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

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**by B.Raman**

There was a qualitative improvement in India's relations with China under the outgoing BJP-led Government, despite the initial hiccups of 1998 in the wake of the ill-advised statement of Shri George Fernandes, the Defence Minister, giving his perception of China as a possible military threat and Beijing's criticism of the Indian nuclear tests (Pokhran II). After President Bush came to power in January 2001, China had some grounds for suspicion that his Administration was planning to use India as a counter-weight to China in Asia.

2. It goes to the credit of the BJP-led Government that it managed to contain and remove the negative fall-out of these hiccups and suspicions and brought about this qualitative improvement. Among the indicators of this improvement, one could mention the following:

\* The stand in favour of the respect of the sanctity of the Line of Control (LOC) in Jammu & Kashmir taken by Beijing during the Kargil conflict in 1999. Mr.Nawaz Sharif, the then Pakistani Prime Minister, might not have been amenable to the pressure exercised on him by the Clinton Administration to order the withdrawal of the Pakistani troops from across the LOC if Beijing had not taken a similar stand as it did when he visited Beijing in late June,1999, before his visit to Washington DC.

- \* The neutral stand taken by China in matters relating to Indo-Pakistan disputes, particularly over Jammu & Kashmir. One saw the beginnings of a change in the Chinese attitude during the visit of the then Chinese President Jiang Ze-Min to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1996, when Shri Deve Gowda was the Prime Minister. In the years before that, China automatically used to side with Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, but it no longer does so. Its attitude is more nuanced.
- \* The significant improvement in India's bilateral trade with China.
- \* The increased exchanges of visits of experts at various levels.
- \* The beginnings of a military-to-military relationship with exchanges of naval visits and joint exercises and exploration of other avenues of exchanges for mutual benefit.
- \* The successful removal of lingering Chinese suspicions relating to India's stand vis-a-vis Tibet and the Dalai Lama.
- \* The Chinese decision to recognise Sikkim as an integral part of India.
- \* The upgradation of the border negotiations to a higher level under the supervision of the political leadership and the agreement to seek a solution to the border dispute on the basis of "give and take".
- \* The periodic trilateral talks, at the governmental and non-governmental levels, involving India, China and Russia, to discuss subjects of common interest. When the idea of such a trilateral dialogue first emanated in the late 1990s from Yevgeny Primakov, the then Russian Prime Minister, China was reticent about it. It has since become more favourable to it.

3. Rajiv Gandhi set in motion the beginning of the thaw in Sino-Indian relations during his visit to China in 1988 and this process was kept up---though in fits and starts--- by the Governments of Shri V.P.Singh, Shri Chandrasekhar, Shri Narasimha Rao, Shri Deve Gowda and Shri Inder Gujral that followed, but their approach tended to be over-cautious because of the fact that many of the members of those Governments, who were either from the Congress (I) or associated with it in some stage of their political career, could not easily rid themselves of the lingering distrust of China caused by the debacle suffered by India during the Sino-Indian war of 1962.

4. The BJP, in its previous incarnation as the Jan Sangh, could not escape some share of the responsibility for the 1962 debacle. The Jan Sangh, then in the opposition and widely perceived as pro-Washington and anti-Beijing, pushed Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Congress Prime Minister, into a situation which led to the war. A rightist section of the Congress, led by Morarji Desai, then Finance Minister, who was also perceived to be close to Washington DC, unconsciously became an objective ally of the Jan Sangh in forcing Nehru to take an increasingly rigid line on the border dispute, thereby making a negotiated solution difficult.

5. The BJP and its Hindutva organisations also developed and nursed close contacts with the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan followers. George Fernandes also nursed his own network of contacts in the Tibetan exile community. Against this background, one would have never imagined that the BJP would have so readily shed its historic anti-China mindset and imparted such a positive transformation to Sino-Indian relations.

6. Among those, who played an important role in making this transformation possible, are the following:

\* Shri Brajesh Mishra, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister A.B.Vajpayee and the National Security Adviser. He is a retired officer of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), who was India's Charge d'Affaires (CDA) in Beijing during the days of Mao Tse-Dong.

\* Shri C.V.Ranganathan, another retired officer of the IFS, who served as the Convenor of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) of the Government of India in 2002 and 2003. He had also served in China--- initially as a young officer and subsequently, as the Indian Ambassador. He speaks Chinese and knows well the pre-1979 and the post-1979 China. Unlike many IFS officers, who tend to blame China for many things that went wrong in the 1950s and the 1960s, he reportedly holds the view that India and China had equally sinned against each other and that it is time to forget the past and move forward.

\* Shri Jaswant Singh, who was the Foreign Minister after the BJP-led coalition came to office in 1998, before he moved over to the Finance Ministry. Realpolitik based on lucid-thinking was the main characteristic of his policy.

7. These three might not have succeeded the way they did but for two other favourable factors---first, since his days as the Foreign Minister in the Morarji Desai Cabinet between 1977 and 1979, Vajpayee himself was convinced of the futility of negative thinking and policies with regard to China; and second, the coming into office in Beijing of a younger and new Chinese leadership which was prepared to try a pragmatic approach in China's foreign policy, including in matters relating to relations with India.

8. The tactical successes scored by the BJP-led Government should not obscure the continuing serious hurdles, which would come in the way of a strategic improvement. Amongst these hurdles:

\* China's continuing policy of militarily bolstering up Pakistan in pursuance of its strategy of keeping the Indian military preoccupied on two fronts. One could cite its continuing supply of nuclear technology and nuclear weapon delivery capable missiles to Pakistan and its assistance to it in the construction of the Gwadar port on the Mekran coast of Balochistan, which would help the Pakistan Navy to reduce its dependence on the Karachi port, vulnerable to Indian attacks if there is a war. Even while holding talks with India on improving bilateral relations, it reached an agreement with Pakistan in 2002 for assistance in the construction of the Gwadar port and has recently signed another agreement for assisting Pakistan in the setting-up of a second nuclear power station in Chashma. Political neutrality on the Kashmir issue, but military commitment to keep Pakistan strong vis-a-vis India continue to be the two cornerstones of China's policy.

\* There are so far no indications of any significant forward movement in the upgraded border talks. "Give and take" was the principle agreed to, but it is said that China wants India to do the giving and it to have the taking. Beijing is reported to be unyielding in its claims to territory in the Tawang area of Arunachal Pradesh.

9. That the Congress (I) has no quarrel with the BJP's handling of India's relations with China would be evident from the following reference to China in its policy document titled "ISSUES BEFORE THE NATION:

SECURITY, DEFENCE AND FOREIGN POLICY": "The Congress will continue the process of normalizing, strengthening and expanding India's relations with China, which is the most important factor affecting Asian security and stability. The Congress will continue and increase the momentum of the initiative that the Congress Government took between 1988 and 1996 to ensure a stable and mutually cooperative and beneficial relationship with China. The Congress will move forward purposively to resolving the boundary issue with China in a practical manner, by systematic and continuous negotiations.....The Congress will take the initiative to have credible, transparent and verifiable confidence-building measures in treaty form to minimize the risk of nuclear and missile conflict with Pakistan and China."

10. While the Congress (I) has not shown the generosity to give credit to the BJP-led coalition for improving the relations with China during its tenure in office, it has refrained from criticising the BJP's handling of the relations. The emphasis is on a practical approach to the border problem through systematic and continuous negotiations and talks on nuclear confidence-building measures (NCBMs) in a treaty form. The emphasis on NCBMs with China was not part of the BJP's priorities vis-a-vis China.

11. Would the Congress (I) be able to maintain the good ambience in the bilateral relations created by the BJP-led coalition and keep up the momentum imparted by the outgoing Government? While there is no doubt that it would work in that direction, its success could be limited by

the following factors:

- \* The lack of China expertise in the Congress (I) entourage similar to what the BJP had at its disposal, unless it has the foresight to continue to use the services of Brajesh Mishra and Ranganathan instead of looking upon them as pro-BJP and avoiding them.
- \* The vestiges of 1962 in the mindsets of many of those in the Congress (I)'s entourage.
- \* The past proximity of the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan exiles to some of the Congress (I) leaders.

12. Before it came to power in 1998, the BJP was not known for its enthusiasm for the erstwhile USSR. The fact that the Communists and the BJP have always been sworn ideological enemies of each other also prejudiced its perception of Moscow. But, after coming to power, there was a remarkable transformation in its thinking and perception. It did not allow its efforts to improve India's relations with the USA to affect the sustaining and the further strengthening of the network of relationships with Russia built up by the previous Congress (I) Governments in the political, economic, military and scientific and technological fields.

13. India today has the strongest strategic relationship with Russia, which continues to be an important supplier of military equipment to India and has been a strong supporter of India in the war against terrorism. The credit for coaxing Beijing to move in the direction of a trilateral talks mechanism should also go to Moscow. The Vladimir Putin Government has not allowed its improving relationship with the Pervez Musharraf regime in Pakistan to affect its relations with India. It has shown great sensitivity to India's concerns and has refrained from any major military supply relationship with Pakistan.

14. The Congress (I) has, therefore, every reason to be gratified with the state of Indo-Russian relations under the BJP-led Government. Its policy document does not contain any criticism on this score. At the same time, it is surprising that the document refers to India's relations with Russia only in passing without any elaboration. It says: "The Congress will attach high importance to India's relations with the United States, the European Union, the Russian Federation, China, Japan and the ASEAN countries....The Congress will improve and expand strategic relations between India, on the one hand, and the USA, European Union, Russia, Japan and the ASEAN region, on the other." (My comment: China does not figure in the second formulation relating to strategic relations. Why?)

15. This omission seems to be more due to mental lethargy and not the result of any conscious decision. One should not read undue significance into it.

16. The name of Israel does not figure in the document at all. As already mentioned in Part II of this series, it was under Indira Gandhi in the late 1960s that channels of communications and mutual security assistance with Israel were opened. These were kept sustained by the

Morarji Desai Government and further strengthened by the Rajiv Gandhi Government and the Governments that followed. The Narasimha Rao Government established full-fledged diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992.

17. However, all Governments, which preceded the BJP-led coalition, had kept the relations with Israel in various fields a secret lest public disclosure of them damage India's standing in the Islamic world. The BJP-led Government brought these relationships into the open and further expanded them. It also sought Israeli expertise in the use of technical means for countering terrorism. It also encouraged non-governmental contacts with Israel as well as the Jewish community in the rest of the world and, particularly in the USA, to identify new areas of co-operation. There was also an open exchange of visits at various levels, the high point of which was the high-profile visit of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to India last year.

18. There was strong criticism of the BJP's handling of the relations with Israel from the Congress (I) as well as the leftist parties and pro-Arab intellectuals in the months before the elections. The Congress (I)'s criticism was mainly due to the fact that it felt that the BJP had allowed the importance attached by it to these relations to mute its criticism of Israel for its policy of reprisals against the Palestine Liberation Organisation and downgrade India's traditional support to the Palestine cause.

19. None of this criticism finds mention in the Congress (I)'s document, but one is likely to see a qualitative change in the Congress (I)'s handling of the relations with Israel. First, the mutual security and military supply relationship would, most probably, be maintained, but in secret as it was before 1998. Second, the priority given to counter-terrorism co-operation may be downgraded. Third, high-level and high-profile exchanges of visits, particularly of personalities, perceived by the Congress (I) as controversial, may be reduced, if not stopped. And four, there would be much stronger vocal support to the Palestine cause and criticism of Israeli's policies and actions against the Palestinians.

20. The "Look East" policy started by the Narasimha Rao Government to expand and strengthen India's relations with the South-East Asian countries and the ASEAN was further developed by the BJP-led coalition. The momentum in this regard would be maintained. The Congress (I) policy document says: "The Congress will attach high importance to India's relations with the United States, the European Union, the Russian Federation, China, Japan and the ASEAN countries.....The Congress will improve and expand strategic relations between India, on the one hand, and the USA, European Union, Russia, Japan and the ASEAN region, on the other.....The Congress will revive purposeful efforts to strengthen India's relations with other regional groups like ASEAN and APEC."

21. How effective will the Congress (I) be in the implementation of its policies? There is a big question mark over this. The past Congress (I) Governments of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi had absolute majorities and did not have to depend on other parties for their policy formulation and implementation. The Narasimha Rao Government did not have that kind of majority, but it managed to survive without any undue dependence on others. In the incoming coalition, the Congress (I) has only a half of the required absolute majority. Its dependence on its electoral allies, particularly the Communists, would be high and possibly crucial.

22. While policy differences with other coalition partners in the centre or to the right of the political spectrum would be minor and manageable, those with the leftists, who have won the largest number of seats since independence, could prove to be difficult to manage in respect of economic reforms and relations with the USA and Israel.

23. Any slowing down of the economic reforms or reversal of past policies could have an adverse effect on India's relations with the West, particularly the US. The regimes in China and Russia, who were the past mentors of the Indian leftist parties, have realised the importance of good relations with the US, even while maintaining their vital national interests. Many of our leftists continue to live in the past and have nothing to learn from the present pragmatic regimes of Beijing and Moscow.

24. The Congress (I) led Government is likely to be weak and the Congress (I)'s ability to enforce its leadership on others is uncertain. One could already hear discordant voices in respect of economic reforms and relations with the USA. While the Congress (I) through Shri K.Natwar Singh has underlined the importance attached by it to India's relations with the US, the leftists have been saying quite the opposite.

25. A statement issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) on May 18,2004, calls for opposition to "imperialist (My comment: Read US) penetration" in society and a foreign policy consistent with India's traditional stance of non-alignment. It adds: " The policy should promote multi polarity and good relations with our neighbours and promote dialogue with Pakistan.' During the election campaign, the leftists had been calling for a re-look at all the agreements on military-military co-operation with the US signed under the BJP-led coalition.

26. Will the leftists revive and persist with these demands? Will the Congress (I) be able to persuade them not to insist on them? What influence will the leftists exercise on the foreign policy and national security management? It is difficult to answer these questions at present. (To be concluded)

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