proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority, the LTTE has indicated that all future negotiations relating to the economic and other interests of the Northern and Eastern Provinces have to be with the Government of that authority. This would imply that if its proposals are accepted by the Sri Lankan Government and an interim Government headed by Prabakaran emerges, future negotiations on the renewal of the lease of the petrol storage tanks have to be with that Government. Will this be acceptable to the Govt. of India? What would be the role of India in the peace process---a passive observer as under the BJP-led coalition or an active player? Would India adjust itself to the growing US role in Sri Lanka instead of opposing or countering it?

14. None of these questions had figured in the policy documents of the Congress (I) or in its statements during the election campaign. It has preferred to maintain a discreet silence instead of articulating its position in public or even criticising any of the policies followed by the BJP-led coalition. Even the BJP had preferred to maintain deliberate ambiguity on many of the questions posed above.

15. The Government of Begum Khalida Zia had no reasons to be happy with the BJP-led Government because of its oft-repeated accusations of Bangladeshi support to anti-Indian insurgent and terrorist organisations, which were vigorously denied by it, and the talk of the BJP of its plans for the inter-linking of the Indian rivers which, the Bangladesh Government claimed, would reduce the flow of waters in its river system. Her Government also continued to be reluctant to accept the proposals of UNOCAL, the US company, for the export of gas to India. Unless this was agreed to, the exploitation of the gas reserves of that country would not be profitable to UNOCAL or any other foreign company. The Khalida Zia Government seemed prepared to deny to itself the benefits of the exploitation of these gas reserves rather than sell gas to India in view of public opposition to it.

16. Another matter of concern to India is the increased US activism in Bangladesh. There is a possibility of an increase in the US role in that country should the Government of Khalida Zia agree to send Bangladeshi troops to Iraq under a UN mandate after June 30,2004. This would bring the country closer to the USA, with prospects of Bangladesh being declared one day another Major non-NATO Ally in the South Asia region. The BJP-led Government showed no outward signs of concern over the US role in that country.

17. As in Sri Lanka, in Bangladesh too, the BJP had no political favourites. Its relations with the ruling Bangladesh National Party (BNP) as well as the opposition Awami League headed by Sheikh Hassina were devoid of warmth. Traditionally, the Congress (I) had been closer to Sheikh Hassina than to the present ruling party. What impact would this have on India's relations with Bangladesh?

18. Just as in dealing with Sri Lanka, the Congress (I) would have to be sensitive to the concerns and interests of the DMK, similarly, in dealing with Bangladesh, it would have to be sensitive to those of the leftists who run the Government in West Bengal. The West Bengal Government is as concerned as the Government of India over the activities of Bangladesh-based insurgent and terrorist groups since some of them pose a threat to the State's internal security. It is, therefore, expected that the new Government at New Delhi headed by the

Congress (I) would keep up the pressure on Dhaka on this issue, but, probably, more discreetly than in the abrasive manner in which the BJP-led coalition was doing. However, if there is a deterioration in the internal security situation in India's North-East as a result of the activities of the insurgents and terrorists operating from Bangladesh territory, it might find it hard to resist the urge to act more robustly to deal with this menace.

19. The BJP's proposals for the inter-linking of the river waters of India were of vital interest to the southern Indian states, more particularly to Tamil Nadu, with its chronic water shortage, for drinking as well as agricultural purposes. The DMK is expected to keep up the pressure on New Delhi to implement these proposals, which could add to the tensions in the relations with Dacca.

20. Another matter of great concern to India has been the increasingly close relations between the Government of Khlalida Zia and the regime of President Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan. Unless there is a qualitative improvement in India's relations with Bangladesh and a consequent lessening of tension, this is a process which is likely to continue without India being able to stop and reverse it. The BJP-led Government watched it helplessly. The Congress (I)-led Government may be able to do no better.

21. The continuing Maoist activities in Nepal and their linkages with their counterparts in India, the role of the US in assisting Nepal in its counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations, the overthrow of democracy by the King and the worsening confrontation between him and the political parties over the suppression of democracy would have an impact on Indo-Nepal relations. The BJP-led Government appeared to have no strategy relating to India's relations with Nepal, just as it appeared to have no strategy in respect of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Adhocism and inactivism in matters relating to the increasing US role in the region characterised its policies.

22. Was this inactivism vis-a-vis the US role in this region due to its keenness not to do anything which might cause difficulties in the developing bilateral relations with the US or was it the outcome of an intelligent calculation to use the US to deal with the internal security problems of these countries which might ultimately redound to the benefit of India or was it just due to policy lethargy? It is difficult to answer these questions.

23. The King of Nepal is close to Sankaracharya, a Hindu spiritual leader of Kanchi in Tamil Nadu, and many other spiritual leaders of India, who are close to the so-called Hindutva front organisations of the BJP. He also has many personal friends and well-wishers in the Hindutva organisations. As against this, the BJP's relations with the political parties of Nepal lacked warmth. This apparently came in the way of the BJP-led Government voicing strongly its opposition to the King's suppression of democracy.

24. The Congress (I), on the other hand, is till now not known to have much love for the King. Traditionally, it has maintained close relations with the political parties. The likely tendency would, therefore, be to activate itself more energetically than the BJP did on the side of the political parties in their confrontation with the King, who should be a worried man. The US itself seems to be more content dealing with the King. It has serious doubts whether the hotch-potch of political parties of Nepal would be able to deal effectively with the Maoist insurgency.

25. The previous Congress(I) Governments of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi had found it difficult to resist the urge to play an activist role in Nepal. The Congress (I) Government of Narasimha Rao (1991-96) and the subsequent non-Congress (I) Governments had tried to follow a non-interventionist policy. The incoming Congress(I) Government, unlike the past Governments, would be weak and dependent on the support of a confusing medley of parties for its survival in power and effectiveness in managing India's external relations and national security. It is doubtful whether they would encourage a resurgence of its past interventionist reflexes unless such interventionism or activism be to counter the US role in these countries.

26. The Congress (I) has accused the BJP-led Government of subservience to the USA. The "see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil" policy followed by the BJP-led Government with regard to the increased US activism in this region was one of the factors which made the Congress (I) dub the BJP as subservient to the USA instead of being an equal strategic partner. After having levelled this charge, can the Congress (I) afford to follow a similar policy on this subject? This is a question which would haunt it after it assumes office.

27. Extracts relating to South Asia, other than Pakistan, from the Congress document are appended below. As could be seen, there are hardly any. (To be continued)

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#### EXTRACTS FROM THE CONGRESS (I) REPORT ON SOUTH ASIA OTHER THAN PAKISTAN

"The Congress will allocate the highest priority to nurturing and expanding relations between India and its approximate neighbours in all respects. The Congress will strengthen and expand the activities of SAARC to make it an effective regional organization, serving the objectives of peace, stability and well being of the peoples of the South Asian Region. It will work toward the establishment of a South Asian Parliament. It will take up major regional projects in water management, energy and other vital areas."

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