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STRADDLING FAULTLINES:
India's Foreign Policy toward
the Greater Middle East

Sushil J. AARON

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Sushil J. Aaron
20 July 2003

STRADDLING FAULTLINES : India's Foreign Policy toward the Greater Middle East

SUMMARY

India's foreign policy has had an anomalous quality since the time Jawaharlal Nehru resolutely attempted to steer clear of Cold War alliances. This continues to be so given India's unique situation of establishing "strategic relations" with both Israel and Iran, as part of its Greater Middle East policy. A study of this paradox assumes significance for various reasons. One, it offers a glimpse into the way India is reordering its foreign policy in the post Cold War, as part of its clamour for Great Power status, thus presenting a westward complement to its familiar 'Look East policy' which seeks to engage regions beyond South Asia. It also provides a view of the complexities involved in endorsing the American agenda in a geopolitical neighbourhood, transformed by the September 11 attacks, and yet, one that affects India's security because of its energy reserves and Islamist ferment. To this end, this study analyses India's foreign policy toward the Middle East and Central Asia since the late 1990s, with a specific focus on its relations with Israel, Iran and Iraq that reviews the way it reconciles immediate security needs with competing realities of economic interdependence and political sensitivities. The paper also evaluates the challenges India faces in strengthening links with Afghanistan and Central Asia.

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SUMMARY	

I. INTRODUCTION

Among scholars of international relations, September 11, 2001 might, in time, be reckoned as having a greater impact on relations between nation-states than the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This is, at least, true concerning the immediacy of impact that the terrorist attacks have wrought on the conduct of diplomacy and statecraft the world over. After the end of the Cold War in 1991, global politics was acquiescing with American pre-eminence while other great powers like Russia and China were preoccupied with appropriating the agenda of economic globalization alongside a low-intensity pursuit of political and military interests. In short, the overt ideational and material circumstances to strive for an active balancing act against American power and strategic reach was missing in world politics.

On a regional plane, this is true also of India's external outlook in the 1990s, which was content to strive for order in South Asia while seeking beneficial relationships with neighboring regions such as Southeast Asia and the Middle East as part of its avowed clamor for "great power" status. The pre-September 11 scenario, in a sense, offered a measure of gradualist luxury in that a power like India could afford to engage a region at its own pace without events threatening to overtake or obstruct political and economic linkages. Even the Middle East, known for its relentless turbulence, appeared to experience a tenuous calm owing to the stalemate over the Palestinian Intifada and Iraq.

September 2001, which has unraveled the geopolitics of the Middle East and Central Asia, is of crucial significance to India, both as a great power wannabe and by virtue of being a dominant player in South Asia which is contiguous to the troubled West Asian region. Importantly, the fact that Afghanistan is no longer able to insulate South Asia and the Greater Middle East (GME) will be of interest to India as it braces up to a westward neighborhood that is characterized by nuclear proliferation, supplies it with crucial oil and natural gas while being the site for fomenting Islamic radicalism that bedevils its security.

Relevance of the study

Security Complex theorists like Barry Buzan have argued for continuity across the notional South Asia-West Asia boundary despite the upheavals in Afghanistan after September 2001 as it purportedly continues to serve as a buffer. Buzan deemed that Afghanistan would remain a “zone of chaos” that will insulate the Persian Gulf from South Asia.¹ However, Buzan wrote the mentioned article well before American plans for regime change in Iraq were underway. The presence of United States military’s Central Command (CENTCOM) in Iraq, across the Middle East and Central Asia, the barely disguised clamor of the Bush administration in favor of regime change in Iran, and complications arising from non-state terrorist action might serve to together securitize Middle East and South Asia. The GME is also currently characterized by intense American involvement, which potentially offers India the opportunity to enhance its political and economic prospects by virtue of its latter-day propinquity with Washington. This study will seek to analyze the nature of such crosscutting complexities and how they affect India.

Furthermore, an academic treatment on India’s relations with the Greater Middle East can have some policy value. For one, it can provide an angle to India’s claims to being a major power that has animated recent scholarship.² Since the ability to exert influence in a region is one of the attributes of a major power, a study gauging India’s political, economic and diplomatic reach is arguably germane. This is underscored by an articulated expectation, in some quarters, that the American ingress into West and Central Asia can prospectively privilege India’s role and status in the region. For instance, Shekhar Gupta, a noted Indian columnist, while exhorting India to support Gulf War II against Iraq in March 2003, argued that the increased and permanent US involvement in southern, central and western Asia gives India “an entirely new leverage as the only stable, democratic and powerful nation in a wide arc of instability, extending from

¹ Barry Buzan, “South Asia Moving Towards Transformation: Emergence of India as a Great Power,” *International Studies*, 2002, Vol. 39 (1), p. 12.

² On recent treatments of India’s “Great Power” status see Baldev Raj Nayar and T. V. Paul, *India in the World Order: Searching for Major Power Status* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Stephen P. Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001). For a case-study treatment of the great power claims see Frederic Grare and Amitabh Mattoo eds., *India and ASEAN: The Politics of India’s Look East Policy* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).

Israel to Burma, Almaty to Aden.”³ A negative definition of its interests in the region was, likewise, provided by Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh at a 2000 lecture in Singapore when he said “Given its size, geographical location, and EEZ (exclusive economic zone), India’s security environment and therefore potential concerns range from the Persian Gulf in the west... Central Asia in the Northwest, China in the Northeast, and South-East Asia.”⁴ Elsewhere, Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal remarked that India’s “political, security and economic interests span in particular the area from the Gulf to South East Asia.”⁵

Whether Gupta’s alluring notion of India performing a crucial strategic function from Central Asia to Southeast Asia can translate into reality depends to an extent on the dynamics of its Middle Eastern policy, particularly after the end of the Cold War, which is the purpose of this paper. There are significant economic links between India and Middle Eastern countries, which has been tackled well elsewhere; thus this discussion will preclude itself to the politico-strategic dimension with brief allusions to the former when necessary.⁶

So far as the Middle East goes, India has enjoyed close relations with the Arab world, highlighted by the friendship of Jawaharlal Nehru and the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, mediated through their leading role in the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) and particularly expressed their similar stands during the 1956 Suez crisis. Later on, this progressed to fervent support for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) which was corresponded by official antipathy to Israel signified, for instance, by India

³ Shekhar Gupta, “Unshackle, Seize The Moment,” *The Indian Express*, 15 March 2003. Indeed, many Indian leaders are reputed to believe that Indian interests are “not harmed, and may even be bolstered, by American security presence in the Persian Gulf.” Teresita C. Schaffer, “Building a New Partnership with India,” *Washington Quarterly*, 25:2, Spring 2002, p. 33.

⁴ Cf. Daljit Singh, “the Geopolitical Interconnection between South and South-East Asia,” in Frederic Grare and Amitabh Mattoo eds., *India and ASEAN*, op. cit., p. 30.

⁵ Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal’s presentation at the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI), Paris, 17 December 2002, <http://meadev.nic.in/speeches/fs-address-paris.htm>

⁶ For an extended review of economic links with the region see, Javed Ahmad Khan, *India and West Asia: Emerging Markets in the Liberalisation Era* (New Delhi: Sage, 1999).

voting in favor of UN Resolution 3379 deeming Zionism as a form of racism in 1975.⁷

But the post Cold War decade has seen an ostensible inversion of priorities. At the outset, following the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in August 1990, India called for the convening of an international conference, insisting on the inclusion of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) with a view to discuss outstanding issues like the Arab-Israeli conflict. Significantly, this echoed President Saddam Hussein's offer to withdraw troops from Kuwait if a conference on Palestine was convened. Less than a decade later, during a trip to Israel in 2000, Home Minister L. K. Advani conceded that India is agreeable to cooperating with Israel on a range of areas including "nuclear cooperation." Israel's leading daily *Haaretz* quoted Advani as saying, "I am in favor of cooperating with Israel in all areas, *especially* the nuclear field and this should be strengthened."⁸ (emphasis added) During a visit to Israel, Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh spoke of a "tectonic shift of consciousness" attributing the previous estrangement between India and Israel to a "very strong urge among politicians" to continue in office. Singh went on to blame "Muslim vote bank politics" for an unstated veto on India's larger West Asian policy.⁹ Between this continuum, India has, over the last decade, strained to reassure Arab governments of the security of Indian Muslims with a wary eye towards its need for oil from the region and the interests of its 3.8 million strong expatriate community, predominantly working in the Persian Gulf states.

This study seeks to understand the continuities and discontinuities in India's expectations of West and Central Asia that might illuminate such

⁷ This is described as being in step with Nehru's tendency to act as the "moral arbiter of Western diplomacy in the Cold War." Lloyd Richardson, "Now, Play the India Card," *Policy Review*, No. 115, October 2002. For voting pattern of different countries on the Zionism as Racism resolution, <http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0jc50#3379>

⁸ Yossi Melman, "India's visiting strongman wants to expand nuclear cooperation with Israel," *Haaretz*, Friday, June 16, 2000. This was duly denied by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/03/21/stories/0521134f.htm>

⁹ A. G. Noorani, "Palestine and Israel," *Frontline*, Volume 18 - Issue 14, 7-20 July 2001. As part of normalizing relations, India voted in favor of a UN resolution that *revoked* 3379. "General Assembly Resolution 46/86, Revocation of Resolution 3379, 16 December 1991," <http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0jc50>

paradoxes. It intends to review the substantive nature of India's engagement with the Greater Middle East after 1992 with a specific emphasis on the policies of the current Indian government, a coalition led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The eventual objective of such an evaluation is to see if India has a coherent set of priorities and objectives in the Greater Middle East. To be sure, there is a disproportionate emphasis in the study on West Asia as opposed to charting India's relations with Central Asia. The reckoning here is that elements of the discussion on Iran and Afghanistan have an adequate bearing on India's outlook on Central Asia to warrant the appellation of Greater Middle East in the study's title. The term 'Greater Middle East' has acquired increasing academic currency connoting the conceptual convergence of South Asia and the Middle East due to their shared security concerns. Conventionally, the term encompasses the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and the five Central Asian Republics (CARs) namely Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.¹⁰ The term as employed in this study essentially refers to the five Central Asian republics apart from the Middle East that comprises the Arab world, Iran, Turkey and Israel. North Africa, barring a brief mention of Egypt, is not assumed whenever the term is invoked in this discussion since the region does not have a direct stake in the emerging geopolitics in India's neighborhood particularly after 9/11.

Overview of India's reoriented policy

This paper argues that India's relations with GME is consistent, overall, with the recent neo-liberal thrust of its strategic behavior whereby economic engagement and cooperation is seen as critical in securing its geopolitical interests. India's entrepreneurial business classes are potentially able to strengthen links with the Middle East and Central Asia, particularly in the service sector. Also, the idealist posturing that drew it closer to Arab Nationalism and the PLO during the Cold War does not overtly hamper this policy anymore. The singular difference that the 1990s have made is obviously the security cooperation that it has forged with Israel and conversely the depreciating substantive commitment to Palestine as a political cause. The India's policy-making elite assumes that New Delhi has no reason not to pursue close relations with Tel Aviv given that Arab

¹⁰ For a contemporary geostrategic evaluation of the region see Robert Harkavy, "Strategic Geography and the Greater Middle East," *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2001, Vol. 54, No. 4, pp. 37-53.

states like Jordan, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait themselves have a pragmatic view of Israel. This conveys a determined resolve to prevent liberal discourse on the Arab-Israeli conflict, which it earlier employed, from pursuing narrowly defined state ends.

India's Middle East policy is thus a delicate dance between combating terror and shoring up military might on the one hand, and securing energy supplies and extending economic links on the other. This balancing act is necessitated by its need to establish close defense ties with Israel to counter Pakistan and Islamist terrorism and yet depend on Iraq and Saudi Arabia for oil. It is further complicated by its aspiration to cultivate Iran both to secure energy supplies following Iraq's uncertain status, and its potential as a conduit for India to engage Central Asia. Indeed, India is in the unique situation of pursuing "strategic relations" with both Israel and Iran, thus providing a window to the complex web of relations that is the feature of Southwest Asia.¹¹ The aftermath of September 11 provides India the opportunities for reviving relations with Central Asia to deny free rein to the Chinese there. It has also revealed the vulnerabilities of an emerging power, manifested in its fitful reaction to the buildup to Gulf War II. By seeking an unconvincing "middle path" that decried war without condemning American unilateralism, India conveyed an unassailable impression that it was falling just a whiff short of endorsing the US policy in the region. This ambivalence about Iraq, which maintained regular contact with India through the 1990s, will not comfort powers like Iran (which figures on George W. Bush's "axis of evil") since that places a question mark over India's ingratiating instincts vis-à-vis the US. This might not be a factor in the short-term but India's refusal to be drawn into a normative discussion on issues facing the Middle East might hamper its interests should the region ever settle into an anti-American rhythm. For now, India is riding the tide of having to deal with opportunistic Middle Eastern regimes that endorse American ingress into the region and, in turn, aspire to benefit from India's market and ascending prowess in the service sector.

¹¹ Thus the title of this study refers to faultlines in a restricted statist sense, not in the way Samuel Huntington popularized it while defining them, among other things, as conflicts between neighboring states *from different civilizations*. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New Delhi: Simon & Schuster; Penguin Books India, 1996), pp. 207-208.

To demonstrate the thrust of its policy in the region, this study will first review India's relations with Israel, then consider the implications of its ties with Iran besides delineating India's position on Iraq as being indicative of the complexities of dealing with the region that helps build a summarizing statement on India's relations with the Middle East. This is a fiercely selective treatment of the subject on the assumption that relations with the three countries convey India's response to security needs plus its handling of the interplay between economic interdependence and diplomatic ambiguity. Thereon, this paper will consider India's emerging posture in Central Asia beginning with its interests in Afghanistan before assessing its relations with the five Central Asian Republics (CARs) and draw relevant conclusions.

Caveat on foreign policy decisionmaking

A preliminary note on sourcing is in order. While there is a fair share of Indian academic interest in West Asia, the topic under consideration has not been subject to an overarching analysis. There are some fine studies on bilateral relations, or economic relations at large but the insights have not been welded under a single heading.¹² Part of the struggle has to do with discerning the nature of political will in India or a pattern of bureaucratic decision-making regarding a politically non-pivotal region like the Middle East as compared to, say, South Asia. In addition, the official contenance and policy analysis can be rendered as an elaborate *argument from effect* rather than from verifiable geopolitical or economic cause. This is particularly so concerning West Asia where India has moved from a very publicly orchestrated pro-Arab, pro-Palestine policy during the Cold War to a translation of backchannel interactions with Israelis into an unstated but discernible alliance. To circumvent that, a triangulation of academic output, media coverage and discussions with interlocutors has been deployed for this paper.

For all that, Indian foreign policy analysis can be an imprecise exercise due to the varying and sometime conflicting levels of decision-making. For instance, there is the impression that core external policy decisions during the tenure of Prime Minister Vajpayee have been the

¹² For a bibliography and estimate of India's academic output on the Middle East see A. K. Pasha, "Gulf Studies Programme at JNU," in A. K. Pasha ed., *Perspectives on India and the Gulf States* (New Delhi: Détente Publications, 1999), pp. 234-276.

preserve of his confidant and National Security Adviser (NSA) Brajesh Mishra, despite the elaborate apparatus linking the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) with the National Security Council (NSC).¹³ At what point, for instance, the intent of a figure like Mishra translates into an entry in copious files maintained by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the extent to which input by the Ministry of Defense (MOD) is internalized into policymaking is difficult to ascertain. Notwithstanding, this study proceeds with the assumption that there is enough in the public domain to glean the contours of India's GME policy with the cautionary proviso that a slippery grasp of the nodes of decision-making make projections hazardous even if events are amenable to post-facto analysis.

1.1 India in the Middle East

Factors governing Middle East policy

The West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region featured prominently in Indian foreign policy during the Cold War owing to the personal friendship between Nehru and the Egyptian leader Nasser who, along with Yugoslavian leader Josif Broz Tito, were the leading triumvirate of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Thus India, which was a leading spokesman for third world issues, found itself responding frequently to the various crises in the region from the Suez crisis to the various Arab-Israeli wars. India went on to play a partisan role in the Arab-Israeli dispute endorsing Nasserite Arab nationalism first and thereon affirming PLO's leadership in the struggle for Palestinian self-determination. The normative stand on Palestine froze diplomatic relations with Israel even though Nehru granted *de jure* recognition to Tel Aviv while maintaining a consular office in Bombay. India's relations with individual Middle Eastern countries effectively amounted to a bilateral translation of ideational consonance concerning third world interests. The deflective symbolic power that

¹³ Mishra is said to draw on inputs from a close knit circle of senior and retired civil servants. For a helpful "organigram of security management" in India see Subrata Mitra, "Emerging Major Powers and the International System: Significance of the Indian View," *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, Working Paper No. 9, April 2002, p. 19, <http://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/abt/SAPOL/HPSACP.htm> The NSA also doubles up as the head of the Executive Council of newly created two-tiered Nuclear Command Authority (NCA), which is ambiguous of the role of the Strategic Forces Command that would be in charge of the nuclear forces, thus adding to Mishra's authority. John Cherian, "The Nuclear Button," *Frontline*, 18-31 January 2003.

Palestine afforded for non-democratic Arab states plus India's energy needs consolidated India's relations with the region. To an extent, India's weak economy and bonhomie with Egypt hindered substantive interaction with other Arab states, beyond energy imports, but roughly New Delhi enjoyed goodwill in the region thanks to the moral authority garnered in the Nehru years. This did not include Iran, though, whose links with Pakistan via the 1955 Baghdad Pact and an aversion to Nasser circumscribed regular contact.

India had reason to reconsider the enthusiastic thrust of its pro-Arab policy in the 1970s. First, Nasser died in 1970 while his successor Anwar Sadat gravitated to the US by expelling Soviet advisers in 1972, weakening the informal trilateral linkages between New Delhi, Cairo and Moscow. Importantly, Arab states like Saudi Arabia responded ambivalently to India's handling of the 1971 Bangladesh crisis and subsequent war that eventually led to Pakistan's dismemberment and the rise of an independent Bangladesh nation. By contrast, Israel had categorically expressed its desire to provide any assistance that India desired in the war. The persistence of the Cold War and the countervailing support of the Soviet Union ensured India's continuity with a reflexive advocacy of third world issues preventing a normalization of relations with Israel.

Political considerations aside, India's energy needs proved to be an essential control on New Delhi's maneuverability in the region. Despite the discovery of hydrocarbons off India's west coast in 1974 that eventually constituted 18 percent of its domestic demand by 1978 and 40.53 percent by 1990, India is perennially dependent on energy imports.¹⁴ Today it imports more than 70 percent of crude oil since indigenous production is declining. It is estimated that by 2010 only 27 percent of its demand is likely to be met by indigenous production.¹⁵ India's energy deprivation has been and can be a source of domestic financial turbulence from the 1973

¹⁴ For a fine account of the importance of Gulf energy exports to India see Gulshan Diel, "The Security of Supply Issue: The Growing Dependence on the Middle East," in Pierre Audinet, P. R. Shukla and Frederic Grare eds. *India's Energy: Essays on Sustainable Development* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), pp. 209-224. Also see K. R. Singh, "Meeting Energy Needs: Domestic and Foreign Policy Options," in Lalit Mansingh and M. Venkatraman et al eds., *India's Foreign Policy: Agenda for the 21st Century*. Vol. 2, New Delhi: Foreign Service Institute and Konark, 1997, pp. 342-361.

¹⁵ "Does India need strategic oil reserves," *Business Standard*, 13 November 2002.

oil shock that raised its import bill by 50 percent to the 2003 Gulf War II where the BJP led government had to impose, during March-April, an unpopular 15 percent hike in fuel prices. Short-term fluctuations in supply due to war or future political complications can mean crippling financial costs. One estimate suggests that, for India, an oil inventory of 45 days at current prices can cost between \$2.5 to \$5 billion while transport and storage equipment alone would cost an additional \$6.3 billion.¹⁶

In addition, India has had a thriving expatriate community in the Gulf that provides crucial foreign exchange remittances. The Indian workforce comprises mainly of unskilled workers beside white-collar employees in the construction, transport and service sectors. The 1970s was the boom decade with the workers increasing from 123,000 to 705,000 between 1975 and 1983. They have since increased to 3.3 million currently with 70 percent being semi-skilled, 20 percent white-collar workers and 10 percent professionals. Saudi Arabia hosts 1.3 million followed by the UAE at 1.2 million. The Indian state understandably covets the foreign exchange from the Gulf since the expatriates are known to remit 70 percent of their income. By 1980 they comprised 75 percent of all overseas remittances while the official estimate is currently at \$6 billion not including the unofficial *hawala* channels.¹⁷ In fact when the State Bank of India (SBI) floated the Resurgent India Bonds (RIBs) after the 1998 nuclear tests, the Gulf non resident Indians (NRI's) contributed 40 percent of the \$4 billion raised besides contributing 50 percent of the \$6 billion to SBI's other Millennium Deposit Scheme.¹⁸ The Gulf remittances have a particular bearing on the Kerala economy contributing a significant share of state income which ranged from 17 percent during 1991-92 and 24 percent during 1997-98 with an average of 22 percent for the second half of the 1990s.¹⁹ This resource vulnerability and expatriate dependence on the Gulf has had the odd political effect, for instance, of Indian governments acquiescing

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See Maqsdul Hasan Nuri, "Indo-Gulf Relations in the 1980s," in Verinder Grover ed., *West Asia and Indian Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications), pp. 48-49. For a recent overview on migrants see Girijesh Pant, "Gulf NRIs: From Expatriates to Entrepreneurs," *World Focus*, Vol. 22, No. 3, March 2001, pp. 9-11.

¹⁸ Girijesh Pant, "Gulf NRIs: From Expatriates to Entrepreneurs," Ibid.

¹⁹ K P Kannan and K S Hari, *Kerala's Gulf Connection: Emigration, Remittances and their Macroeconomic Impact 1972-2000*, Working Paper No. 328, March 2002, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, p. 4.

with the presence of Indian-origin criminal networks in the UAE or symbolically deferring to Arab opinions on the condition of Indian Muslims, particularly over their physical security and the situation in Kashmir, as we shall see later.

Besides Nehruvian relational legacy, its energy needs and expatriate interests, Pakistan's role in the Middle East must count as the other relevant factor in determining India's outlook in the region. This is of particular pertinence due to the close Saudi-Pakistan links forged during the Gen. Zia-ul Haq's stint in power that saw Pakistan emerge, among other things, as a military advisor to the Saudi regime in the wake of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Pakistan has sought to rally support to its stand on Kashmir in the region in an effort to "internationalize" the issue. Of immediate interest was the export of radical Wahhabi theologies to Pakistan as part of the support to the Afghan mujahedin guerillas that was to eventually complicate New Delhi's struggles with irredentism, especially in Kashmir by the 1990s. India's traditional counter has been to count on its role as an energy market, sustain bilateral relations across the Gulf and forge relations with secular regimes such as Iraq and Syria to deny Pakistan a free diplomatic rein in the region.

Post Cold War rethink

The end of the Cold War in 1991 forced India to re-orient its policy towards the region, as part of its larger rethink of its approach to international affairs. Part of which stemmed from the embarrassing recoil at its response to two major international events at the start of the decade. One being the infamous response of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao to the attempted August 1991 coup against President Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union. In saying that the coup "was a lesson for reformers in a hurry," Rao seemed to virtually justify the incarceration of Gorbachev during the brief coup. A year earlier, India was again out of step with world opinion and consensus in western capitals when Foreign Minister I. K. Gujral visited Baghdad and embraced President Hussein after the invasion of Kuwait. These two reactions betrayed a reflexive loyalty to Cold War policy habits and allies.²⁰

²⁰ While there is a reasonable case that India had much to lose, by way of alienating Saddam due to the presence of expatriates in Iraq and Kuwait — and the thriving bilateral relations with Baghdad — to justify Gujral's action, the earnest tenor in hobnobbing with the Saddam Hussein regime was symbolically vintage Cold War spectacle.

The negative response of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran to the crackdown on Kashmir insurgency in 1990 undercut India's expectations of reciprocal support on Kashmir from the region in exchange for its pro-Palestine stance.

The attenuation of Russian power and thereby the loss of a reliable partner plus its own compulsion to introduce economic reforms, as a tentative embrace of globalization, compelled India to restructure the thrust of its foreign policy. Significant rates in economic growth during the first three post-reform years and the potential of its sizeable middle class enhanced India's international profile invigorating its claim to be a great power. To realize such ambitions India recast its foreign policy seeking access to "foreign investment, high technology and global markets." As Walter Andersen notes, there was an added emphasis on gaining membership in economic groupings such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and aiming for a leading role in setting up the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOC-ARC).²¹ Regarding West Asia, the end of the Cold War, as stated, confirmed for India the shifting compulsions of statecraft underlined by the conflicting Arab responses to Indian positions on Kashmir and domestic issues such as the demolition of Babri Masjid in December 1992. The centerpiece of the new foreign policy outlook in the Middle East and symptomatic of the search for diversity in relationships was the close relations that India forged with Israel during the 1990s to which we now turn.

²¹ Walter Andersen, "Recent trends in Indian Foreign Policy," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 41, No. 5, September/October 2001, p. 768.

II. INDIA-ISRAEL RELATIONS

Convergence of interests

The India-Israel relationship is probably the most intriguing aspect of contemporary Indian foreign policy. This relationship has implications for India's military modernization, its counter-terrorist ventures, the durability of ties with the Muslim world and its potential role in American grand strategy in Asia. Israel sees its relationship with India as an option to circumvent the encirclement by hostile neighbors and as an ally in liquidating Pakistan's "Islamic bomb." Israel's active pursuit of normalization of relations with India and China coincided with concerns over inconsistent American support in the aftermath of the Cold War, signified by President George Bush (Sr.) administration's linkage of sanctioning \$10 billion in loan guarantees in 1991 to Israel's commitment to the Oslo peace process. Israel appeared to view closer ties with emerging powers such as India and China as an option to prepare for future American disinterest or antipathy owing to geopolitical or domestic considerations. A similar scenario unfolded, for instance, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, when the US could not include Israel and India in the coalition against the Taliban for fear of inflaming Arab opinion and Pakistan respectively. Thus the India-Israel relationship provides a safety net to obviate any future short-term American indifference toward the latter owing to delicate political considerations.

Besides, India was an attractive market for Israel's "recession ridden" military industry since the former's principal arms supplier, the Soviet Union, dissolved into an uncertain future. India also faces recurring budgetary and technological constraints to modernize its armed forces.²² Also, the increasing threat of transnational terror that beleaguered both states drew them closer, principally through the close links forged by their respective defense establishments. For much of the 1990s, the relationship sought to be secretive to defer to Arab and Iranian sentiments but the quest for secrecy appeared to slip as Hindu nationalist hold on power consolidated from 1999 onward.

²² P. R. Kumaraswamy, "India and Israel: Evolving Strategic Partnership," *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, No. 40, September 1998, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, <http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/books/40pub.html>

However judging from the nature of contacts within the first year, it is clear that defense contacts and security cooperation were to be the hallmarks of the relationship, underlined by reported 50 military liaisons between 1992 and 2000.²³ Within 40 days of normalization in January 1992, a senior official was to announce India's terrorism-related needs while Sharad Pawar was criticized in Parliament for saying that normalization clears the way for "drawing on Israel's successful experience to curb terrorism."²⁴ Considering that India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) sent its personnel for specialized training back in 1984 following the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi makes it less surprising that defense cooperation should ensue first. In less than five months, an Israeli delegation of defense manufacturers and exporters visited Delhi. There were to be three other defense delegations by the end of the year that reportedly included offers of a cruise missile technology, unmanned reconnaissance aircraft, multipurpose unmanned aerial vehicles²⁵, and the supply of a "secure digital data link" to Indian MiGs. The first weapons deal was the acquisition of the Barak-1 vertically launched surface-to-air (SAM) missiles from Israel which has the ability to intercept anti-ship cruise missiles. This was in view of the Indian Navy's plan to use Barak-1 to counter Pakistan's P3-C II Orion maritime strike aircraft and 27 Harpoon sea-skimming anti-ship missiles from the United States.²⁶

2.1 India-Israel Defense Ties

Israel has since progressed to becoming India's second largest arms supplier after Russia, besides being a principal partner in its fight against

²³ Ilan Berman, "Israel, India, and Turkey: Triple Entente?," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. IX, No. 4, Fall 2002, <http://www.meforum.org/article/504> .

²⁴ The summary of relations in this paragraph draws on P. R. Kumaraswamy's scholarship, whose publications on the subject provide a comprehensive review of relations till 1998. See P. R. Kumaraswamy, "India and Israel: Evolving Strategic Partnership," *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, No. 40, September 1998, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University. For a shorter version see his "Strategic Partnership between Israel and India," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2, May 1998, pp. 42-54. <http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/books/40pub.html>

²⁵ In 1996, India purchased 32 "Searcher" UAVs, electronic support measure sensors and an Air Combat Maneuvering Instrumentation simulator system. (This was possibly the result of the visit of APJ Abdul Kalam, India's current President and formerly the head of the Defence Research and Development Organization [DRDO] to Israel in June 1996.) "Israel-India Military and Civil Trade Ties Skyrocket," www.jinsa.org , (The Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs), 25 August 1997.

²⁶ *ibid*

terrorism by way of technology imports and intelligence cooperation. The bilateral civilian trade between the two countries has, meanwhile, jumped from \$640 million in 1998 to over \$1 billion by 1999 that accrue out of some 180 joint ventures involving diamonds, textiles, software, high-tech agricultural equipment (like Israel's acclaimed drip irrigation systems) and foodstuffs.²⁷

As stated, Israeli defense exports relate to modernizing existing armaments. As *Jane's* quoted an Indian military official: "Russia delivers the hardware - tanks, aircraft, and ships, and Israel provides the weapons systems - the radar, the electronic control systems, and other high-tech add-ons."²⁸

Reporting on a major 2001 deal Michael Jansen writes that "Israel's arms industries launched an aggressive campaign in India, concluding deals for sales, joint projects and technology transfer worth billions of dollars. In addition to the \$1 billion Phalcon deal, Israel Aircraft Industries last year concluded contracts for naval surface-to-air missiles (\$280 million), unmanned aerial vehicles or drones (\$300 million) and the Green Pine radar system (component of anti-missile system)... Projects under discussion include upgrading India's aircraft avionics and T-72 Russian-manufactured battle tanks and developing a truck-borne howitzer."²⁹

The sale of three Israeli airborne early-warning and control (AEW&C) Phalcon systems came through in early 2003, a delay of two years after India expressed interest attributed to addressing Chinese and American concerns.³⁰ Israeli Foreign Ministry reportedly stalled the deal for "fear of embittering China and jeopardizing the objective of establishing

²⁷ Ranjit Devraj, "India moves closer to Israel," *Asia Times*, www.atimes.com, 11 July 2000.

²⁸ Cf. Ben Lynfield, "Israel, India forge strategic partnership," *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 January 2002.

²⁹ Michael Jansen, "Non-Aligned in the Middle East," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 21-27 February 2002, Issue No. 574. Reports suggest that Israeli defense companies work closely with SIBAT (Foreign Defence Assistance and Defence Export Organization) and have appointed "scores of agents" besides opening an office in Delhi. Rahul Bedi, "The Tel Aviv connection grows," <http://www.indiatogether.org/govt/military/articles/isrlbuy02.htm>, 26 July 2002.

³⁰ Harsh Dobhal, "US approves Israeli Phalcon sale to India," *Indian Express*, 23 May 2003. Also see Carol Giacomo, "Amid closer ties, U.S., India face key decisions," *Reuters* report, 8 July 2003, at

<http://reuters.com/news/Article.jhtml?type=politicsNews&storyID=3057210>

relations with Pakistan” besides being held culpable should India deploy them against China.³¹ (The Phalcon can track upto 60 targets over an 800 km radius and is used to coordinate air strikes). India was wary too of a possible cancellation of the sale under US pressure as was the case with China in July 2000 in the wake of the crisis over Taiwan.³²

Phalcon delays, Arrow prospects

Washington was, in fact, outrightly opposed to any military deals that involved American technology, especially in the aftermath of the 1998 nuclear tests, which saw the imposition of sanction. In July 1998, the US delivered “a harshly worded letter to Israel accusing it of violating the MTCR (Missile Control Technology Regime)” by selling radar technology associated with the Arrow anti-missile system to India. A joint US-Israel project, the Arrow itself is a defensive missile while its components can be used in offensive armaments thus violating the MTCR. India denied the existence of a deal while Israel dubbed the American stance as “hypocritical” since US defense contractors sell the very weapons that the US government prohibits Israel from selling.³³

The American sensitivity has markedly abated following the 2001 attacks, leading to greater acquiescence with such deals.³⁴ Any misgivings were related more to the inconvenient timing of the sale rather than disputing the impact of weaponry on military balance in the Indian subcontinent. On the Phalcon sale, former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens, a member of the Knesset from the ruling Likud party, said “there may be a question of timing with the US, but there is no question of principle” on the sale, which he said is extremely important for Israeli military industries.³⁵ This was the case when the US urged Israel in January 2002 to postpone the Arrow and Phalcon deal till the India-Pakistan tension subsided following

³¹ “Friction with Pak. crops up in Indo-Israeli ties,” *The Hindu*, 29 September 2000.

³² Cf. “U.S. Said To Support Phalcon Sale To India,” 27 December 2001, http://www.menewline.com/stories/2001/december/12_27_3.html

³³ Defense Ministry Director-General Ilan Biran was supposedly summoned to the US Embassy “in order to vent their anger in person.” See “Report: US slams Israel for selling Arrow know-how to India,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 24, 1998.

³⁴ See Khurshid Imam “Israeli Phalcon to join Indian defense force soon,” www.tehelka.com, 24 December 2001

³⁵ Ben Lynfield, “Israel, India forge strategic partnership,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 January 2002.

the 13 December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament which provoked a renewed military buildup along the border.³⁶ Given that the Americans were dependent on Pakistani logistical and intelligence support for their anti-al-Qaeda operations less than four months since 9/11, it is probable that the US responded to Pakistan's articulated concerns over the deals.³⁷

Despite official Indian denials about seeking to acquire the Arrow-2 system,³⁸ reports indicate that India is attempting to integrate Akash, its indigenous medium range surface to air missile, with the Arrow-system to counter the Chinese M-11 and variants of the M-9 missiles that Pakistan possesses.³⁹ To compound the situation further, India was unable to procure another component of the missile defense system, the Ofek-5 spy satellite that orbits the earth every 90 minutes. This system tracks missile silos and zeroes in on every missile in the boost phase itself, allowing enough time for Arrow to intercept and destroy missiles besides being able to carry nuclear, chemical or biological warheads. According to *Jane's*, Israel declined India's request saying they could not provide India with the satellite as it is presently deployed for watching Iran, Iraq and Syria.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding the glitches over the Arrow 2, the Green Pine Radars, purchased in 2001, comprise a significant component of India's quest for an anti-missile defense. The radars bought for \$250 million can be fitted

³⁶ A US official told *Reuters* that questions were raised as to "why anybody would sell anything — either to the Indians or the Pakistanis — other than chewing gum" (!) barely a month after the attack on the Indian Parliament. Cf. Chidanand Rajghatta, "US blocks Israeli arms sales to India," *Times of India*, 15 January 2002. Also "US tells Israel to block arms sales to India," *Hindustan Times*, 16 January 2002.

³⁷ "Pakistan warns Israel not to sell spy plane to India," www.albawaba.com, 17 February 2002.

³⁸ "Israel 'gifts' India infantry weapons," *The Indian Express*, 5 July 2002. The Arrow 2 system, consisting of a radar station, batteries and control center, can detect and track incoming missiles as far way as 500 km and can intercept missiles at a distance of 50-90 km away. See "Israel Unveils Arrow 2 Anti-ballistic Missile System," http://www.meib.org/articles/9911_me3.htm. See also "US gives green light to Israel's Phalcon sale to India," www.iansa.org (International Action Network on Small Arms), 14 January 2002.

³⁹ India is also threatened by the North Korean Nodong-1 which Pakistan has adapted as the Ghauri in addition to the developing longer range Shaheen-2 missile. "Indo-Israeli partnership for new missile shield," <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/09/06/stories/0206000h.htm>

⁴⁰ "Israeli Missile Defense System for India," <http://www.islamonline.net/English/News/2002-06/29/article80.shtml>, 29 June 2002.

on the Russian Ilyushin IL-76 aircraft to operate as AWACS with a surveillance range of 400 km.

The reworking of Russian military systems is an important part of the Indo-Israel defense relationship. A *Haaretz* report stated that forthcoming deals with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) were to include the upgrading of Russian-built Indian warplanes - Mig-21s, Mig-29s and Sukhois - as well as Mil-8s and Mil-17 helicopters.⁴¹ In fact, in 1997, an Indian MiG-29 was said to have secretly landed in the “technical area” of Lod’s Ben Gurion Airport, ostensibly for the purpose of acquainting Israelis with such platforms for the purpose of installing Western avionics.⁴² Israeli Ministry of Defense spokesman Shlomo Dror told *tehelka.com* that the Israeli expertise “is easily demonstrated by the Lavy, which is essentially an F-15 with advanced avionics” which allows importing countries “better aircraft in less money.” (Dror also spoke of offering sophisticated Israeli tanks to India in about 10 years time.)⁴³ Interestingly, a MiG corporation spokesman cautioned India in April 2002 against upgrading Russian warplanes with Israeli help for technical reasons. “India’s current effort to upgrade the MiG-27 fighter jets in cooperation with Israel is wrong strategy,” Vladimir Barkovsky, First Deputy Head of the MiG corporation, told *The Hindu*.⁴⁴

The reported 2001 deal included the purchase of over 1,000 mobile sensors in addition to the unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that were of particular importance during the 1999 Kargil War. Elbit, an Israeli aircraft manufacturer, was to sell thermal imaging systems to be adapted for the Russian T-72 tanks and Russian BMP-II armored vehicles though sources differ on the numbers under consideration, varying from 300 to 600.⁴⁵ The

⁴¹ Cf. “Tel Aviv-Delhi \$2bn arms deal,” *Dawn*, 18 July 2001.

⁴² V. K. Shashikumar, “Secret Israel-India defence deal on the anvil,” *www.tehelka.com*, 6 August 2001.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Vladimir Radyhin, “India warned against ‘tampering with’ MiG-27s”, *The Hindu*, 29 April 2002. Whether there is a separate program to establish platforms for MiG-27s as MiG-29s is unclear from this report.

⁴⁵ *Palestine Chronicle* reports that imaging systems for 600 T-72 tanks and 300 armored carriers were finalized while *The Hindu* reports 300 apiece for the tanks and armored carriers. See <http://www.palestinechronicle.com/article.php?story=20021007165618852>, 7 October 2002 and “India to purchase Israeli radars,” *The Hindu*, 8 October 2002.

portable radars worth \$70 million are capable of detecting movements across the border with a range of 10 km, ostensibly to prevent infiltration from Pakistan. The radars, manufactured by EL-OP, that include shorter range 3000 to 4000 meter range as well as long range observance and reconnaissance systems, beat bids by French electronic giant Thales and Sagem for similar purposes.⁴⁶ India also purchased “a large number” of Aerostat Balloons that can be used for battlefield surveillance and to track incoming artillery shells. The *Times of India* reported that India has asked for the speedy deliver of the Balloons that have a range of 500 kms.⁴⁷

Incidentally, Israel also “gifted” India a huge consignment of infantry personal weapons, including Galil rifle and Uzi machine guns as a “symbolic gesture of goodwill.” Negotiations are reportedly underway for night vision devices (NVDs) for tanks and Hand Held Thermal Imagers (HHTIs).⁴⁸ The Indian Navy is also reportedly acquiring six Heron UAVs, costing \$3 million each, for surveillance and monitoring in the Arabian Sea and areas around Andaman and Nicobar Islands.⁴⁹ Cooperation has further extended to jointly producing and marketing the civilian version of the 14-seater Advanced Light Helicopter manufactured by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL).⁵⁰

In return for Israel’s role towards its military modernization, India is reportedly imparting help to the Israel’s space program that is in a relatively fledgling state. The *Dawn* reported that both countries are expected to jointly launch a telescope-equipped satellite within two years, according to Avi Hareven, the head of Israel’s space agency.⁵¹

⁴⁶ “India to get advanced Israeli radars to detect infiltration,” <http://www.indiaexpress.com/news/world/20021006-0.html> , 6 October 2002.

⁴⁷ Cf. “India asks Israel to speed up delivery of military surveillance systems,” <http://www.albawaba.com/headlines/TheNews.php3?action=story&sid=215177&lang=e&dir=news>, June 02, 2002.

⁴⁸ “Israel ‘gifts’ India infantry weapons,” *The Indian Express*, 5 July 2002.

⁴⁹ “The China factor in the India-Israel Phalcon deal,” *Strategic Affairs*, No. 27, 1 September 2001, <http://www.stratmag.com/issue2Sep-1/a01> ,

⁵⁰ “India, Israel to jointly market Advanced Light Helicopter,” <http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/jan/20alh.htm> , 21 January 2003.

⁵¹ “India, Israel to launch satellite,” *Dawn*, 11 January 2003.

2.2 Security Cooperation with Israel

As important as the defense deals are, the nature of Indo-Israeli security cooperation is of strategic consequence to the region as it inflames Pakistani insecurities, alienates Arab goodwill and potentially makes Iran wary. The propinquity of the relationship is symbolized, in a sense, by the provision of Indian territorial space for Israeli military tests, which is similar to the arrangement that the latter has with Turkey to obviate its constricted territorial space. London's *Sunday Times* reported that an Israeli navy Dolphin-type submarine tested an anti-missile missile by firing it at an Israeli-made cruise missile off India's eastern shores, presumably near Balasore in Orissa.⁵² Incidentally, news of defense cooperation was not openly shared by the governments owing to Arab and Iranian sensitivities where India was concerned. But post 9/11 this seemed to discernibly change as neither country seemed wary of declaring the nature of their cooperation. By June 2002, it was revealed that India was assisting Israel in developing a second strike naval capability to counter Iraqi and Iranian ballistic missile threats. As Professor Efraim Inbar rationalized: "Israel's close ties with India enable it to broaden its naval activities far from the Israeli coastline and secure a permanent presence that is hard to keep under surveillance."⁵³ Also, Israeli Reserve Colonel Gidi Netzer strove to underline that India was aware of such tests. "Indian defense officials, however, certainly would have had foreknowledge of the Israeli cruise missile test, which would have been carried out with full Indian coordination because of its regional and strategic sensitivities," he said.⁵⁴

Counterterrorist and intelligence cooperation

Importantly, India is reportedly drawing on Israeli experience in counter-terrorism with reports of terrorism experts visiting the Kashmir valley and other insurgency prone areas. India's Home Minister L. K. Advani in his momentous visit to Israel in June 2000 – his first overseas as Home Minister – declared that "Defeating the designs of our neighbor (Pakistan) who has unleashed cross-border terrorism, illegal infiltration

⁵² Haaretz report cited in Ashok K. Mehta, "India, Israel developing strategic partnership," *The Observer*, 25 July 2000. Featured on MEA website at <http://www.meadev.nic.in/opn/2000july/25obs.htm>

⁵³ cf. "India assisting Israeli navy," *The Economic Times*, 17 June 2002.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

and border management are concerns that have brought me to Israel.”⁵⁵ This is despite a paradoxical assurance from the Israeli government, notwithstanding Advani’s statement, that its security assistance to India would be limited. “Israel will not provide training for personnel or send any instructors, but will only provide information, training in operations, and sales of equipment,” a government source said.⁵⁶ Significantly, Advani was accompanied during his visit by Indian home secretary Kamal Pande, Border Security Force (BSF) director-general E.N. Rammohan, Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) director R.K. Raghavan and Intelligence Bureau (IB) chief Shyamal Dutta.⁵⁷ *Jane’s Terrorism and Security Monitor* noted that Israeli intelligence agencies have ‘several teams’ in Kashmir training Indian counter-insurgency forces. It reported that between Advani’s visit in June 2000 and Shimon Peres’ visit to Delhi in January 2001, an Israeli counterterrorism team, including military intelligence specialists and senior police commanders, paid a visit to Indian-administered Kashmir and other regions of the country that are grappling with anti-government militants to assess India’s security needs.⁵⁸

Besides, there are already existing protocols for cooperation on terrorism between Israel and Russia and thus there is, by aforesaid ventures, a scope for intelligence cooperation among the three countries that have all experienced Islamist insurgencies.⁵⁹ (This also fits into Israel’s focus on Central Asia as will be alluded to later in the study.) During Advani’s landmark visit, a joint security strategic dialogue of the countries’ national security advisers was formalized which was initiated in September 2001 initiated by NSA Brajesh Mishra and his counterpart Uzi Dayan. Israel and India now have a defense coordination committee, a joint ministerial commission for exchanging intelligence on terrorism that meets twice a

⁵⁵ Rahul Bedi, “The Tel Aviv connection grows,” <http://www.indiatogether.org/govt/military/articles/isrlbuy02.htm> , 26 July 2002.

⁵⁶ “Israeli Anti-Terror Experts Visit India,” The International Policy Institute for Counter Terrorism, <http://www.ict.org.il/spotlight/det.cfm?id=490> , 23 September 2002.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Ed Blanche, “Mutual threat of Islamic militancy allies Israel and India, *Jane’s Terrorism and Security Monitor*, 14 August 2001. As Defence Secretary Amos Yaron noted, “No country can fight terrorism individually. Therefore, we have to join hands in this battle. “India, Israel must join hands” *The Hindu*, 23 November 2001.

⁵⁹ Reuven Paz, “Israeli-Indian-Russian Cooperation on Counter-Terrorism”, <http://www.ict.org.il/spotlight/det.cfm?id=449> , 5 July 2000.

year and a joint working group (JWG) headed by respective defense secretaries to meet every alternate year.⁶⁰ Significantly, in April 2003, rediff.com reported that C. D. Sahay, India's new RAW chief would undergo training with Israeli intelligence, a notable change from earlier heads who had training stints either in the US or the United Kingdom.⁶¹

Advani's visit, that arguably clinched the direction of the relationship, got added attention from the kind of reception accorded to him by Israel's political and military establishment. Advani held talks with Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, besides conferring with Mossad head Ephraim Halevi, and the head of the Shin Bet security service, Avi Dichter. The leading daily *Haaretz* remarked on the unusual bonhomie saying that "not every visiting interior minister manages to meet immediately (if ever) the prime minister and the top brass of Israel's secret services."⁶² The media noted Advani's reputation of being India's "strongman" capable of directing India's external policy into the future besides noting the strategic alliance between the two countries. The visit was noteworthy for Advani's comment favoring nuclear cooperation with Israel that elicited concern in Arab capitals and among Indian officials that such a remark might spawn proliferation concerns.⁶³ Indian officials attempted half-hearted damage control by canceling Advani's visit to an Israeli nuclear reactor while he himself sought to allay Arab fears by prosaically stating that "nuclear cooperation with Israel is not aimed at any other state."⁶⁴

2.3 Arab response

However, the high level exchange of visits make the true depth of the relationship intriguing, especially in view of India's nuclear tests in May 1998 that provokes fears in Arab capitals of joint nuclear cooperation

⁶⁰ See Ranjit Devraj, "India moves closer to Israel," *Asia Times*, www.atimes.com, 11 July 2000 and Rahul Bedi, "Moving Closer to Israel," *Frontline*, 15-28 February 2003.

⁶¹ Sheela Bhatt, "New R&AW Chief is first to be trained in Israel," www.rediff.com , 2 April 2003.

⁶² Yossi Melman, "India's visiting strongman wants to expand nuclear cooperation with Israel," *Haaretz*, 16 June 2000.

⁶³ Advani said "Yes, I am in favor of cooperating with Israel in all areas, especially the nuclear field, and this should be strengthened." Yossi Melman, "India's visiting strongman wants to expand nuclear cooperation with Israel," *Haaretz*, 16 June 2000.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

with Israel aimed at Muslim nations – a fact exacerbated by the accession to power by a coalition led by Hindu nationalists since 1998.⁶⁵ In the months after Pokhran, Arab media progressively highlighted the nature of Indo-Israeli links. Reports circulated, for instance, stating that APJ Abdul Kalam, currently the President of India, visited Israel twice in 1996 and 1997 in his capacity as the head of India's missile program after which senior Israeli scientists reportedly reciprocated the visits. That the Indian Army's Chief of Staff Gen. V. N. Malik visited Israel two months prior to Pokhran did not go unnoticed.⁶⁶ The Arab League declared that it had information proving that India and Israel have been "increasing military and nuclear cooperation" without disclosing the evidence. The League's Deputy Secretary-General Mohamed Zakaria Ismail issued a sharp reaction that the alleged collusion constituted a "threat to the Arab world", and urged the League to take the "necessary measures" in the hope "that there will be no such relations between India and Israel in the future."⁶⁷

The Arab perceptions of the geopolitical implications of South Asian nuclearization alone are worth noting; the prospect of Indian nuclear links with Israel can only heighten the sense of alarm. One analyst remarked in the aftermath of the Pokhran tests:

A nuclear India is of concern to us in the Middle East because India is a significant element on the strategic map of the Gulf region. It was the most important component when Britain was in India, and has now recovered its prime significance because of its nuclear capabilities. Pakistan is expected to escalate its efforts to produce the bomb and to

⁶⁵ Relations with Israel elicit enthusiasm among defense analysts and some opinion makers. Representatively, M. D. Nalapat, formerly a senior editor at the *Times of India*, argues that India, Israel and the US form a "natural triangle, bonded by history, by common interests" and terrorism to fight against the "Wahabism-Khomeinism" emanating from the Muslim world. M. D. Nalapat, "Fighting Fire with Water: India, Israel and the United States," *Indian Defence Review*, October-December 2002, Vol. 17 (4), pp. 133-135.

⁶⁶ Jansen, op. cit., "Non-Aligned in the Middle East," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 21-27 February 2002.

⁶⁷ The Arab League also protested Gen. Malik's alleged visit to a town in Israeli-controlled South Lebanon. See Dominic Coldwell, "Still in the closet, barely," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 30 September – 6 October 1999. "Arab League Condemns India, Israel For Nuclear Cooperation," http://www.saudiembassy.net/press_release/00_spa/07-15-Arab.html , 15 July 2000.

announce the good news to the world, and particularly the Gulf. In Iran, debate or conflict will gain momentum within the ruling elite and may reflect on foreign relations with Russia, China, North Korea, Afghanistan, the Gulf and Iraq, with repercussions in the Middle East.⁶⁸

The editor-in-chief of the influential Egyptian *Al-Ahram Weekly* reckoned

that [the] reverberations from the nuclear tests extended beyond India and Pakistan to include all of South and Southeast Asia... They appear as an indication that India is seeking regional hegemony... Of primary concern to us, however, is the fact that India, a country with which we have always been on friendly terms, may become a source of tension in an extended strategic area, from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, an area that abuts on the Gulf, and which, by virtue of both past history and present exigencies, requires our constant attention and vigilance.⁶⁹

Deference to Arab dissent

India sought to mitigate Arab reaction following the tests, by requesting that a proposed visit by Israeli Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Amnon Shahak be canceled.⁷⁰ As a counterpoise, India seeks a persistent rhetorical fealty to Arab interests alongside outright denial of strategic ties with Tel Aviv. In February 2001, six months after Advani's public expression on Indo-Israeli "nuclear cooperation", Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh issued the following insistent refutation while responding to a query at the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs in Cairo:

[the] suggestion that there is any strategic alliance between India and Israel, is a total illusion and a canard that is spread. There is no strategic alliance between India and Israel. We do have diplomatic relations with Israel and we have trade with Israel as a number of countries have, but to classify that as

⁶⁸ Gamil Mattar, "Back in the Gulf," *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, 28 May - 3 June 1998, Issue No. 379.

⁶⁹ Column by Ibrahim Nafie, (editor in chief of *Al-Ahram Weekly*), "Adapting the model," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 6-12 August 1998, Issue No. 389.

⁷⁰ "Israel-India nuclear cooperation gets attention of the region," www.arabicnews.com, 6 June 1998.

strategic alliance is to do injustice to India's foreign policy, possibly also throws many doubts on the effectiveness of my publicity department, that I'm suggesting.⁷¹

Continuing to downplay the relations with Israel, Singh mentioned that "The volume of trade between India and Israel is far less than Egypt's trade with Israel."⁷² Singh's remarks in Cairo, in February 2001, at a time when the \$2 billion arms (that came to light in June 2001) were probably being finalized reinforces the lack of credibility of such pronouncements. This possible nuclear dimension conveys to the Muslim world that the India-Israel linkage indicates a new criterion of proximity that other states in the region will struggle to match, which is particularly striking considering how close India was to the NAM countries in the Middle East a little over a decade ago.

2.4 Role of Pro-Israel American Jewish Organizations

Facilitating a India-Israel-US alliance; Mishra's AJC speech

Reports of the parleys between the Indian government and the American Jewish Committee (AJC) also promise to entrench fears of a malevolent anti-Muslim alliance. In May 2003, National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra addressed the AJC in Washington DC where he urged an India-Israel-US alliance "to jointly face the same ugly face of modern day terrorism," stating that "such an alliance would have the political will and moral authority to take bold decisions in extreme cases of terrorist provocation." Reiterating the convergence of opinion in tackling terror Mishra said the alliance "would not get bogged down in definitional and causal arguments about terrorism" outlining the purposes as including "Blocking financial supplies, disrupting networks, sharing intelligence, simplifying extradition procedures" which are, in his reckoning, "preventive measures which can only be effective through international cooperation based on trust and shared values."⁷³ MEA officials were quick to rule out

⁷¹ Interview with External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh at the Egypt Council of Foreign Affairs, <http://meadev.nic.in/govt/eam-egypt-coun.htm> , 3 February 2001.

⁷² Gamal Nkrumah and Dina Ezzat, "In the clear," *Al-Ahram Weekly online*, 8 - 14 February 2001.

⁷³ Incidentally, on 11 September 2001, Israeli National Security Advisor Uzi Dayan was in Delhi to hold talks with his Indian counterparts, a poetical coincidence that foreshadowed impending counter-terror cooperation. For text of Mishra's speech see <http://meadev.nic.in/speeches/bm-nsa-ad.htm>

any axis among the three countries but that Mishra was only urging an international alliance and better cooperation to fight terrorism.⁷⁴

However, Mishra's statement drew attention to the virtually surreptitious links that the BJP-led government forged, in recent years, with the pro-Israel organizations in Washington with the help of certain Indian American groups. Mishra himself termed the links between the AJC and the Indian-American community as "another positive reflection of shared values of our peoples."⁷⁵ "We also value your (AJC) contribution to promoting India-US relations and India-Israel relations," Mishra said noting the presence of "so many distinguished members of the United States Congress" in the gathering who were termed as both friends of Israel and friends of India. Mishra went to announce that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon would soon visit India.

Incidentally, in May 2003 the US House International Relations Committee passed a resolution requiring the Bush Administration to disclose to Congress the extent to which Pakistan is fulfilling its pledge to permanently halt cross-border terrorism, shut down terrorist camps in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) and eschew proliferation of nuclear weapons.⁷⁶ This was ostensibly due to the efforts of the pro-Indian lobby group US-India Political Action Committee (USINPAC). It was reported that organizations like the AJC nudged the process along.⁷⁷ Significantly, the heads of several leading American Jewish organizations met with Prime Minister Vajpayee at a reception earlier in September 2002. The organizations included the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), B'Nai B'rith International, the AJC, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), and the influential American Israeli Public Affairs Committee

⁷⁴ The former director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Affairs, Air Commodore (retd.) Jasjit Singh, said, "I would be very surprised if he has said this as he is very careful. He does not speak much and that's why when he does, it is of great importance" thus backing the verity of intent. T. V. Parasuram, "Free societies must join hands to fight terror," www.rediff.com 9 May 2003.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Aziz Haniffa, "US panel gives Bush administration wakeup call regarding Pakistan," www.rediff.com 8 May 2003.

⁷⁷ Alan Cooperman, "India, Israel interests team up," *Washington Post*, 19 July 2003, Page A05. The pro-Israel organizations are now said to be working on facilitating the sale of Arrow 2 missile system to India which has been blocked by the Pentagon.

(AIPAC). Vajpayee called for further cooperation between the Indian American and American Jewish organizations as did David J. Harris, executive director of the AJC, who foreshadowed Mishra's call by speaking of "the common thread of terrorism that the democracies of India, Israel and the U.S. face."⁷⁸ The AJC, which has sent seven delegations to India since 1995, had during 2002 held two training sessions on grass-roots lobbying to about 80 Indian Americans.⁷⁹

Following Mishra's May visit, the AJC announced also its intent to open a New Delhi office to further cooperation between India, Israel and the US. Jason Isaacson, AJC's director of government and public affairs, stated that as "friends of India, [the AJC is] in a position to say things which will raise India's profile" in the US. "A key concern of India is terrorism, as well as, perhaps, the failure on the part of the international community to confront the sources of terrorism... We feel sympathy and a natural alliance (with this). What better way to demonstrate our appreciation?," Isaacson added. AJC's office in India, that is expected to open by mid 2004, will only be its fifth outside the US after Jerusalem, Berlin, Geneva and Warsaw.⁸⁰

Recessed interest in Palestine

That India has attained a comfort level with Israel to contemplate inviting Sharon for a visit, despite its negative symbolic import for proponents of a free Palestine in the region signifies the substantive recession in India's interest on the Palestine question.⁸¹ As mentioned elsewhere, Indian posturing on the Palestinian question has virtually ceased, with official pronouncements leaning more towards the restoration of peace in the region than an active call for recognizing Palestinian rights, with the latter being a rhetorical fallback position rather than a notion that permeates official discourse as was the case during the Cold War. For instance, during

⁷⁸ "21-member Jewish delegation meets with Prime Minister," <http://www.newsindia-times.com/2002/09/20/tow-top22.html>

⁷⁹ Alan Cooperman, "India, Israel interests team up," *Washington Post*, op. cit.

⁸⁰ Jyoti Malhotra, "American Jewish body set to open office in India," *Indian Express*, 23 May 2003.

⁸¹ As if to underscore the resignation over relations with Tel Aviv, the Palestine Ambassador to India reportedly declined to discuss the India's growing relations with Israel. Priya Solomon, "No plan for axis to fight terror: MEA," www.rediff.com 15 May 2003.

the escalating crisis in October 2000 that involved increasing violence following Israeli armed incursions into Palestinian territories, there was hardly any forthcoming reaction – despite the events occurring just prior to Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh’s visit to Saudi Arabia, the first of its kind in 45 years. In fact, a delegation of Arab ambassadors in New Delhi called on Secretary (East) K. V. Rajan in the MEA but failed to elicit a formal communication on India’s position on the violence. One Arab Ambassador was quoted as saying: “The whole world has been critical of the violence unleashed by the Israelis in the last fortnight, even the US abstained on the UN Security Council vote three days ago. India has been a friend of the Arab world for so many decades, but were still waiting for India to respond...” Another envoy said: “Arab anger is growing and it is wise of Singh to address this anger. But if India has to play an important role in this region, then it must look at all its interests. In this crisis it is crystal clear who is the victim and who is the oppressor.”⁸²

India’s rationale and Pakistani anxieties

But Indian officials insist that the relationship with Israel and the symbolic neglect of Palestine will not affect relations with the Arab world. One official confidently affirms that “The Arab world also knows that national interest is supreme. Our close ties with Israel do not affect our equally warm relations with the Arab world.”⁸³ Pointedly, MEA officials make the comparison with China’s engagement of the Middle East. “The Arabs have had no problem with China’s defense ties with Israel,” an official stated. In the words of one analyst, “India sees China’s Middle East strategy of close ties with the Arabs and the Israelis as an approach from which it can learn.”⁸⁴

Evidently India is banking on the impulsive pragmatism of the Arab states which have pushed for tentative tolerance for Israel while providing clear indications that their own radicalism for Palestine has waned in the 1990s. India thus expects that its defense realpolitik will not be grudged too much in Arab capitals despite rhetorical outbursts like those

⁸² “India caught in a dilemma over West Asia escalation,” *Indian Express*, 13 October 2000.

⁸³ Cf. “Israel ‘gifts’ India infantry weapons,” *The Indian Express*, 5 July 2002.

⁸⁴ Sudha Ramachandran, “India and Israel united in defense,” *Asia Times*, 26 June 2002, <http://www.atimes.com/ind-pak/DF26Df02.html>

cited above. That countries like Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait have come under American sway, by providing logistical support to US armed forces in the 2003 Gulf War II, will bolster expectations of indulgence towards India's relations with Israel.

Understandably, India-Israeli ties are of concern to Pakistan, the only Muslim nation with declared nuclear capability. Islamabad is well aware of proliferation concerns that pertain to the possibility of imparting nuclear bomb making skills to other Muslim nations that has drawn speculation of a joint Israeli-India operation to preemptively destroy the nuclear installation in Kahuta, in a fashion similar to the Israeli operation against the Iraqi Osirak reactor in June 1981. Just as there is arguably a perceptible exaggerated deference to Israel's ability in tackling terrorism among New Delhi's policy elite, there is a Pakistani equivalent reaction that is alarmingly paranoid.⁸⁵ A representative example is that of a recent article in the journal *Regional Studies*, published by the Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad. Provocatively titled "The Brahmanic-Talmudist Alliance", it is an alarming, essentialist interpretation of Israeli and Indian history, primarily arguing that the alliance is predicated on a racist ideology that both elites share in their understanding of the Muslim other.⁸⁶ It goes on to a proof-text reading comparing illiberal elements in Jewish scriptures and Hindu religious texts to suggest a natural metaphysical affinity between Tel Aviv and New Delhi. Oddly enough, this strain of opinion was virtually shared by a respectable mainstream analyst Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema who wrote:

This (relationship) is particularly significant when one realizes the existing commonalties between the Jews and the Brahmins. Both propagate the purity and superiority of race, share somewhat bitter historical legacies, suffer from delusions of greatness, demonstrate almost regularly animosity against

⁸⁵ For representative official Pakistani responses to India-Israel relationship see "Transcript of the press briefing addressed by the Foreign Minister on 25 September 2000," <http://www.forisb.org/FM25sep00.htm> and "Transcript Of The Press Conference Addressed By The Foreign Office Spokesman" 14 January 2002, <http://www.forisb.org/briefings/FOS02-05.htm>

⁸⁶ Ghani Jaffer, "Brahmanic-Talmudist Alliance," *Regional Studies* (Islamabad), Spring 2002, <http://irs.org.pk/IRSEBSITE/regional%20studies%20editions/Spring%202002.pdf>

the Muslims, and assertively stress that the past subjugations and deprivation will ‘Never Again’ be allowed to manifest.⁸⁷

This underscores the kind of responses that India-Israel relationship elicits, particularly under a BJP-led government, the effects of which India can only hope to counter by a serious engagement of the Arab states.

2.5 Congress Party view of Israel

The close relations with Israel has been the outcome of a convergence of changed geopolitics, India’s trouble with armed insurgency and terrorism in Kashmir, the financial struggles of Israeli military industry and, importantly, the accession of Hindu nationalists to power in Delhi. The BJP has at least been less concerned to maintain the secretive nature of the relationship that was maintained till about 1998, which has now changed as its hold on power consolidates given the durability of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) ruling coalition that it leads. Politically, the BJP has felt less encumbered by Muslim sentiment and has been able to get away with relative silence over the Intifada II that has effectively raged since September 1996.

The indications are, though, that in the event of the Congress Party coming to power in 2004, it will not be able to roll back the nature of its security cooperation in view of the defense deals and India’s expectedly continuing counter-terror needs. This is notwithstanding Congress’ President Sonia Gandhi stating during a speech at Oxford University in November 2002 that “growing economic and strategic cooperation between India and Israel does not make (the party) insensitive” to “the reality of the legitimate concerns of the Palestinian people.” On another occasion, Gandhi asked the US soon after the 9/11 attacks to change its West Asia policy, exhorting Washington not to endorse a pro-Israel stance.⁸⁸ The Congress has taken an understandable contrarian position terming Advani’s nuclear cooperation remarks as a “terrible mistake” and characterizing the Israeli tilt in foreign policy as a repudiation of the Nehruvian nurture of West

⁸⁷ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, “Growing Indo-Israeli Nexus,” *The News* (Islamabad), 9 September 2001.

⁸⁸ Sonia Gandhi, “Conflict and coexistence in our age,” *Seminar*, January 2003, Issue 521; “Swami criticizes Sonia’s remarks” *The Hindu*, 16 October 2001.

Asian relationships.⁸⁹ The Congress' reaction to the Mishra's proposal at the AJC event for an India-Israel-US counter-terror alliance was particularly sharp. Its spokesman, Jaipal Reddy, warned that the strategic partnership with Israel would disrupt "time-tested" foreign policy, stating that the tie-up "defies intelligence."⁹⁰

Reddy reckoned:

There are fundamental (ideological) dissimilarities between India and Israel. The problem faced by Israel is qualitatively different from India. We've held the view that Palestinians have been denied their due. There has to be a minimum ideological similarity for a strategic partnership... The reference to Israel is not inadvertent because this was the exact formulation of Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani soon after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The NDA's obsession with Israel is strange and perverse... For such a proposal to be made when Israel is facing international isolation is an indication of the intellectual insolvency of the NDA.⁹¹

However, given India's preoccupation with terrorism for the foreseeable future and the consolidation of the defense relationship that is evident in recent years, even a Palestinian oriented worldview of the Congress will struggle to reverse the affinitive rhythm attained in favor of Israel among India's military establishment and foreign policy bureaucracy. To this end, a future Congress government will be expectedly similar to the erstwhile Islamist Erbakan government in Turkey that persisted with the strong relations with Israel despite inveighing against the ties whilst in opposition.⁹²

⁸⁹ See interview with former Minister of State for External Affairs Eduardo Faleiro, "Jaswant, Advani's Statements on Israel Are a Terrible Mistake, Faleiro," <http://www.subcontinent.com/sapra/world/global20000804a.html>. Also see interview with former Congress Foreign Minister Natwar Singh in "Bad domestic policy can never produce good diplomacy," *Frontline*, Vol. 19, Issue 16, August 3-16, 2002.

⁹⁰ "Brajesh proposal can upset consensus on foreign policy: Cong," *SundayHindustan Times*, 11 May 2003. Also see Sultan Shahin, "India's startling change of axis," *Asia Times Online*, 13 May 2003, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/EE13Df01.html

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Bulent Aras, "Post-Cold War Realities: Israel's Strategy in Azerbaijan and Central Asia," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. V, No. 4, January 1998, p. 71.

2.6 Similarities with Israel-Turkey relations

Interestingly, the India-Israel relationship has compelling similarities with that of the Turkey-Israel relationship. As stated, India's defense establishment is expected to sustain the relationship irrespective of the preferences of the political establishment. Likewise, Gokhan Bacik states that, "In Turkey, the basic reason for rapprochement with Israel was the role of the central military and civil bureaucracy."⁹³ Defense agreements between the Jerusalem and Ankara include those relating to "weaponry upgrade, hardware purchase, joint production, training, intelligence sharing, trade transportation, water etc."⁹⁴ As stated, though there are strains within the MEA that seek to balance Israeli links with close economic cooperation with the Arab states, the defense community is in no doubt as to the wisdom of allying with Israel. Like India, Turkey is diversifying its arms suppliers after the end of the Cold War and is looking for countervailing alliances following the relative decline in strategic depth. Both the military establishments share an antipathy towards non-state Islamist activity and are drawn to Israel's campaign against the same. From Israel's vantage, these countries provide a reprieve from regional isolation besides militarily providing crucial services such as the provision of airspace to the Israeli Air Force.

Bacik draws attention to another Turkish expectation of its relationship with Israel, namely its vaunted lobbies in Washington. Ankara is said to appropriate the services of the pro-Israel lobbies for endorsing its position in Washington and European capitals as it seeks a greater role in NATO. This too is similar to India's aspirations in Washington, judging by the recent parleys between the AJC and the BJP-led government. In this respect, India stands to benefit more than Turkey since it is more of a frontline state concerning terrorism than Ankara is.

There is another notional link with Turkey since some have called for an Israel-India-Turkey entente as part of a Eurasian alliance that includes

⁹³ Gokhan Bacik, "The Limits of an Alliance: Turkish-Israeli Relations Revisited," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Summer 2001, p. 52.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

the US.⁹⁵ The fact that India and Turkey are characterized by a large Muslim population and at the same time threatened by Islamist violence is purportedly a good rationale to forge together an alliance with Israel of “powerful pro-Western states” in Middle East and Central Asia that could serve to underpin the US Middle East strategy.⁹⁶ In any case, owing to their mutual relations with Israel and the US, India and Turkey are now drawing closer, due to the shared terror threat. Visiting New Delhi in April 2000, Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit spoke of the shared values with India: “Turkey has suffered a great deal on account of terrorism sponsored from outside the country. Just like India we are determined to deal with terrorism without deviating from democracy and human rights.”⁹⁷ New Delhi and Ankara have drawn closer even as Turkey’s traditionally good ties with Pakistan have unraveled following the latter’s support to the Taliban and its indulgence of Islamist radicals who destabilize Central Asia.⁹⁸ Turkey has since reversed its support to Pakistan’s position on Kashmir, moving from a call for a plebiscite under UN supervision to stressing the importance of India-Pakistan bilateral talks to resolve the issue, which is India’s position.⁹⁹

Thus, there is, arguably, an informal entente in place in tackling terrorist threats, on the lines suggested by Berman and Walker, but a concerted diplomatic front is not on offer yet since overt formalization of intent across disparate geographical regions is a relic of Cold War posturing that has no symbolic value in current scenarios. Besides, informal alliances have the added benefit of limited agendas – in this case countering global terror – that makes the ironing out of diplomatic differences superfluous. For example, these countries may have agreed on ending Saddam’s rule, but Turkey and Israel have differences on the Kurdish question. Also, India has an abiding interest in strengthening relations with Iran that run contrary

⁹⁵ Ilan Berman, “Israel, India, and Turkey: Triple Entente?” *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2002, Vol. IX, No. 4, available at <http://www.meforum.org/article/504>

⁹⁶ Martin Walker, “The New US Triple Alliance: India, Israel and Turkey,” *Globalist*, 17 January 2002, <http://www.globalpolicy.org/wtc/analysis/2002/0117triple.htm>

⁹⁷ Atul Aneja, “India, Turkey begin new phase of ties,” *The Hindu*, 1 April 2000.

⁹⁸ On the growing chasm in Ankara-Islamabad relations see Ishtiaq Ahmad, “Turkey and Pakistan: Bridging the Growing Divergence,” *Perceptions*, September-November 2000, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupa/percept/V-3_iahmad-12.htm

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

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to American and Israeli attitudes to Teheran. In fact, American machinations towards Iran in aftermath of Gulf War II will test India's diplomatic maneuverability that will be considered in the succeeding sections on relations with Iran and Iraq respectively.

III. RELATIONS WITH IRAN

As stated, India enjoyed closest relations with Cairo among the Muslim-majority nations of the Middle East and North Africa during Nehru's era. Bilateral relations with Egypt have since receded in importance since both countries have moved away from their activist role in global affairs. NAM is no longer an adequate forum to effect change in Palestine that previously united Cairo and New Delhi, while inadequate economic rationale between the two adds to the drift in relations.

Confluence of shared security perspectives and economic necessities

Iran can now be deemed as taking over from Egypt in the region insofar as proximity with India among Muslim nations goes. "Strategic convergence" and "Strategic ties" are phrases used frequently in official pronouncements to describe relations with Iran. Agreeably, the word "strategic" is over-used in Indian policy circles,¹⁰⁰ yet the relationship has made marked progress to warrant such a description with the passage of the substantive Teheran Declaration (April 2001) and Delhi Declaration (January 2003) that delineate the assumptions and goals that undergird the relationship. This being the result of a mutual recognition since the early 1990s that they contend with common security threats and economic opportunities in the region. They have corresponding views on Afghanistan and together back factions resisting the Pakistan sponsored Taliban that took over Kabul. The Taliban came to power at the expense of Iranian allies like the Hazaras and Shiite leaders like Ismail Khan of Herat, as also the Tajiks, which have links with India and Russia. Iran, India and Russia, in fact, graduated to openly backing the Northern Alliance against the Taliban and the three countries will continue to have an abiding interest in Afghanistan's uncertain future, a fact that draws frequent mentions in their official communiqués.

Meanwhile, Teheran and Delhi are keen to strengthen the economic relationship that principally seeks to provide India's gas needs while

¹⁰⁰ For instance, relations with countries such as Japan and Kuwait are also considered "strategic" in official pronouncements, complicating the issue of prioritizing among different cases. For instance, see Swashpawan Singh, "India and Kuwait: Working towards a strategic partnership," *Indian Defence Review*, July-September 2002, Vol. 17 (3), pp. 25-28.

facilitating Iranian attempts to circumvent US sanctions that inhibit its economic growth. India offers Iran a large market for its huge natural gas reserves that amount to 15 percent of the world's total, the second largest after Russia. Projections suggest that India's demand for gas may increase from 74 million cubic meters a day to 322 million a day by 2025.¹⁰¹ There are constraints to fulfill that demand which will be considered below, but India's mid level expertise in engineering goods, textile machinery, telecommunications, consultancy, drugs and pharmaceuticals, power etc enable Iran to forge joint ventures to transcend its dependence on oil exports to spur economic growth.

On its part, India has cultivated Iran also to obviate the loss of commerce with Iraq, estimated at \$20-30 billion in trade volume, which has reeled under economic sanctions for much of the decade. Besides its energy exports, Iran serves as a way to bypass Pakistan to realize its aspiration to politically and economically engage the Central Asian Republics. Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao's 1993 visit to Teheran was a turning point in reviving the relations, which were neglected owing to the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Thereon, both sides appeared keen to jettison inherited sensitivities. Iran had been known to pontificate on issues relating to Indian Muslims as part of the revolutionary fervor of the Khomeini years. For instance, Iran canceled the visit of Foreign Minister I. K. Gujral in 1990 to protest the crackdown in Kashmir. Iran also played an active role in formulating the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) communiqué at its 13th summit which called the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 a "sacrilegious and unpardonable act." Earlier in September 1992, President Hashemi Rafsanjani declared his support for the self-determination of Kashmiris.¹⁰²

Addressing Iranian isolation and Indian sensitivities

However, Iran's near total isolation in the region following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 following the decisive endorsement of American involvement in the region by the GCC states, scuttled Teheran's intent of normalizing economic relations with the latter. This highlighted the need to look for other profitable relationships. To compound matters, the Clinton

¹⁰¹ "A pipe of peace," *The Economist*, 12 July 2001.

¹⁰² Farah Naaz, "Indo-Iranian Relations: Vital Factors in the 1990s," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. XXV, No. 2, May 2001, pp. 237-238.

Administration imposed restrictive trade sanctions in 1993 as part of its “dual containment” of Iran and Iraq that forced Iran to “develop regional economic partnerships in the north and to the west and east.”¹⁰³ The sense of isolation has not abated since; it has instead exacerbated through President George W. Bush’s appellation that Iran belonged to the “axis of evil” with Iraq and North Korea. A columnist notes that “The common feeling among Iranians is that they are surrounded on all sides, with NATO-allied Turkey to the northwest, US bases in Uzbekistan to the northeast, US forces in Afghanistan, US bases in Pakistan, and the US navy in the Gulf and Indian Ocean.”¹⁰⁴

In view of that enduring perception, Iran sought to cultivate India assiduously by discarding revolutionary ardor over contentious issues. It assured India in 1993 that it would not provide rhetorical fillip to separatists in Kashmir and expressed full support for the territorial integrity of India. Importantly, Iran persuaded Pakistan to withdraw a resolution censuring India for human rights abuses in Kashmir at the UN Human Rights Conference at Geneva in 1994 that were partly the result of hectic parleys by Indian envoy Dinesh Singh.¹⁰⁵ Iran went on to invite India to the Tehran Conference on Afghanistan in October 1996 in spite of severe Pakistani objections.

Kashmir has had its irritant value in the relations principally by virtue of being on the agenda of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) that forces Iran to go along with the forum’s anti-India rhythm in the 1990s. Iran voted for the resolutions in 1997 and 2000 that ambivalently affirms the 1972 Simla agreement as the framework of settlement — which is not to Pakistan’s satisfaction — and yet chastises India for the “indiscriminate use of force and gross violations of human rights” while “regretting” that India has not allowed OIC’s fact finding team into Kashmir which the organization has sought since 1993.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Hooman Estelami, “A study of Iran’s responses to US Economic Sanctions,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 3, September 1999, at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1999/issue3/jv3n3a5.html>

¹⁰⁴ Galal Nassar, “Iran: threat or victim?,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 29 August - 4 Sept. 2002, Issue No. 601.

¹⁰⁵ A. K. Pasha, *India and West Asia: Continuity and Change* (New Delhi: 1999), p. 180.

¹⁰⁶ For the text of OIC’s 2000 resolutions, which is an updated version of the one adopted in 1997, see “Resolution No.14/9-P(IS): On Jammu and Kashmir Dispute,” http://www.oicnetworks.com/summit/9-resolutions_PMMCLIA_14.php

India has demonstrated that it can surmount delicate issues in the interest of long-term prospects as shown by its dexterity in the aftermath of the Babri Mosque demolition in 1992. The UAE, for instance, termed it as a “shameful act” and took a hard-line position on Kashmir following the incident, calling for guaranteeing the “national rights and the Islamic identity of Kashmiri people.” It declined to receive the MEA minister R. L. Bhatia on a visit soon after the event, dithered over dates for a planned visit of the Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao besides deferring the visit of a Navy contingent.¹⁰⁷ Despite the obvious problem of dealing with the crime syndicates that operate out of the Emirates, the UAE, has nonetheless, progressed to becoming India’s largest trade partner among the GCC states with a two way transactions amounting to \$4.3 billion in 1999-2000.¹⁰⁸

In the case of India and Iran, commercial interests have forced both sides to abandon insular impulses that may arise out of domestic ideological contexts. In the case of Iran, some have pointed to “the apparent unyielding adherence to tenets of Shi’i doctrine that complicates foreign relations.”¹⁰⁹ While the true tenor of that is difficult to apprehend; it is more to the point that “those who seek to discern Iran’s propensity to pursue moderate foreign and domestic policies must sort through the rivalries between supreme spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the clerics and between President Mohammad Khatami and sections of the political elite.”¹¹⁰ Thus India appears to capably navigate the complex nature of Iran’s foreign and security policy formulation that currently involves the President and the Foreign Ministry, the Supreme Leader’s Office, the Supreme National Security Policy, the Ministry of Information and Security,

¹⁰⁷ A. K. Pasha, “India and the GCC states: Challenges and Opportunities,” *World Focus*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Anthony C. Cain, “Iran’s Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Implications for US Policy,” US Air War College, *Maxwell Paper*, No. 26, April 2002, 8. For an excellent review of Iran’s decision-making process see Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “The Foreign Policy of Iran,” in Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), pp. 283-309.

¹¹⁰ Anthony C. Cain, “Iran’s Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *op. cit.*, 5. One such recent example is the furore and a probe ordered into the reported meeting between Rafsanjani’s son and US officials in Cyprus. Kesava Menon, “Rafsanjani’s son held talks with US,” *The Hindu*, 23 May 2002, <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2002/05/23/stories/2002052301321500.htm>

the Revolutionary Guard Corps, the armed forces and other state and quasi-state bodies.¹¹¹ The propensity for personality-driven decision-making in India makes it no stranger to dealing with the consequence of fluid authority that prominent figures as Khamenei and Khatami experience; at least they both share a commitment to defying Iran's international isolation which suits India fine. To this end, for instance, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has said that "building a gas pipeline from Iran to India would be one of the several beneficial projects that would cement bilateral ties".¹¹²

3.1 Terms of Engagement: The Teheran and Delhi Declarations

Affirming mutual worldviews

As noted, a mercantilist strain is embedded in the India-Iran equation notwithstanding strategic congruities concerning regional instability in Afghanistan and Central Asia. This is evident judging by the official pronouncements and the areas of cooperation sought by both nations. Interestingly though, the two aforementioned Declarations (2001, 2003) provide prefatory worldview assumptions consistent with the purported intent to upgrade relations to the "strategic level", to mutually affirm each other's concerns and for the perceptual benefit of Western capitals.¹¹³ In the Teheran Declaration, both sides affirm "that only an equitable, pluralistic and co-operative international order can address effectively the challenges of our era" deeming a "Dialogue among Civilizations, as a new paradigm in international relations", a sign renewing Iran's clamor against enforced isolation in the global order while serving as a throwback to India's ethical affectations.

The Teheran Declaration signed during Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to Iran in April 2001 goes on to "express concern over restrictions on

¹¹¹ Edmund Herzig, "Iran and Central Asia," in Roy Allison and Lena Jonson eds., *Central Asian Security: The New International Context* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), pp. 173-174.

¹¹² Cf. Subramanian Swamy, "An Iranian Sister," *Frontline*, Vol. 19, No. 17, 30 March – 12 April 2002. On his part the previous President Rafsanjani also advocated a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue through bilateral negotiations between India and Pakistan during his India visit in April 1995.

¹¹³ For the text of New Delhi and Teheran Declarations respectively see <http://www.meadev.nic.in/speeches/stmt-ind-iran-25jan.htm> and http://pib.nic.in/archieve/pmvisit/pm_visit_iran/pm_iran_rel4.html

exports to developing countries of material, equipment and technology for peaceful purposes and reaffirm, in this context, the right of States to development, research, production and use of technology, material and equipment for such purposes.” This is a pointed reference to American proliferation concerns over the nature of Iran’s nuclear program, particularly at the Bushehr plant and the assistance provided by Russia and China.¹¹⁴ Following a 1992 agreement to provide two 440 MW reactors, Russia announced a 10 year nuclear cooperation accord in July 2002 to expand Iran’s nuclear reactor program including the completion of Bushehr at a cost of \$800 million.¹¹⁵

Interestingly, the 2003 Delhi Declaration retains the oblique reference to US restrictive endeavors despite the open American resistance to the Russian involvement in Bushehr, an year after the September 11 attacks. In fact, within two weeks of signing the Delhi Declaration in January 2003, President Khatami announced that Iran intends to control the whole fuel cycle, from mining and processing the uranium ore to reprocessing the spent fuel as opposed to a previous decision to redirect the spent fuel at Bushehr to Russia to allay proliferation concerns.¹¹⁶ Whether India was informed of Iran’s impending announcement is unclear but the Declaration shored up Iran’s case for developing its program.

In return, the Teheran Declaration castigates terrorism “in all its forms” condemning “states that aid, abet and directly support international terrorism” in a barely veiled reference to Pakistan. The Delhi Declaration

¹¹⁴ National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice told ABC: “It’s been couched as a peaceful programme, but we’ve been, for a long time, one of the lone voices that has said that the Iranians are a problem.” Sonni Efron, “Iran making nuclear advances, U.S. says,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 March 2003.

¹¹⁵ For a primer on Iran’s nuclear program see Cain, 18-20. Cain notes that other countries, such as China, North Korea, France, Germany, and Great Britain, have contributed specific and dual-use technologies to the burgeoning Iranian nuclear capability. For the US State Department response to the Iran-Russia nuclear cooperation, see <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2003/17107.htm>

¹¹⁶ This announcement formed part of inviting the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to assess the program. Khatami stated: “If we need to produce electricity from our nuclear power plants, we need to complete the circle from discovering uranium to managing remaining spent fuel... The government is determined to complete that circle.” Dan de Luce, “Iran admits to having uranium,” *The Guardian* (London), 10 February 2003.

registers a protest on India's side against presumably Western indulgence of Pakistan stating that "combat against international terrorism should not be based on double standards."¹¹⁷ On a political plane, the Declarations suggest a "strategic convergence" on terrorism Central Asia, Afghanistan and feign a persevering outlook towards the possibility of strengthening non-America oriented linkages (with the inclusion of Russia).

Importantly the Declarations "*recognize* that their growing strategic convergence need to be underpinned with a strong economic relationship" (emphasis added) and calls on "business communities of the two countries to harness each other's strength for mutual benefit and promote bilateral trade and investment." To facilitate this they have focused on two projects, the establishment of the North-South corridor that purports to link India, Iran and Russia and the Iran-India gas pipeline that is yet to see fruition.

3.2 North South Trade Corridor

The corridor plans flow out of the Inter-Governmental Agreement on International "North-South Transport Corridor" between India, Russian Federation and Iran that was signed in September 2000 at St. Petersburg. The agreement, ratified by all the parties, entered into force in May 2002 which will be valid for a period of 10 years. This is part of the Indo-Iranian endeavor to facilitate movement of goods across Central Asia and Russia. To this end, the two countries also signed an earlier trilateral agreement on transit of goods with Turkmenistan in 1997. The corridor is expected to cut transport time of goods by 10-12 days besides shrinking transport costs. This would be an alternative to the current cargo route between India and Russia that goes either through the Baltic ports of St. Petersburg and Kotka, the European port of Rotterdam or through the Ukrainian Black Sea ports of Illychevsk and Odessa to join the Mediterranean.¹¹⁸

One report, pre-dating Khatami's Delhi visit in January 2003, suggested that goods will be routed to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas by

¹¹⁷ Quite identical with the Delhi Declaration signed with Russia which says "the fight against terrorism must admit of any double standards and should also target the financial and other sources of support to terrorism." "No double standards in fighting terrorism", *The Hindu*, 5 December 2002.

¹¹⁸ "North South Corridor will save freight and time," *The Hindu*, 26 January 2003.

sea, whereupon road and rail networks would transfer them to the Caspian Sea port of Bandar Anzali and Bandar Amirabad, via Tehran. The cargo would then be transferred to the Russian ports of Astrakhan and Lagan en route St. Petersburg on the Baltic Sea — which is Russia's maritime access to Europe — thus potentially extending the Helsinki-Petersburg-Moscow trade route across to Caspian Sea to Iran and India. Compared with the currently used 16,129-kilometer route through the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean, the North-South Corridor is just 6,245km long, causing Indian officials to gush that it would link Southeast Asia and Europe.¹¹⁹ Estimates of saved transport costs vary from 15-20 percent to 40 percent.¹²⁰ *India Today* reported that trial runs were conducted for over a year that involved 1800 freight containers which were expected to go up to 8000 by the end of 2002. (In fact, Iran proposed during Khatami's visit that the North-South corridor could be utilized for transferring 5,000 tons of tea produced by blending Indian and Iranian tea for consumption in the Russian market).¹²¹

There are concerns relating to corridor's passage through the conflict-prone Caucasus region and its potential in fostering arms trade and nuclear proliferation while questions over the provision of funds needed to upgrade the road and rail networks remain unresolved. Notwithstanding, the corridor is expected to handle 15 million to 20 million tons of freight annually, with the trade turnover pegged at US\$10 billion.¹²² Russian sources state that more than two million tons of cargo, worth \$700 million, were shipped between Russia and Iran in 2001. Analyst Stephen Blank summarizes the uses saying, "The idea of the Corridor has multiple purposes. For Russia, it's the opportunity to bypass the Silk Road. Iran gains political and economic benefits from trade with Russia, Central Asia and India—perhaps at the expense of Pakistan. And India gets access to Russian, Central

¹¹⁹ Sudha Ramachandran, "India, Iran, Russia map out trade route," *Asia Times Online*, www.atimes.com 29 June 2002.

¹²⁰ See "International North-South Corridor through Iran Will Bring Russia, CIS and East Europe Markets Closer to India," *FIEO News*, (Federation of Indian Export Organisations), February 2003, <http://www.fieo.com/fieonews/2003/february/hosts.html>

¹²¹ "North South Corridor will save freight and time," *The Hindu*, 26 January 2003.

¹²² CF. Sudha Ramachandran, "India, Iran, Russia map out trade route," *op. cit.*

Asian and Eastern European markets for its goods, and links to a variety of energy import sources.”¹²³

As part of these transportation projects India will build a railway track that connects the Iranian port of Chahbahar to the Afghan city of Zaranj which will be used to take Indian goods to interior Afghanistan via Delaran and beyond.¹²⁴ The congested Bandar Abbas port has given way to Chahbahar, which will be the node to transport Indian goods that will additionally benefit from reduced tariffs according to the agreements reached during Khatami’s visit. India will also upgrade the 215 kilometer road from Zaranj to Delaran which is part of garland road network in Afghanistan that forms a circular route connecting Herat and Kabul via Mazar-e-Sharif in the north and also Kandahar in the South apart being a crucial link connecting Afghanistan to Central Asia.¹²⁵ This Indo-Iranian initiative forms part of a trilateral arrangement that includes a Iran-Afghanistan agreement signed earlier in January 2003 that allows “Afghan exporters the right to use the port of Chahbahar with a 90 percent discount on port fees and a 50 percent discount on warehousing charges. In addition, Afghan vehicles are to be allowed full transit rights on the Iranian road system.”¹²⁶ This fits in with Iran’s focus on Central Asia, which lies to its north-east, a region that has seen increasing development as compared to its south and west with Mashhad emerging as its second largest city.¹²⁷

As part of consolidating business ties with India, Khatami brought along a 65 member business delegation in January 2003 to Delhi that considered transactions amounting to \$800 million in joint investment involving 400 Indian and Iranian companies.¹²⁸ MEA documents record

¹²³ Cited in Mark Berniker, “Trade Corridor Could Link Russian Arms To Iran And India,” www.eurasianet.org, 19 July 2002.

¹²⁴ John Cherian, “An Entente with Iran,” *Frontline*, Vol. 20. Issue 3, 1 February – 14 February 2003 and <http://www.meadev.nic.in/govt/parl-qa/loksabha/February19-270.htm>

¹²⁵ Shubha Singh, “Bound by history,” *The Pioneer*, 27 January 2003.

¹²⁶ Ahmed Rashid, “Afghan-Pakistani Tension Prompts Kabul To Develop New Trade Routes,” www.eurasianet.org 24 January 2003.

¹²⁷ Ertan Efegil And Leonard A. Stone, “Iran’s Interests in Central Asia: A Contemporary Assessment,” *Central Asian Survey* (2001), 20 (3), p. 353. This explains, for instance, an oil swap deal between Iran and Kazakhstan whereby Iranian refineries in the north are supplied with Kazakh oil, in return for shipments of crude oil in the Persian Gulf to Kazakh customers, thereby facilitating Kazakh oil exports. Estelami, op. cit., “A study of Iran’s responses to US Economic Sanctions.”

¹²⁸ “North South Corridor will save freight and time,” *The Hindu*, 26 January 2003.

that investment in Iran was sought in automobile, information technology and the textile sector where India could reputedly “take the lead.” It was agreed that India could also provide Iran items like rice, sugar, pharmaceuticals, edible oil, engineering goods besides textile machinery, etc.¹²⁹ Non-oil trade was also sought to be enhanced.¹³⁰

Earlier, the India-Iran business Promotion Core held its first meeting in May 2002 under the aegis of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mines. It identified thrust areas of cooperation as ranging from carpets, handicrafts, dry fruits, iron and steel, aluminum, agro-based products, chemicals, optical equipment, fertilizers and industrial machinery on the Iran side and items such as rice, sugar, pharmaceuticals, edible oil, engineering goods, textile machinery, telecom and consultancy from the Indian side.¹³¹

3.3 Elusive Pipeline Project(s)

The lynchpin that assures an inextricable Indo-Iranian relationship in the future is the gas pipeline to India that Iran proposed back in 1993.¹³² It was an extension of a 2670 kilometers Iran-Pakistan overland pipeline proposal that would connect Iran’s South Pars natural gas field to Karachi. Pakistan was to route excess capacity, to the tune of 70 percent, to Delhi since India’s annual shortfall of natural gas amounts to 29 million cubic meters.¹³³ Ahmed Rashid reports that the proposed 56 inch diameter pipeline would be 850 km in Iran, 700 km in Pakistan and 1120 km in India, with

¹²⁹ For details see, “<http://meadev.nic.in/economy/ibta/agreements/ficci-iccim-21may2002.htm>”

¹³⁰ Carpets, handicrafts, dry fruits, iron & steel, aluminum, agriculture and agricultural products, chemical products, optical equipments, fertilizers, industrial machinery, etc., were some of the items that Iran wished to export to India.

¹³¹ “India, Iran identify thrust areas for cooperation,” *The Hindu*, 21 May 2002.

¹³² For an excellent analytical and chronological treatment on the various dimensions of the pipeline see Shamila N. Chaudhary, *Iran to India Natural Gas Pipeline: Implications for Conflict Resolution and Regionalism in India, Iran and Pakistan* (Trade and Environment Database [TED] Case Studies), December 2000, American University, Washington DC., <http://www.american.edu/TED/iranpipeline.htm>

¹³³ Shebonti Ray Dadwal, “The Current Oil Crisis’: Implications for India,” *Strategic Analysis*, September 2000, www.idsa-india.org

initial estimates of \$700 million accruing to Pakistan as royalties.¹³⁴ But the proposal has run aground because of Indian fears of Pakistani sabotage. Iran, eager to clinch the deal commissioned Australian firm BHP for an onshore pipeline study and Snamprogetti of Italy to examine the offshore option.¹³⁵ The deep-sea route was deemed prohibitively expensive at \$10 billion as opposed to an on-land pipeline worth \$6 billion.¹³⁶ Hectic parleys on the project continue. Iran has since convened meetings of international oil companies; the Indo-Iranian working group on hydrocarbons has met frequently but made little progress.

The project has not been short of ideas to placate Indian fears of possible Pakistani sabotage. They include involving stakeholders such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, international financial institutions, and the private sector in both India and Pakistan. The involvement of such a consortium of multinationals would arguably persuade cash-strapped Pakistan from wanton sabotage since it could accrue between \$250-400 million a year. Iran has suggested that contractual arrangements may have the proviso for payment only after actual delivery of gas; and there are reports of offering the imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) at half the price.¹³⁷

In August 2002, India's petrochemical giant Reliance Industries announced its intention to sign a deal with British Petroleum and the National Iranian Oil Company to deliver gas to India by 2006-07. The deal was set to be signed in January 2003 which did not materialize. This followed the completion of a \$10 million feasibility study commissioned by the three companies which proposed that natural gas would be sent to

¹³⁴ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 168-169.

¹³⁵ "A pipe of peace," *The Economist*, 12 July 2001.

¹³⁶ "Iran to convene meet on gas pipeline to India," *The Hindu*, 5 December 2001. India had a similar experience earlier when an agreement with Oman in 1994 to import gas by a sub-sea line never took off due to the inordinate expense. See "Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline plan stuck in political dilemma," *Alexander's Oil and Gas Connections*, 7 July 2000, <http://www.gasandoil.com/goc/news/nts02768.htm>

¹³⁷ For an overview of options see R. K. Pachauri, "On Track with Teheran," *Times of India*, 19 April 2001, "A pipe of peace," *The Economist*, 12 July 2001 and "Pipedream or reality," *Financial Express*, 14 January 2003.

the Reliance refinery in Jamnagar, Gujarat through a 2,775 km pipeline passing through Pakistan.¹³⁸

By November 2002, however, it was clear that India could not reconcile its apprehensions about Pakistan with the promise of the pipeline. Its Deputy Prime Minister L. K. Advani reportedly objected an alternative bid by Gazprom, the Russian semi-governmental energy firm, that sought to build the Pakistan sector of the pipeline underwater at a depth of two kilometers. Advani reportedly raised “strong objections” on grounds of “national security” despite assurances that Pakistan might comply with commitments to international financial institutions.¹³⁹

3.4 Pakistan as a factor in Indo-Iranian relations

Indian insistence on obscuring Pakistan’s role in the Iran pipeline deal is a component of its strategy to exacerbate Islamabad’s contemporary global pariah status. Following 9/11 India suddenly saw its strategic cinch with the US – fostered in the aftermath of the 1998 nuclear tests by frequent high-level consultations – undermined by Pakistan’s critical role in the war on the Taliban. India perceived a relative decline in its short-term geo-strategic utility to the US and was understandably peeved by the failure of the State Department to categorically censure and persuade Pakistan to reign in terrorism in Kashmir. External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha said in an interview that “It is for the United States to decide what kind of relationship it would like to have with Pakistan.” “At the same time, I believe that there can be no double standards with respect to terrorism...It would be incorrect to think that partial cooperation on terrorism will eliminate the potential of such threats,” Sinha said.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ “Reliance Industries hopes to pipe natural gas from Iran by 2007,” *Alexander’s Gas and Oil Connections News*, 5 August 2002, <http://www.gasandoil.com/goc/company/cnm23632.htm>

¹³⁹ Gazprom has signed a production-sharing contract with the Gas Authority of India Limited in October 2000 whereby both sides agreed to cooperate in the fields of exploration and production, processing of natural gas, construction of a gas pipeline and other related areas. “Advani objects to Iran-India gas pipeline,” *Iranian News Agency (IRNA)*, 15 November 2002. <http://www.irna.com/en/tnews/021115095732.etn00.shtml>

¹⁴⁰ “Pakistan’s nuclear weapons are already in the wrong hands,” (Interview with Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha), *Outlook*, 24 February 2003.

This sentiment has spawned the MEA discourse highlighting the western “double-standards” in dealing with terrorism, that purportedly glosses over the role of Pakistan in lending material and moral support to terrorist insurgency in Kashmir while the global effort against terror is afoot. The 1999 Kargil War following the 1998 Lahore Declaration and the cavalier attitude of Gen. Pervez Musharraf that led to the collapse Agra Summit in 2001 embarrassed Delhi’s policy makers to the extent that they are wary of any grandstanding summit meetings. Substantively, this translates into a near absolute refusal to negotiate with Pakistan, despite US entreaties, till “cross-border terrorism” ceases. India reckons that peace initiatives have reaped dire consequences. India has since calculated that the counterpoise of its bandwagoning with the American war on terror will be the pursuit of isolating Pakistan in whichever multilateral realm possible.¹⁴¹ The scuttling of the pipeline deal thus far is germane to that strategy. Accordingly, in the aftermath of Gulf War II in April 2003, India has been obliquely airing the idea that if Iraq warrants armed invasion owing to its assumed links to terrorism then Pakistan too ought not to get off the hook by that reckoning.

In view of the fluid situation in the region that can quickly reconfigure relationships, such Indian intransigence on a crucial issue as the gas pipeline might serve to draw Iran and Pakistan closer should Washington put simultaneous pressure on both. Indeed, rebuffing the pipeline idea as it stands might be India’s signal to Iran not to use its relations with Delhi as a conduit to a deeper engagement with Islamabad as the pipeline offers economic benefits to Teheran as well.

Prospects for Iran-Pakistan relations

Iran might yet seriously consider refurbishing its relations with Pakistan notwithstanding their conflicting aspirations in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The war against Taliban has undermined both these countries’ position in the region. Pakistan will be aware that American support to Musharraf’s regime is tactical and that it might, in the future, get sidelined as Iran did in the Afghan reconstruction despite its significant anti-Taliban

¹⁴¹ In addition to increasing the frequency of military exercises, India has enthusiastically supported the US National Missile Defense and has, like Washington, opposed being under the purview of the Landmines Treaty and the International Criminal Court.

role prior to September 2001. The prospect of mutually being sandwiched between pro-Western sides will nudge Pakistan and Iran closer despite their recent antipathies. As Shireen Mazari writes, “On land there are the allied forces in Afghanistan and Central Asia and at sea there is the US-dominated naval armada. Given the military links between the US and India, as well as the Indo-Israeli military nexus, the threat is multiplied for both Pakistan and Iran.”¹⁴²

Although they have backed different sides in Afghanistan, they share mutual anxiety about the Karzai regime in Kabul; Iran being wary of the free hand granted to the Americans and Pakistan which is wary of Karzai warming up to India. That the current leading anti-American mujahedin Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who enjoys the backing of Pakistani military apparatus, has reportedly sought occasional refuge in Iran indicates the convergence of interests.¹⁴³ In fact, firming up lines of communication between Tehran and Islamabad can potentially be the Iranian equivalent of India maintaining “strategic ties” with both Iran and Israel. Khatami’s December 2002 visit to Islamabad – a first by a President in 10 years – a month prior to being in New Delhi, as the official guest of India’s Republic Day celebrations, counts as an effort in this direction. While Pakistan-Iran relations are nowhere near being classified as strategic, it is a possibility that can be pursued if the geopolitical realignment underway in the region provides an opportunity.

Despite being at odds over the Taliban which massacred seven Iranian diplomats in September 1998, there have been tentative links between Tehran and Islamabad. Iran is said to have pushed for a coalition including Pakistan, China and India to oppose Western intervention in the region while Pakistan’s former Chief of Staff Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg called for nuclear cooperation with Iran back in 1991 only to retract. Pakistan provided assistance to the Iranian navy transferring midget submarines

¹⁴² For a broad rationale for close Pakistan-Iran relations and details of recent confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) between the two countries see Shireen M. Mazari, “Iran-Pakistan Cooperation in the New Strategic Environment,” http://www.issi.org.pk/strategic_studies_hm/2002/no_1/comment/1c.htm

¹⁴³ Iran is also close to Ismail Khan who controls the Herat region of Afghanistan that borders Iran. Syed Saleem Shahzad, “Iran courts Pakistan to counter US,” <www.asiatimes.com> 11 January 2002.

and holding a naval exercise in February 1994 which was first military exercise that Iran held in the post-revolutionary era.¹⁴⁴

More recently, Pakistan and Iran have revitalized defense cooperation, albeit low-key, including manufacture of small arms, ammunition, artillery tank ammunition, propellant and various kinds of explosives. Iran's Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi said Pakistan-Iran relations had moved in a new direction following Islamabad's shift in its policy towards the Taliban in the wake of the September 11 attacks.¹⁴⁵ In fact, the sides were drawing close prior to 9/11 by virtue of Musharraf's Iran visit in November 1999 which, incidentally, was the first foreign trip after taking over as the country's chief executive.¹⁴⁶ Khatami's visit to Pakistan in December 2002 has a similar tenor (without a reference to "strategic ties") emphasizing the importance of economic cooperation, signing agreements to boost trade and expand cooperation in areas of science, technology and agriculture.

Indo-Iranian fledgling defense relationship

All that is in the realm of potential in the wake of significant realignment of interests. For now, India and Iran are forging institutional links to inch closer. Political comfort levels have paved the way for the first ever naval exercise involving two Iranian ships in March 2003 that followed the bilateral visits by Navy Chief Admiral Madhvendra Singh to Iran and Khatami to Delhi.¹⁴⁷ The Delhi Declaration envisages exploring "opportunities for cooperation in defense in agreed areas, including training and exchange of visits." Iran particularly seeks Indian expertise in electronic and telecommunications systems as part of its military modernization.¹⁴⁸ To this end, India has reportedly trained Iranian naval engineers and servicemen in Mumbai and Visakhapatnam. Iran has sought combat training

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Michael Eisenstadt, "Dual bomb blasts in South Asia: Implications for the Middle East," *PolicyWatch*, (published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy), No. 318, 29 May 1998.

¹⁴⁵ B. Muralidhar Reddy, "Pak., Iran to expand defence ties," *The Hindu*, 4 December 2001.

¹⁴⁶ "Khatami visit a turning point," *Dawn*, 23 December 2002.

¹⁴⁷ Admiral Singh's visit is the first by an armed forces chief to Iran. "Indo-Iran joint naval drill from March 10," *The Indian Express*, 9 March 2003.

¹⁴⁸ See "Iran Reports Success In Naval Modernization," *Middle East Newsline*, July 2001, http://www.menewslines.com/stories/2001/july/07_08_2.html

for missile boat crews and intends to buy simulators for ships and submarines from India.¹⁴⁹ Reports also indicates that Iran sought Indian help in servicing its MiG-29 fighters and “retrofit its warships and submarines in Indian naval dockyards”. (Whether India provided the MiG-29 assistance is yet unclear.) Moreover, India and Iran have agreed to form a joint working group on terrorism and security issues that will merge with the existing one on drug trafficking that will focus on al-Qaeda activity in Afghanistan.¹⁵⁰

On a political plane, there have been frequent high level visits that conveys a sense of urgency among the two states with Defense Secretary Yogendra Narain (March 2001), Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal (June 2002), Home Secretary N. Gopalswami (February 2003), Minister of State for External Affairs Omar Abdullah (April 2002), Human Resource Minister Murli Manohar Joshi (November 2002) among those from on the Indian side. Following Vajpayee’s visit, Hasan Roohani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Deputy Foreign Ministers Mohsen Aminzadeh and Adeli Mohammed Hossein, Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh and Cooperative Minister Morteza Haji have visited India.

These developments have caused Pakistan enough concern by February 2002 that Iran had to deny as “totally baseless” a media report that Iranian military bases were going to be used by India for operations against Pakistan.¹⁵¹ However *Jane’s* drew an important conclusion from the implications of Indo-Iranian military relations: “Iran benefits by gaining access to Indian military expertise, which will include upgrades of its fighters, as well as new tanks and artillery. India will also help train the Iranian army and navy. India will be allowed to deploy troops and equipment in Iran during a crisis with Pakistan and gain access to Iranian ports... It looks very much like an encirclement of Pakistan by India.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ <http://www.stratmag.com/issueJune-15/page01.htm> 16 June 2001.

¹⁵⁰ “India, Iran to sign protocol on terror Joint Working Group (JWG),” *Indian Express*, 11 February 2003.

¹⁵¹ The Iranian embassy in New Delhi clarified that “The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran under no condition gives permission to the armed forces of foreign countries to use its land, space and ports.” “Iran denies report about military cooperation with India against Pakistan,” <http://www.intellnet.org/news/2003/02/05/16347-1.html> , 5 February 2002.

¹⁵² “Strategic shift in South Asia,” 29 January 2003, http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/news/fr/fr030129_1_n.shtml

Thus relations with Iran offer both strategic and economic benefits. Good relations with Iran involve multiple geopolitical linkages. Interestingly, one of the proponents of closer relations with Tehran is former Home Minister Subramanian Swamy, who was also one of the active proponents of Indo-Israeli relations. (He also called for disarming Saddam as it was implacably committed to the destruction of Israel.)¹⁵³ Swamy advocates that India should not “let Iran down when the U.S. slanders it as a part of the “evil axis”, reckoning that it should emerge as a “pole in the multipolar world and cast foreign policy as a pursuit of its national interest without being anybody’s junior partner.”

Strategic ties between Tehran and New Delhi preclude closer Iran-Pakistan relations that is consistent with Israeli interests. Meanwhile, for Iran ties with India offer a potential relational byproduct of establishing contact with Washington, possibly via Israel, under a different US administration. Whether that will happen depends on India’s ability to stand up by its new relations in turbulent situations.¹⁵⁴ The 2003 Iraq crisis provided an opportunity to see if India was capable of reconciling conflicting interests, a subject to which we now turn on India’s relations with Baghdad.

¹⁵³ Subramanian Swamy, “India’s moment of truth on Iraq,” *The Hindu*, 11 December 2002.

¹⁵⁴ Subramanian Swamy, “An Iranian Sister,” *Frontline*, Vol. 19, No. 17, 30 March – 12 April 2002.

IV. RELATIONS WITH IRAQ

India's strategic relations with Iran demonstrate its pragmatism in seeking to reconcile its security perspectives with economic prospects while running the risk of American ire. By contrast its dealing with Iraq, particularly towards the end of Saddam Hussein's regime, indicate its capacity for a delayed, *fait accompli* realism that involves hedging during a crisis and endorsing the victorious side. India's willful ambiguity on the question of American intent on war with Iraq all through 2002 till Gulf War II in March-April 2003 conveyed an uncomfortable attempt to play both sides necessitated by the need not to alienate Washington for fear of aggrandizing Pakistan's interests and the need to safeguard its material interests in the Gulf by not coming across as too eager for regime change in Baghdad. At times it appeared that New Delhi was unsure as to the outcome of the war of words between US and Iraq and thus chose to sit on the fence for most part till the outcome was clear in early April 2003 when Baghdad was captured.

Relations with Baghdad in the 1990s

To gauge the factors that governed India's ambivalence on war against Iraq, a brief review of the bilateral relations in the 1990s is in order. Chastened by the severe reaction of the Kuwait and Saudi Arabian monarchies to Foreign Minister I. K. Gujral's embrace of Saddam Hussein in 1990, India chose to maintain a low-profile relationship with Iraq, intent more on mending fences with Kuwait for fear of a backlash on the 140,000 Indian immigrant workers. India, however, continued to maintain its embassy in Baghdad but the relations were characterized as "not warm" by the Iraqi Ambassador to India.¹⁵⁵

Iraq further expressed misgivings about India's retreat from championing the cause of developing nations, which, in its case, meant contesting the UN sanctions that have had a crippling effect on Iraqi people. On its part, India scarcely appeared to delve into the issue, in a manner consistent with its erstwhile inclination for advocating the two-thirds world

¹⁵⁵ "We must unite to convince the West that they cannot dictate terms to us," Interview with Iraqi Ambassador Salah al-Mukhtar, www.rediff.com, 2 August 2000.

causes. Iraqi Ambassador in India Salah al-Mukhtar stated in August 2000 that India did not attempt to make a judgment on the issue well almost a decade after the Gulf War. “India is only calling for the lifting of the economic embargo, without saying whether or not Iraq has finished its obligations to the UN.”¹⁵⁶ India was also denounced for not opposing the no-fly zones that the US imposed on Iraqi air force that had no UN sanction. “Till now, there is no official statement in India condemning the no-fly zone. India spoke with us about and said it was illegal but officially, it has not spoken,” said Ambassador Mukhtar.¹⁵⁷

Working the UN sanctions regime to mutual benefit

But there were signs of the two sides drawing closer since 1998 owing to the potential in economic ties. Iraq was looking to rebuild its power and energy infrastructure while cash-strapped India found the barter mechanism of the UN oil-for-food program convenient. From 1998 till 2002, when the Hussein’s regime became the focus of the Bush administration, India and Iraq arrived at a modus vivendi whereby the latter would gloss over New Delhi’s thriving relations with the US and Israel and yet covet its industrial expertise to revive its infrastructure. And India came to terms with the fact that it can no longer gloss over the loss of \$20-30 billion in trade opportunities over the decade owing to erratic American pressure on other nations’ dealings with Baghdad.¹⁵⁸ After all, Syria was actively assisting smuggling operations to augment Iraqi income while France and Russia resumed contracts by 1995. Thus, India was to perfunctorily call for an end to the embargo while willing to work under the sanctions to its benefit. In fact, India was to roundly criticize the American airstrikes on Iraq for violations of the no-fly zone in December 1998 around the time when economic links were being re-explored. Vajpayee expressed his “grave concern” and “deplored”, expressing concern for the suffering Iraqi people adding that the strikes raise “serious questions about the procedures of the UN Security Council and undermines the Council’s ability to verify Iraq’s compliance with relevant Council’s

¹⁵⁶ See “We must unite...”, op. cit., www.rediff.com 2 August 2000.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ K. K. Katyal, “India opposes continued sanctions against Iraq,” *The Hindu*, 22 December 2000.

resolutions.”¹⁵⁹ India made particular headway in exporting power equipment, bagging \$350 million worth contracts of the \$750 million that Baghdad doled out between 1999-2002. Power generation plants and electrical equipment comprised half of India’s exports to Iraq with earnings of \$700 million expected between 2002 and 2004 that were to be paid out the Escrow account accruing out of the sale of Iraqi oil.¹⁶⁰ By another estimate, Iraq accounted for 40 percent of India’s project capital exports.¹⁶¹

These economic links encouraged Iraqi vice-president Taha Yassin Ramadhan to speak of a possible “strategic and long term relationship with India” that is “not commodity oriented” and which does not preclude defense cooperation.¹⁶² Ramadhan’s visit in November 2000, the first by a senior minister for 10 years, saw private entrepreneurs signing various memoranda with Iraqi companies under the auspices of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). India agreed to supply raw materials and equipment as well participate in developing Iraq’s telecommunications, transport and power sectors. It was also announced that India’s ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL) and Reliance Industries were to invest \$600 million in securing Iraq’s Tuba oil field in collaboration with Algeria’s Sonatarch. The OVL was also planning to invest a further \$63 million in Iraq block 8 oil fields. In July 2002, well after the Bush administration announced its intent to disarm Hussein’s regime, India’s Petroleum Minister Ram Naik

¹⁵⁹ *Voice of America*, 17 December 1998, available at <http://www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/12/17/981217-india.htm> (Federation of American Scientists).

¹⁶⁰ Indian exporters were also said to be thriving through the illegal trade where, for instance, goods would be delivered to an agent in Syria. Iraq would then pump the needed extra oil which would sold in return for cash by the agent in Syria. See Manu Joseph, “India to Saddam: Power to You,”

<http://www.wired.com/news/conflict/0,2100,49603,00.html> , 16 January 2002.

¹⁶¹ P. Jayaram, “India in touch with UN for wheat-for-deal with Iraq”, *The Economic Times*, 3 January 2001. On a more clandestine note the British government revealed that India’s NEC Engineers Private Limited was exporting chemical engineering equipment that helped set up a plant in Al Mamoun in Iraq that produced ammonium perchlorate, a key ingredient for building propellant rocket motors. This was a severe embarrassment to India’s claim for a perfect non-proliferating record. NEC reportedly shipped out 10 consignments of prohibited material worth \$791,343 between September 1998 and February 2001. The exports included titanium vessels, spherical aluminum powder, titanium centrifugal pumps and industrial cells with platinum anodes that may have been used in the manufacture of rocket propellant. Shishir Gupta, “The Indian Connection,” *India Today*, 14 October 2002.

¹⁶² *The Hindu*, 30 November 2000.

led a 53-member business delegation to Baghdad organized by the India-Iraq joint business council. Naik inaugurated the OVL's office in Baghdad and reported that contracts worth \$1.1 billion were awarded to India under the UN "oil for food" program.¹⁶³

The apparently unobtrusive but fairly robust economic contacts reportedly worried western observers with one diplomatic source characterizing India's increased business with Iraq as "a source of discomfort." Former US Ambassador Teresita Schaffer noted, at the time, that though the relationship between India and Israel was a 'niche relationship' and while India is building stronger ties with Iran, "its oldest and strongest friendship remains with Iraq."¹⁶⁴ A low-key visit to New Delhi by former US Secretary of State James Baker III in April 2002 cast light on such apprehensions. Baker, who is associated with the James Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University — a research facility interested in oil prospects in the Middle East — was reported to have solicited India's support to the planned US attack on Iraq besides asking OVL and Reliance to shelve plans for exploration and production of crude in Iraq.¹⁶⁵ Though there was no official response to the reported request, India's subsequent response to the Iraq crisis reflected this dual imperative of balancing American sensitivities with availing existing economic opportunities.

Underplaying political links

If anything India ensured that political linkages were underplayed with the presumed expectation that business rationales cause fewer diplomatic tumults. For instance, in May 2001, India evidently backtracked from its intent to send humanitarian flights to Baghdad as announced by the External Affairs Minister Ajit Panja. Initially, the plan was to join other

¹⁶³ Press Statement by Shri Ram Naik, Hon'ble Minister of Petroleum & Natural Gas issued in New Delhi on 10th July, 2002, available <http://meadev.nic.in>

¹⁶⁴ "Rising India and US Policy Options in Asia," March 21, 2001, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), <http://www.csis.org/saprog/risingindianotes010321.htm>

¹⁶⁵ Shantanu Guha Ray and Narendra Taneja, "For blood and oil," *Outlook*, 15 April 2002. Ironically, the US was importing an average of 500,000 barrels a day from Saddam's regime while calling for an end to his rule. The figure reached 830,000 barrels a day in January 2003 to make up the loss of Venezuelan exports due to the anti-Chavez strikes, according to a report by Associated Press. "US, Iraq are brothers in arms for oil," *Times of India*, 16 January 2003.

countries like Russia, which defied the informal ban on flights by commissioning humanitarian consignments. However, India reneged on the announcement and its absence in doing so was noticed since Pakistan and Vietnam were among the countries that together sent as many as 60 flights. As an analyst reportedly put it, “If you draw a map of all the countries that have sent plane-loads into Baghdad the one huge blank space represents India.”¹⁶⁶ Interestingly, as if to underscore the absence of substantive relations in the 1990s, the MEA website does not feature Iraq in its section on “selected statements of foreign relations of India” while offering reviews of relations with Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Palestine and Saudi Arabia from West Asia.¹⁶⁷

Ministerial interlocutors have revealed that Iraq also agreed to buy 1000 buses from Tata Engineering (TELCO) in 1999 which were not delivered to Iraq as of September 2002 as the UN sanctions committee did not clear it. Officials expressed misgivings that Egypt and China were able to process similar bus contracts at the UN by 2000 while India could not. Critics felt that the office of India’s Permanent Representative to the UN was not energetic enough in pursuing matters with the sanctions committee since addressing letters alone was inadequate to get the required approval, indicating an unwillingness to openly back Iraq’s case.¹⁶⁸

4.1 India and Gulf War II

India’s response to the Iraq crisis in 2002-2003 demonstrated the complexities of harmonizing its Middle Eastern policy with its emerging strategic links with the US. India’s compelling energy needs, its economic interests by way of immigrant remittances and a legacy of exercising responsibility *for* and enjoying goodwill *in* the Arab world and its recent equation with Washington, combined to produce an inert policy amid the biggest crisis the region has seen in a decade.

Such contradictory impulses produced a confused foreign policy, that was delineated mostly in terms of conflicting pronouncements as this

¹⁶⁶ Kesava Menon, “Iraq awaiting Indian flights,” *The Hindu*, 11 May 2001.

¹⁶⁷ See “Selected Statements of Foreign Relations of India,” Ministry of External Affairs website, <http://www.meadev.nic.in/foreign/intro.htm> (accessed last 23 April 2003).

¹⁶⁸ CSH interviews, September 2002.

crisis panned out, essentially as an elaborative rhetorical slugfest in world capitals before war fighting began. In other words, the sheer longevity of the buildup to war that lasted for an year was manifest by a battle for public opinion, principally through coalition building and resolutions at the UN rather than unilateral initiatives actively designed against Iraq. Hence India, like other countries, was in the awkward position of having to respond to evolving diplomatic disquisitions that often threatened to translate to Western state policy. This probably explains the long spells of official silence from North Block even as events unfolded quickly during November-December 2002.

Searching for the 'Middle Path'

Essentially, India's stance boiled down to a rejection of war, endorsement of Iraq's disarmament by peaceful means and that any military action needed UN Security Council sanction. So long as war looked an unlikely option, which appeared to be so till a week prior to 20 March 2003 when it actually began, the intensity of India's opposition to unilateral invasion increased. Hence in October 2002, Vijay Nambiar, India's Permanent Representative to the UN, reiterated that "sovereignty and territorial integrity of a State were inviolable" and thus India "could not justify unilateral action" while expressing eagerness to see Iraq comply with UN resolutions.¹⁶⁹

Likewise, Prime Minister Vajpayee caustically remarked at the end of November 2002 that "No one should try to enforce their will on others," preferring not to desert Saddam just yet saying that "People of all nations have a right to rule themselves and choose their own leader." This was dovetailed with the customary pitch that if Iraq had "weapons which endangered humanity, it should give it up on its own."¹⁷⁰ However, Vajpayee,

¹⁶⁹ "In Security Council Debate, United States, France, Russian Federation, Others Outline Positions On Possible Resolution Concerning Iraq," 17 October 2002, at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2002/sc7536.doc.htm>

¹⁷⁰ "Vajpayee's snub to US: Iraq is UN's business," *Indian Express*, 20 November 2002. This was restated during Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Delhi in early December. "Both sides strongly oppose unilateral use or threat of use of force in violation of the UN charter as well as interference in the internal affairs of other states." "Russia, India Oppose Unilateral Action Against Iraq," (Reuters), 4 December 2002, available at http://www.truthout.org/docs_02/12.06B.russia.india.htm

as one analyst observed, stated this when Hussein's special envoy and information minister Mohammed Sayeed Al-Sahaf was visiting Delhi.¹⁷¹

Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha underlined the ambiguity when he told the Rajya Sabha in November 2002 that "Iraq under Saddam Hussein is a friend of India," and that Hussein "should not feel let down" (sic) and restating that support for Iraq is "principled and constant." Interestingly, Sinha went on to refer to the anti-Americanism in the Upper House and pointed to the fact that the US and Russia jointly declared in their recent meeting that Iraq ought to cooperate with weapons inspectors or face "serious consequences." Sinha in pointing to the fact that the Security Council resolution 1441 was passed "unanimously" by all 15 members of the Council, conveyed a tacit alignment with the US agenda.¹⁷² The reasoning behind India's semantic gravitation towards the American position – euphemistically termed the "middle path" – was that neither Syria, nor the Arab nations opposed the proposed US action. For that matter, India found no rationale for sticking with Hussein when Non-Aligned nations such as Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia were providing logistical support to US armed forces.¹⁷³

India's resolve not to obviously oppose the US was expressed in the government's opposition to a parliamentary resolution to state its case as the domestic opposition parties clamored for. The BJP, the leading party in the NDA coalition, stalled the demand for a resolution as it would commit India to a particular position which was deemed unwise in a rapidly evolving, fluid situation. This proved to be fairly judicious by hindsight after Hussein's regime fell since India was obviously wary of repeating the gaffe of embracing Hussein in 1990. Sushma Swaraj, Union Minister for Information, gave a concise representation of India's concerns when replying to the possibility of initiating a unanimous parliamentary resolution on the crisis. "In a discussion the feelings of the House are expressed

¹⁷¹ C. Raja Mohan, "India, US and the Gulf War," *The Hindu*, 25 November 2002.

¹⁷² Jyoti Malhotra, "Saddam a friend but UN resolution unanimous: Sinha," *Indian Express*, 29 November 2002. Also see "India Supports Iraq, Says Saddam Shouldn't Feel Let Down," <http://www.palestinechronicle.com/article.php?story=20021201163424277>

¹⁷³ Shishir Gupta, "Wary India keeps sting out of anti-US rhetoric," *Indian Express*, 22 March 2003.

whereas a resolution is bound by words. The Government carries the spirit of the House to the international community without being constrained by a comma here or a full stop there,” Swaraj said.¹⁷⁴

By 13 March, a week prior to the war, India appeared to rhetorically echo the French stance. Prime Minister Vajpayee told Parliament that a regime change in Iraq must be wrought by the Iraqi people saying “No outside power has the right to do that.” Further Vajpayee said “If unilateralism prevails, the UN would be deeply scarred, with disastrous consequences for the world order. The Government of India would strongly urge that no military action be taken...” But expectedly he advised Iraq to comply with the UN inspection process with a condescending caveat that had Iraqi cooperation been “quicker”, “it may have enabled UNMOVIC [United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission] and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to certify to the UN Security Council that Iraq was in full compliance of Resolution 1441.”¹⁷⁵

Strikingly, Vajpayee told Parliament that he did not anticipate a war. “*I believe there will not be a war. Hence, I cannot answer what stand we will take if there is a war*”¹⁷⁶ (emphasis added). It is difficult to say though whether this was just a ploy to fend off a delicate issue or if India was genuinely not in the know.

Kanti Bajpai, a leading Indian scholar, spelt out options that might enable India to regain a legitimate role in the international community that go beyond “tactical sidestepping.” Terming India’s pronouncements as not being “terribly impressive,” Bajpai reckoned that India ought not to endorse everything that the US does nor drive it into a corner with an inflexible opposition. Specifically, India could ask the Americans and the French not to squabble in public while privately persuade Saddam to abdicate.¹⁷⁷ India evidently failed to attempt any of these.

¹⁷⁴ “All disarmed as Sushma says it with flowers,” *Indian Express*, 26 February 2003.

¹⁷⁵ “For a peaceful resolution of the Iraq issue,” (Prime Minister Vajpayee’s statement to both houses of Parliament), *Indian Express*, 12 March 2003.

¹⁷⁶ “We’ll not back regime change in Iraq by outside forces: PM,” *The Hindu*, 13 March 2003.

¹⁷⁷ Kanti Bajpai, “No one writes to Saddam: New Delhi could preserve a peaceful world order,” *Indian Express*, 24 February 2003.

Instead, as alluded elsewhere, India seemed surprised by the 20 March invasion. After initially expressing “anguish” over the bombings saying the action “lacks justifications,” the government maintained diplomatic silence till rising civilian casualties and domestic opposition uproar built a momentum in favor of a parliamentary resolution demanding a condemnation of the coalition forces. The resolution, passed unanimously on 8 April, called for an immediate end to the war against Iraq and demanded a “quick withdrawal” of “coalition” troops. The resolution, expressing “national sentiments”, said military action in Iraq in favor of regime change was “not acceptable.” However, the government made heavy weather of the wording of the Hindi resolution, where it persisted with the equivocating use of the word *ninda*, that translates as both “deplore” and “condemn.”¹⁷⁸

The government achieved two things by allowing this atypical reaction to a US initiative. It obliquely signaled its intent to resist any future outside initiatives to address the Kashmir question, now that Iraq was reckoned as dealt with by the Bush administration, signifying India inability to de-link its larger strategic vision from a preoccupation with Pakistan. Besides, the insistence on using *ninda* as opposed to *ghor-ninda* (strongly condemn) would provide the necessary spin should it need to assuage the State Department.

To be sure, India inc., at least, was in a conciliatory mood with the prospect reaping rich benefits through reconstruction contracts in post-Saddam Iraq. Towards the end of hostilities, stories auguring immense potential for Indian industry appeared regularly in the media. India’s Representative at the UN, Vijay Nambiar hinted as much by saying that “War is sometimes waged unilaterally but peace has to be built together.”¹⁷⁹ India was expecting to bag contracts since the Office of the Iraqi Program (OIP) at the United Nations identified food, health, water, sanitation, education, electricity and agriculture as priority areas under the Oil for

¹⁷⁸ “Resolution calls for end to war,” *The Hindu*, 9 April 2003. The Congress wanted to condemn the invasion in “clear terms.” For opposition reactions, see Kota Neelima, “Iraq resolution waits for words,” *Indian Express*, 8 April 2003.

¹⁷⁹ “India hopes hostility would end soon,” *The Hindu*, 28 March 2003. See also UN Press Release SC/7705 dated 26 March 2003, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2003/sc7705.p2.doc.htm>

Food program.¹⁸⁰ Amit Mitra, FICCI's Secretary General, claimed that this program could procure orders worth Rs. 3000 crore [\$630 million] for Indian companies – which were not echoed thereafter.¹⁸¹ But the US decision to administer reconstruction through United States Agency for International Development (USAID) which went on to award initial contracts worth \$600 million to American firms such as Bechtel and the Fluor Corp¹⁸² moderated expectations to “getting no more than crumbs.”

Analysts, thereafter, advised that India “should temper the rosy-tinted visions of securing billions in contracts in rebuilding Iraq.”¹⁸³ Figures were hence downsized from “several billion dollars” to \$100-200 million.¹⁸⁴ To confirm this there were reports of mass Indian recruitment as support staff to the US armed forces in Iraq as chefs, kitchen assistants, mess supervisors, accountants, financial supervisors, bus drivers and bus boys.¹⁸⁵

4.2 The issue of sending Indian troops to Iraq

Evidently, India was unwilling to be left out of the new dispensation in Iraq and arguably the region by resisting American moves. The Bush administration, on its part, appeared to gloss over Indian ambivalence owing to the prospect of long term strategic linkages with New Delhi. India's dithering responses proved to be prescient as the regime change in Iraq consolidated American sway in the Persian Gulf. This has yet to reap tangible benefits in the Iraqi reconstruction, as we have seen. On the contrary, the US put pressure on India to contribute a substantial peacekeeping “stabilization force” of 15,000 troops to maintain order around

¹⁸⁰ Amit Mitra, Secretary General, FICCI, reckoned that the program would generate contracts worth Rs. 3000 crore (\$6 billion) to India. “India inc. eyes reconstruction in Iraq,” www.ndtv.com, 17 April 2003.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Cf. “Rebuilding Iraq: India must make its moves fast to get the action,” *Financial Express*, 14 April 2003.

¹⁸³ “Rebuilding Iraq,” *Financial Express*, 14 April 2003.

¹⁸⁴ N. Chandra Mohan, “Business in the aftermath of Gulf War II,” *Financial Express*, 17 April 2003.

¹⁸⁵ *India Today* reported that Royal Consultants had a contract for 900 people to be based in Kuwait. In addition 60 cooks, 60 assistant cooks, 300 waiters, 100 cleaning boys and 150 kitchen supervisors were due to employed to be paid around 100 to 300 Kuwaiti dinars each, which was a climbdown from initial expectations. “Indians plan to cook up a storm in Iraq,” *India Today*, 28 April 2003.

the northern city of Mosul. Washington sought to persuade New Delhi that the 22 May UN Security Council Resolution 1483 which calls on member nations to contribute men and material for humanitarian assistance in Iraq was a justifiable rationale for India to send troops.

This issue sparked off a lively domestic debate India over the prospect of its troops being put in a position to shoot Iraqi civilians. The symbolic import of Indian troops shooting Arab civilians made the government wary of discarding proven Nehruvian continence in endorsing superpower stratagems in the region. The possible repercussions on the valuable Indian expatriate population in the Gulf following use of force on civilians was obviously another consideration for India when it finally declined to send troops on 14 July 2003. Of course, the Resolution 1483's characterization of the US and the UK as "occupying powers" too was controversial.

Domestic uproar

The polarized debate, that went on for nearly two months, featured proponents of dispatching troops arguing that it would signal India's intent to step out of the confines of "the narrow South Asia political box" and assume a military role beyond the region.¹⁸⁶ Critics contended that India would squander whatever goodwill it enjoys in the region and that it will be hard to live down the inherited reputation of being "imperial mercenaries" that Indian soldiers already have due to their role in expanding the British empire through operations in East Africa, Burma, China and Malaya.¹⁸⁷ Amitav Ghosh, further, wrote that the Indian government would run the risk of future marginalization in the region by complying with the Bush administration, saying that any conflagration with Indian troops near the Shiite holy places of Najaf or Karbala would have disastrous consequences especially in view of the Hindu nationalists being at the helm in New Delhi.¹⁸⁸ Others pointed to the anomaly of India considering the case for sending 15,000 troops while NATO allies like Italy and Spain were sending only 3000 and 2300 troops respectively.¹⁸⁹ The leading opposition Congress

¹⁸⁶ C. Raja Mohan, "India's decision time on Iraq," *The Hindu*, 26 May 2003.

¹⁸⁷ Amitav Ghosh, "Lessons of Empire," *The Hindu*, 24 June 2003.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Prakash Karat, "Misleading the people," *The Hindu*, 1 July 2003.

Party pointedly argued that “national honor cannot be sacrificed for the sake a few contracts.”¹⁹⁰ Its foreign policy adviser reckoned that India had little reason to comply with Washington’s request if others like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, China, Russia, Canada, France, Germany and Mexico were not sending troops either.¹⁹¹

Till 14 July India gave little indication of being opposed to sending troops on principle; instead reports suggested that it was stalling for the right conditions to do so while negotiating the operational details of the peacekeeping and the financial cost of the “stabilization force.”¹⁹² There was significant pressure exerted by the US during Deputy Prime Minister Advani’s trip to Washington in early June. His trip involved consultations with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice and a 30 minute “unscheduled” meeting with President Bush. Advani conceded that the troops matter was the “principal issue” discussed with the Bush administration.¹⁹³ Interestingly, Advani appeared to lean toward sending troops to Iraq. Speaking to an Indian television news station in Washington, he criticized the opposition for rejecting the idea at the outset. Without specifically naming the Congress Party, Advani said: “The opposition issued a one-sided *fatwa* without seeking any information....They should not have done this. This is wrong. They are entitled to their views, but the government will take a decision keeping the national interest in mind.”¹⁹⁴ It is particularly striking that Advani sought to differentiate between the opposition rejection of American request and a “national interest” perspective of the government, suggesting that India was open in June to sending troops but was probably biding time for the scenario to clarify itself. Also reports in the Indian media indicating that

¹⁹⁰ “National honour cannot be sacrificed, *The Hindu*, 5 July 2003.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*.

¹⁹² Amit Baruah, “Govt. not averse to sending troops to Iraq?”, *The Hindu*, 3 July 2003. By 23 June it was felt that the government “sensed” that it would be “politically prudent” to send troops. For an overview on the debate see Jyoti Malhotra, “And the boys go to Babylon,” *Indian Express*, 22 June 2003.

¹⁹³ Ron Synovitz, “India: Delhi considers US request to send troops to Iraq,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 11 June 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2003/06/11062003170843.asp>

¹⁹⁴ Advani reportedly stated this in an interview to the Hindi channel *Aaj Tak*. “Advani flays oppn for opposing troops in Iraq,” 11 June 2003, <http://news.indiainfo.com/2003/06/11/11advani2.html>

Jordan and the UAE were in favor of an Indian presence in Iraq served to buttress the purported Advani line even though the more significant disapproval of Syria and Iran persisted.¹⁹⁵

Eventually, India's response to Gulf War II in March 2003 demonstrated that its troubles with Pakistan undermine inherited canons concerning foreign policy autonomy and the exercise of moral authority on the world stage. Had not India been saddled with the need to find favor with the Americans to exert pressure on Pakistan to end terrorism, it might have responded differently to the Iraqi situation. This is arguably so since India is a big enough neighboring power for the Middle Eastern states not to completely eschew engaging it over the long run. It has established fairly intensive economic ties in the Gulf, trading volumes with the UAE reaching \$4 billion while Saudi Arabia too is keen on not losing the Indian market for its oil, a fact underlined by increasing consultations following Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh's visit in January 2001.

By refusing to adopt a normative position on the Iraq crisis, essentially a sequel to its indifference to Palestine, it safeguarded its subcontinental interests by tacitly toeing the American line. India thus chose to be co-opted by rather than have a niche position consistent with its globalist ambitions to play a larger international role. It appears to subordinate its emerging power aspirations to the short-term need to counter Pakistan and terrorism in the short term for which it needs American help.

Significantly, the absence of any identifiable "road-map" on India's side to address the Kashmir issue will continue to bedevil attempts to assume a role beyond South Asia. Just as the ASEAN nations are inhibited to engage South Asia tangibly, the continuing instability in the subcontinent (which arguably serves a vital political interest in domestic Indian politics), hampers India's global ambitions. The 2003 Iraq crisis underlined the fact that India lacked the leverage to control its backyard which would have provided it the authority to assume larger and meaningful responsibilities in the Middle East. Of academic import though, the Iraqi crisis proved B.A. Roberson

¹⁹⁵ Saurabh Shukla, "Jordan and Kuwait Indian troops in Iraq," *Hindustan Times*, 29 June 2003 and Pranab Dhal Samanta, "UAE wont mind Indian troops in Iraq," *Indian Express*, 2 July 2003.

prescient when he wrote in 1986 that: “The geopolitical effects of the Gulf region on India are peripheral to its primary concerns except where a crisis in the Middle East either brings about an alteration to the strategic position of Pakistan, or brings the military presence of a superpower into the region.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ B A Roberson, “South Asia and the Gulf Complex,” in Barry Buzan and Gowher Rizvi eds., *South Asian Insecurity and the Great Powers* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), p. 175.

V. INDIA, AFGHANISTAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

If the end of the Cold War forced India to redraw its strategic priorities in the Middle East, then 9/11 offers compelling reasons to assess whether it is a significant player in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Its reaction to Gulf War II showed that it is not inclined to contradict American aims in the region, notwithstanding the inherited distaste for superpower presence in the neighborhood. However, as of June 2003 India conveyed its disagreement with Washington's attitude towards Iran, stating that it does not believe that the latter harbors al-Qaeda terrorists as US lawmakers asserted following the bombings in Riyadh and Casablanca in May 2003. "Our own reading is not quite the same," Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal said, adding that Iran's situation is very different to that of Iraq.¹⁹⁷ To what extent India will resist future American pressure for regime change in Iran is unclear. But revolutionary regime or no, India seeks to profit from the new dispensation in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region. The strategic importance of the five Central Asia Republics (CARs) has been assumed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union owing to their immense energy reserves and for being perceived as an extension of the Middle East by virtue of being Muslim nations. Straightaway, Turkey and Iran were presumed to jockey for influence due to their presumed cultural affinities and geographic proximity. For the West, the fledgling republics struggling with internal order or economic deprivation provided an avenue to engage the Russian underbelly. Israel too sought to establish links to prevent the CARs from embracing Iran.

These multiple interests and contexts assumed massive importance and urgency following 9/11 as American forces acquired military bases in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as part of the war against Taliban in late 2001. The accession of Hamid Karzai to the interim government in Kabul suddenly enhanced India's role. This section seeks to understand India objectives in Afghanistan and explore the state of its relations with Central Asia.

¹⁹⁷ Amit Baruah, "Iran not harbouring al-Qaeda, says India," *The Hindu*, 31 May 2003.

India's Afghan Policy

Afghanistan is the fractious gateway to and from Central Asia, which defines the way other powers grapple and circumvent the complexities of the region. India has had checkered fortunes that matched its erratic interest as the country went through internal factionalism, superpower intervention in 1978; severe civil war till 1988 that saw the Soviet withdrawal; a tenuous mujahedin government in place till 1996 when the militant Islamist Taliban took control. Traditionally, Afghanistan is significant as a counter-flank to Pakistani adventurism in Jammu and Kashmir. The relatively dormant notion of Paktunistan, a state comprising of Pashtun, comprising parts of east and southern Afghanistan, along with sections of Pakistani provinces of Baluchistan and North West Frontier Province (NWFP), has traditionally been a promising irredentist pressure point on Pakistan for India but one that has not attained critical mass due to the violent Afghan conflict since the late 1970s.

Having gained a measure of notoriety for failing to condemn the Soviet invasion in 1979, India went on to forge close relations with the Najibullah government while Pakistan threw in its lot with the US sponsored mujahedin. Under the reactivated Indo-Afghan Joint Commission since 1982, India sponsored projects in health, irrigation, hydro-electricity, agricultural research, rural development, power and education in addition to numerous Indian experts providing technical assistance to the Afghan government.¹⁹⁸ The then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi indicated the extent of support in 1988 when he expressed the hope that the Najib government would be able to “meet the mujahedin onslaught.”¹⁹⁹ Not known for its dexterity in foreign policy at any rate, India eschewed links with the mujahedin with good reason given that Pakistan’s ISI was exercising direct control of the funds and the anti-Soviet operations. Pakistan’s brazen efforts to install a favorable regime in 1992 alienated mujahedin groups that led India to cast its lot with the Rabbani government that included the renowned Tajik leader Ahmed Shah Masood as defense minister.

¹⁹⁸ For an overview of India’s Afghan policy see Aabha Dixit, “Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan: Does India have a Role to Play?” *ACDIS Occasional Paper*, 1997, http://www.acdis.uiuc.edu/homepage_docs/pubs_docs/PDF_Files/Aabha.pdf , 3.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

The unraveling of mujahedin unity after the Soviet withdrawal provided a window for India to claw its way back into Afghan equations, albeit marginally. Barring the persistent links with Masood, India's role in Afghan affairs has been noteworthy only in conjunction with Russian and Iranian aims and strategy, one that particularly came to light following the Taliban victory in 1996. The Pakistani press, though, alleged that India was providing military assistance to Masood during the Rabbani tenure suggesting that the Indian mission in Kabul was opened for the express purpose of facilitating cooperation between India's Research and Intelligence Wing (RAW) and the Raiasate-Armaniyat-e-Milli (RAM) that had replaced Afghanistan's intelligence agency (KHAD) which operated under Najib.²⁰⁰

The Taliban victory elicited a measure of urgency in Teheran, New Delhi and Moscow indicated by a conference held by the Iranians in October 1996 following which there were attempts to help mutual allies like Iran's Ismail Khan of Herat and the Hazaras, while Russians and Indians would provide support to Masood and Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum who decided to ally with his erstwhile rival, Masood, against the Taliban. (India, too, on its part switched sides after Najib's fall recognizing Rabbani's regime despite his Jamiat-I-Islami background.) Though India was concerned that Taliban's Mullah Omar endorsed Osama bin Laden's transnational Islamist terrorism that had Kashmir in its sights, it did not commensurately provide the kind of active consistent support to preempt violence in Kashmir. The nature of Indian support is not entirely clear. Ahmed Rashid reckons around the time of the 1996 battle for Kabul, India helped refurbish Ariana, the Afghan airline, to ensure regular arms supply for the Rabbani regime besides supplying aircraft parts, new ground radars, and money.²⁰¹ The Pakistan press in May 1995 featured reports that India supplied arms to the Rabbani regime. The *New York Times* provided corroboration stating that India, Iran and Russia were providing military and material support to Rabbani while the Taliban claimed to have captured Indian-made arms from the Northern Alliance forces in September 1997.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban. Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 45.

²⁰² Cf. N. A Kellett, "External Involvement in Afghanistan," Report by DND Policy Group, 23 December 2002, http://www.dnd.ca/admpol/eng/doc/Afghanistan/afg_toc_e.htm

Pakistan, meanwhile, was deploying its army regulars in Taliban operations, following on its insistence that its ally, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, take over power after Najib. Analysts contend that it was contributing a third of the 20,000 Taliban force while *Jane's Defence Weekly* asserted that "Pakistani military involvement appears to have gone beyond logistical support and the presence of military advisors to include the covert deployment of special forces."²⁰³ Afghanistan's endemic ethnic cleavages exacerbated by the infusion of arms are perceptually a constant destabilizing factor for Pakistan and the latter's impulse to shape regimes in Kabul perforce elicit factional interventions by other regional powers such as India, Iran and Russia, especially in a terror prone era.

India, however, snapped out of any hint of institutional stupor in December 1999 following the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC-814 by militants of Jaish-e-Mohammed affiliated to Osama bin Laden who had demanded that freed militants be flown to Kandahar. Following the remarkable spectacle of the Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh traveling with the militants to secure the release of the hostages, India stepped up lines of support to Masood. Earlier *Asiaweek* reported in mid 1999 that Massoud's senior aide Dr. Abdullah spent several weeks in New Delhi holding talks with Vivek Katju, the MEA secretary dealing with Afghanistan, besides meeting with foreign and defense ministers. It was also reported that an Indian defense official based in Central Asia would visit Massoud's northeast stronghold in the Panjsher valley to assess the military situation on the ground.²⁰⁴

In 2000, India delivered three Mi-17 transport helicopters to Masood's anti-Taliban forces. This materialized following Putin's New Delhi visit whereby Russia delivered these choppers on India's behalf to Masood's army at its air base at Dushanbe in Tajikistan. Nonetheless, MEA sources felt that the level of support was inadequate with one official saying that "while India supports the Rabbani government, it lacks the strategic vision and the guts to support it militarily."²⁰⁵ He argued that India's assistance must go beyond humanitarian assistance reckoning that while

²⁰³ Cf. Peter Tomsen, "Geopolitics Of An Afghan Settlement," *Perceptions*, December 2000-February 2001, Vol. V, No. 4. See also "Struggle for Recognition," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 4 October 2000, p. 1.

²⁰⁴ "Intelligence," *Asiaweek*, 30 July 1999. <http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/99/0730/feat4.html>

²⁰⁵ V K Shashikumar, "India sends three choppers to anti-Taliban forces," www.tehelka.com, 12 October 2000, available at <http://www.media-watch.org/articles/1000/27.html>

the Afghans need blankets, rice, tea, edible oils etc., “they cannot win a war with humanitarian supplies.” True enough, India’s assistance to President Rabbani’s government dropped from \$70 million in 1997-98 to a measly \$400,000 in 1999-2000 and in the process declined Rabbani’s request for 20 Mi-17 helicopters. The MEA was reportedly frustrated with the lack of progress by the Northern Alliance.²⁰⁶

Nonetheless, political contacts were maintained, the proximity with the Rabbani regime confirmed by the presence of Masood Khalili as the representative of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in New Delhi that was also recognized by the UN. Khalili was a close aide of Masood and was an eyewitness to Masood assassination in September 2001, serving as a translator for the leader for the purported interview with the al-Qaeda suicide bombers who masqueraded as journalists.²⁰⁷ Emblematic of his links with India, Masood died at an Indian run hospital at Farkhor.

5.1 India and post Taliban Afghanistan

The September 11 attacks and the subsequent attack and exit of the Taliban has privileged India’s position vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Politically, the head of the interim administration, Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun moderate with no popular base, prefers to deal with India than Pakistan who have nurtured his radical Pashtun rivals. The other significant leaders arising out of the Northern Alliance that shore up the interim authority’s hold over Kabul, Gen. Dostum and Abdullah Abdullah, too have had significant ties with India. Owing to the American writ in the country that militates against wholly depending on contiguous Iran, Karzai has looked to India to consolidate his position through governance initiatives.²⁰⁸ Thus senior members of the interim administration, including Karzai, Dostum, Interior Minister Younis Qanooni, Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, and Defense Minister Gen. Mohammad Qasim Fahim visited India within three months of the inauguration of the regime in December 2001.²⁰⁹ In fact, Qanooni visited New Delhi a day after the Bonn Agreement was signed on

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Reuters story available at <http://www.cooperativeresearch.net/timeline/2001/reuters100401.html>

²⁰⁸ Worth noting that the US has not resisted the trade agreements that Afghanistan has forged with Iran. For a list of agreements signed see “Highlights of recent trade agreements”, http://www.eurasianet.org/loya.jirga/trade_agreements.shtml, 24 January 2003.

²⁰⁹ Agam Shah, “Dostum Has Multiple Aims On Visit To India,” 2 February 2002, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav020402.shtml>

5 December 2001 requesting India's assistance in establishing a national security force in Afghanistan, one of the elements of the Bonn agreement.

India, wiser for its relative disinterest in the past, has embraced the new regime. To begin with, it pledged \$100 million in financial aid to Afghanistan at the international donors' conference held in Tokyo in January 2003. It contributed a further \$10 million to the World Bank-managed Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund.²¹⁰ It enhanced the level of humanitarian assistance by supplying 1 million tons of wheat, reopening the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul and sent thousands of artificial limbs (Jaipur foot) to those who maimed by landmines that was a crucial factor in the war.²¹¹ India also loaned three aircraft to revive the Afghan airliner Ariana, the first of whose flights was to New Delhi. Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha visited Kabul and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) organized a trade fair to forge business links. In December 2001, India's Home Minister L.K. Advani announced that New Delhi would dispatch senior police officials to Afghanistan to serve as advisors on the establishment of law-enforcement institutions.²¹²

Pakistani concerns

The intensity in Indo-Afghan relations has expectedly alarmed Pakistan which took umbrage to New Delhi's plans to open consulates in Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif, as they would in their estimate serve as listening posts for the RAW. Unsubstantiated reportage about the RAW and Israel's Mossad collaborating to train militants to destabilize General Pervez Musharraf's regime in summer 2002 added to Pakistan's concerns.²¹³ Around the same time, the *Indian Express* reported that the US had issued

²¹⁰ Agam Shah, "Karzai Seeks Foreign Investment From Indian Companies," <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav022802.shtml>

²¹¹ Sudha Ramachandran, "In Afghanistan, Pakistan's loss is India's gain," *Asia Times Online*, www.atimes.com, 1 February 2002.

²¹² Agam Shah, "New Afghan Leadership Team Turns To India For Assistance," www.eurasianet.org 14 December 2001.

²¹³ Syed Saleem Shahzad, "India, Israel linked to Pakistan plot," *Asia Times Online*, 8 October 2002. The reported plan that stretches credulity owing to the presumed ease of the process, was apparently that RAW arranged most of the "human resources", while training was the responsibility of the Special Operations Division (Metsada) of Mossad. "Once trained, the recruits will infiltrate the border areas of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan Province, where they will attempt to forge links with local tribespeople and militants in an effort to rally support for an uprising against Musharraf."

a *demarche* to India urging it to defer plans concerning the consulates. On its part, New Delhi is reportedly said “to have decided to let the issue rest, at least for the time being.”²¹⁴

The Karzai regime has reached trade agreements with Iran, India and the Central Asian states, which grant major concessions to Afghan goods.²¹⁵ As mentioned, India, Iran and Afghanistan agreed to give Indian goods heading for Central Asia and Afghanistan similar preferential treatment and tariff reductions at Chahbahar which is an alternative to the nearer Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi. It is therefore embarking on a trade direction that leaves Pakistan out which was previously Afghanistan’s principal trading partner and entry port for goods.²¹⁶

Fragile stake in Afghanistan’s bleak future

But where India is concerned, the tenuous position of Karzai does not bode well. He is hardly known to travel much beyond Kabul and the poor representation of Pashtuns (45 percent of population) in his Tajik and Uzbek intensive regime weakens his regime’s prospects which will have an impact on India as well. India’s future in Afghanistan appears linked to any pro-Western regime in Kabul. Though the Bonn Agreements stipulated the drafting of a constitution, a regular Afghan army, and the provisional of fresh elections by 2004, the weak extension of Karzai’s political authority cast doubts on their actualization. This has also been attributed to the haphazard nature of western initiated reconstruction. First the American tactic of arming the various militias in the countryside while fighting the Taliban and simultaneously marginalizing Pashtuns is deemed a political disaster in the making. Also Western states seem to have little clue as to extending Karzai’s control, being content with ad hoc humanitarian assistance rather than embarking on urgent reconstruction. For instance, of the \$1.8 billion pledged for 2002 out of the \$5.25 billion pledged at the Tokyo donors conference, over 75 percent of the \$1.5 billion spent was on short-term humanitarian assistance leaving only \$365 million for long term

²¹⁴ Jyoti Malhotra, “US to India: Lay off Afghanistan, please,” *Indian Express*, 8 December 2002.

²¹⁵ For a list of agreements signed see “Highlights of recent trade agreements”, http://www.eurasianet.org/loya.jirga/trade_agreements.shtml , 24 January 2003.

²¹⁶ “Conference Of Asian States Limited In Its Ability To Promote Regional Stability,” <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav060602a.shtml> , 6 June 2002.

reconstruction that would benefit Karzai's regime.²¹⁷ With the result that the power of the militias plus the unregenerate economy has made Afghanistan little better off than under Taliban rule. Two writers offer a chilling comment on the country's situation in May 2003:

Amazingly, we found that many ordinary Afghans are less secure than they were a year ago. In addition to resurgent Taliban activity, we found major problems with Afghanistan's police, army and intelligence forces - the same people the United States put in place after defeating the Taliban... In many areas, police officers are turning into criminals at night - raiding homes, stealing valuables and even raping young women and girls. Local warlords are fighting each other in several provinces. In the south of the country, aid programs and de-mining projects have been stopped because of attacks by Taliban remnants, some of whom secretly enjoy the support of local warlords.... Even in Kabul, warlords are a problem. Some leaders are using heavy-handed tactics to stifle dissent and free expression, threatening journalists while arresting and torturing political dissidents and civic organizers.²¹⁸

Such a grim picture does not augur well for a power like India that does not have the leverage to force its Afghan allies to do its bidding. India's future engagement of Afghanistan depends on the stability of the Karzai regime that is dependent on a variety of extraneous factors that include the willingness of Pakistan to support Kabul's stabilization. Considering that India has opened a consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif at the request of Abdul Rashid Dostum raises speculation that New Delhi is ensuring a northwestern foothold in Afghan politics should the interim Islamic Transitional State of Afghanistan unravel owing to inadequate nation building.

Pakistan's Afghan imperatives

On its part, Islamabad realizes that the continuation of a Karzai type of regime under the broad tutelage of American armed presence and force can congeal into an Afghan and Central Asian trading pattern that

²¹⁷ Larry Goodson, "Afghanistan's Long Road to Construction," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1, January 2003, p. 88. Most nations were also slow in meeting their pledges.

²¹⁸ John Sifton and Sam ZiaZarifi, "The lesson of Afghanistan," *International Herald Tribune*, 20 May 2003. Also see Sarah Chayes, "Afghanistan's Future: Lost in the Shuffle," *New York Times*, op-ed, 1 July 2003.

could entirely leave Pakistan out. It would be in Pakistan's interest to thus desist from waging a proxy battle with Karzai as agreed upon by neighbors including Iran, China, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in the Kabul Declaration signed in December 2002, wherein 22 countries pledged their commitment to "supportive bilateral relationships based on the principles of territorial integrity, mutual respect, friendly relations, co-operation and non-interference in each other's internal affairs."²¹⁹

The elements of the coalition government in Pakistan are presumed to have some leverage in quelling Pashtun dissidence that is the principal opposition that Karzai or any western backed leader in Kabul will face. The Mutahidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a coalition of Islamist parties that forms a crucial part of the government in Pakistan headed by Zafrullah Jamali, also contains the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) that is said to exercise influence over the madrassas that have generated radical recruits. These parties have a potentially crucial role after the Taliban murdered Abdul Haq and Haji Abdul Qadir, two prominent Pashtun leaders. The Islamist parties had hinted at cooperating with the Americans at the time of forming the government but were to later express severe opposition to the war against Iraq. Nonetheless, analysts expect them to become stakeholders in the Musharraf regime and thereby temper restive Pashtun elements within Pakistan and across in Afghanistan that threaten Karzai's rule.²²⁰ One commercial spin-off from Afghan stability for Pakistan would be the Trans-Afghan Gas Pipeline (TAP) to carry Turkmenistan's natural gas to the Indian Ocean via Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Petroleum ministers of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkmenistan formally invited India to join the pipeline in February 2003.²²¹ There is a revived interest in the \$3.2 billion project after the energy firm Unocal withdrew from the consortium in 1998. The pipeline envisages pumping of gas up to 700 billion cubic feet from

²¹⁹ For text of agreement see *Afghanistan: Good-neighborly Relations Declaration* at http://www.reliefweb.int/w/Rwb.nsf/0_64D3FD3F7CD2627CC1256C9F0058470B?OpenDocument&Start=1&Count=1000&ExpandView&StartKey=Afghanistan.

For an assessment of attempts by Afghanistan's neighbors to undermine the agreement see Ahmed Rashid, "Jockeying for influence, neighbors undermine Afghan pact," www.eurasianet.org, 15 January 2003.

²²⁰ M K Bhadrakumar, "Afghanistan: Pakistan's 'new force' to the rescue?" *Asia Times Online*, www.atimes.com, 17 October 2002.

²²¹ B. Muralidhar Reddy, "India invited to join Afghan pipeline project," *The Hindu*, 23 February 2003.

Turkmenistan's Dauletabad-Donmez field to Pakistan and down to India. But India's fears of investing in Pakistani dependability have thus far restrained its interest in the same. The idea of "strategic depth" proposed by Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg, that involves a massive retrenchment of Pakistan forces into Afghan territory during armed conflict with India, makes Indian planners wary of any long term commercial venture involving its western neighbor.

Kabul shares India's general suspicion of Pakistani intent which has been to place a pliant regime to counter irredentist Pashtun claim within its borders. As Rashid writes, Pakistan effectively "undermines Kabul's authority by allowing senior Taliban leaders and other anti-government renegades, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani, to find de facto sanctuary in Pakistan's tribal belt."²²² Karzai's regime, though, has sought to placate Pakistani fears by stating that its friendship with India is not aimed at its eastern neighbor. But sections of the new regime remain suspicious. Interior Minister Younis Qanooni has said that his government would resist Pakistani meddling adding that the latter was attempting to interfere in Kabul's affairs by supplying the Taliban with arms earlier in the anti-terrorism campaign, charges that Islamabad denies strongly.²²³ Pakistani machinations in Afghanistan have a bearing on India's prospects in the region but importantly Islamabad also ends up "loosing out because its myopic policies place countering India above trade and stability in Afghanistan," as a Western ambassador in Islamabad put it.²²⁴ Should Pakistan choose to rebuild ties with Afghanistan, restrain Afghan radical elements that it has ties with and partake of the energy and trade links being rapidly forged due to the American presence, then India stands to benefit from the virtuous cycle that will ensue.

However Pakistan's prospects in materializing ties with Kabul appears relevant only to a point given the Bush administration's barely disguised campaign in favor of regime change in Iran which threatens to negatively effect Pakistan's grand strategy. The prospect of a regime allied

²²² Ahmed Rashid, "Afghan-Pakistani tension prompts Kabul to develop new trade routes," www.eurasianet.org 24 January 2003.

²²³ Agam Shah, "New Afghan leadership team turns to India for assistance," www.eurasianet.org , 13 December 2001.

²²⁴ Ahmed Rashid, "Afghan-Pakistani tension prompts Kabul to develop new trade routes," *op. cit.*

to America in Iran will lead to the consolidation of a Central Asia-Afghanistan-Iran trade and energy route that severely undermines Pakistan's strategic value for Washington. Importantly, it will be deemed as the sole, sovereign, safe haven for Islamists amid a region populated with elites doing the Islamist anti-American bidding.

For the foreseeable future where India is concerned, a future dispensation that undermines the Tajiks to accommodate Pashtuns will limit India's influence. New Delhi will benefit from a persistent Afghan political stalemate sustained by a continuing American armed presence. Meanwhile, the low-key Russian-Iranian-Indian concert on Afghanistan will strive to enlarge their sphere of activity especially in western and northern areas. Afghanistan remains a worrying source of instability for the three powers owing to presence of Islamist terrorism, drug trafficking, Pakistani activism and the enlarged role for the US in the region (though India would be least concerned among the three about the latter). Thus the three countries are in constant touch on Afghanistan through joint working groups. An Indo-Russian declaration asserts that the countries "feel that there is a need to continuously assess the evolving Afghan situation and intend to continue and expand the close cooperation on Afghanistan", resolving to cooperate closely in the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and agreeing "that these should be driven by Afghan priorities" which is a veiled implication to keep both Pakistan and the US out of it.²²⁵ Which under current circumstances is a simplistic expectation given the geopolitical reordering that is taking place northward in Central Asia and potentially on the west in Iran.

²²⁵ *Delhi Declaration on Further Consolidation of Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Russian Federation*, 4 December 2002, <http://meadev.nic.in/speeches/4decdelhi-decorationussia.htm>

²²⁶ Stephen Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), p. 35.

VI. INDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

The Afghan instability and deteriorating relations with Pakistan complicates India's relations with the five Central Asian Republics (CARs). The region's fluid geopolitical alignments too hamper Indian prerogatives; in a sense the region underlines why Stephen Cohen calls India the weakest of the great states.²²⁶ The variety of interlocking transnational linkages in Central Asia and its own weak economy effectively jostle India out of the possibility of engaging the region in a manner consistent with its great power aspirations. The region's intricate geopolitics provides a glimpse into India's current constraints and possible options for the future.

Structural realities of the 'New Great Game'

Regional and global powers are earnestly pursuing interests in Central Asia owing to its geopolitical status and economic promise. The region enormous mineral reserves, its intractable terrain that facilitates terrorism and drug trafficking, its location as the gateway for east-west trade, and malleable political preferences of the ruling elites have elicited the interest of various powers. The continuing presence of American military bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lend an urgency to the stakes involved in the 'New Great Game' being played out since the end of the Soviet Union. Virtually every neighboring power has sought to exercise influence in the region, beginning with Turkey which was primarily the Western conduit to prevent the CARs from slipping into the Iranian sphere of influence. The four CARs of Turkic cultural extraction, barring Tajikistan, were assumed to be a diplomatic *tabula rasa* on which a new Western orientation could be scripted. Despite feverish parleys between Ankara and the CARs that resulted in \$1.2 billion investment by 1994 the failure of Turkish business to invest and the lack of sea access for land-locked Central Asia made the CARs look elsewhere for economic succor.²²⁷

Besides energy reserves, the Central Asian propensity for regional strife among states and with non-state actors and severe structural constraints

²²⁷ Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* (London: Zed Books, 1994), p. 212.

on state building in the new republics further invited considerable outside interest and investment. Every CARs is subject to internal dissent and external pressures. Kazakhstan has a Russian separatist movement for independence while Uighur militants operate within its border as part of their campaign in neighboring Xinjiang province of China; Uzbekistan has had skirmishes with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan besides facing a formidable insurgency waged by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU); Tajikistan has had a bloody civil war with the United Tajik opposition in 1995 that necessitates Russian military bases, besides conflict over water resources with Tashkent even as the Afghan civil war threatens to spillover to neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.²²⁸

Besides, weak economies and structural weaknesses compelled the CARs to seek out foreign investment. It was reported that, for starters, the CARs did not have adequate trained diplomatic personnel to begin with and few were of ambassadorial rank or with foreign language acquaintance. Kazakhstan, for instance, had barely 20 diplomats in 1991. In the Soviet era most diplomats from Central Asian tended to be relegated to Africa or Asia at junior levels.²²⁹ Following a somewhat recessed Turkish interest, the CARs courted outside powers also to circumvent a dependent relationship on Russia that predominantly facilitates their trade northwestward via the Baltic ports. The US, obviously eager to undermine neighboring Russian and Chinese interests, has taken an active role beginning with the denuclearization of Kazakhstan in the early 1990s. It has since invested \$50 billion with the oil and gas resources of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan playing a prominent role in energy planning.²³⁰ Importantly, Washington has secured important security links with the Central Asian regimes through the NATO's Partnership for Peace (PFP) program that featured military to military cooperation in order to reduce regional instability. Military exercises with the five republics led to the formation of the Central Asian Peacekeeping Battalion (CENTRASBAT) in late 1995. The US has security cooperation agreements in place, institutionalized through joint commissions with Kazakhstan and

²²⁸ For excellent typologies and summary of crosscutting conflicts in Central Asia, see Charles Fairbanks, S. Frederick Starr et al, *Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia* (Washington D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2001), pp. 15-24.

²²⁹ Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?*, p. 207.

²³⁰ *Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia*, op. cit., p. 9.

Uzbekistan.²³¹ The Taliban's 1998 incursion across the Amu Darya river and support to the IMU's operations in 1999 has consolidated links with Washington that facilitated easy transition to establishing military bases to the US following 9/11.

India's low key engagement of the CARs

Amidst this packed diplomatic field, India has sought to strengthen bilateral links, among other things, to deny strategic advantage to Pakistan. On its part, Islamabad has sought to highlight its importance in providing sea access to the CARs and attempting to co-opt the countries by providing loans ranging from \$10 to \$30 million by 1994 in addition to help build the \$500 million hydel power plant in Tajikistan.²³² Pakistan's efforts to secure links with Central Asia via nudging the direction of trade southward to the Arabian Sea have been frustrated by the Afghan impasse. From the CARs vantage, though, India is a useful source for industrial investment, consumer goods and technical training. Also India's secular credentials have added value as opposed to Pakistan's repute for hosting and aiding Islamist terror groups that have undermined internal security in the republics. To this end, all Central Asian leaders have visited India in the 1990s. President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan in February 1992 and December 1996; President Akaev of the Kyrgyz Republic in March 1992 and April 1999; Turkmenistan's President Niyazov in April 1992 and February 1997 while Tajikistan Prime Minister visited New Delhi in February 1993, followed by the Tajik President Rakhmanov in December 1995. During his tenure, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao paid return visits to each country barring Tajikistan due to its civil war.²³³

The substance of agreements have to do with the CARs seeking economic assistance in whatever measure available while India solicits

²³¹ For the development of US interests in Central Asia during the 1990s see Elizabeth Wishnick, *Growing US Security Interests in Central Asia* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute monograph, October 2002), pp. 3-6. For details of military ties see Lyle J. Goldstein, "Making the most of Central Asian Partnerships," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Summer 2002, pp. 82-90.

²³² Qutubuddin Aziz, "Pakistan and the Central Asian States" in Riazul Islam, Kazi A. Kadir et al eds., *Central Asia: History, Politics and Culture* (Karachi: Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, 1999), p. 171.

²³³ For an comprehensive overview of Indian attempts to engage the new CARs, see Gilles Boquerat, "India's relations with Central Asia: Unsubstantiated Gravitation," *Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, March-April 1999, available at www.csh-delhi.com

political support to counter Pakistan plus a presence in emerging multilateral ventures that seek to strengthen links between South and Central Asia. Even though India is not in a position to dole out huge sums, the CARs are simply not in a position to refuse any bilateral interest. Commenting on the significant relations that Israel has managed with the CARs an analyst writes that “the new Central Asian States are so poor economically that they are willing to accept financial assistance from any state which extends it, in the form of technical assistance or foreign aid.”²³⁴ India thus extended in the 1990s credit lines worth \$20 million to Kazakhstan, \$15 million to Turkmenistan and \$5 million each to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Joint commissions have been instituted with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Uzbekistan. However, long trade routes circumventing Pakistan and Afghanistan hampered Indo-Central Asian commerce, which amounted to merely 0.3 percent and 0.11 percent of India’s global trade in 1993-94 and 1997-98 respectively.²³⁵ This has not improved greatly since. The bulk of the trade is with Kazakhstan with an average annual volume of trade of just \$44 million over the last five years.²³⁶

Economic impediments and possible options for India

The nature of bilateral negotiations clearly conveys the exploratory nature of the economic relations. Some of the items reported in the annual reports of India’s Commerce Ministry include unspecified agreements or protocols on “long term cooperation in trade, economic cooperation & cooperation in the field of Industry”; joint commission meetings at the ministry level with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan; a visit by a Minister for small-scale industries to Alma Aty which is both arguably low in the ministerial pecking order and in the hierarchy of Indian industrial priorities. The one exceptional Indian private venture, albeit by a non-resident Indian, is that of Ispat Industries which acquired the Kazakh government’s steel facility in Karaganda and through its subsidiary Ispat Karamet investing \$580 million over the next five years and employs an

²³⁴ Bulent Aras, “Post Cold War realities: Israel’s strategy in Azerbaijan and Central Asia,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. V, No. 4, January 1998, p. 69.

²³⁵ Boquerat, “India’s relations with Central Asia: Unsubstantiated Gravitation,” op. cit.

²³⁶ Ministry of Commerce website, Government of India, http://commerce.nic.in/focus_cis.htm#h14. For that matter far away Japan has a greater trade volume with Kyrgyzstan than India. See “Indo-Kyrgyz Bilateral Relations,” at MEA website <http://www.meadev.nic.in/foreign/kirgiz.htm>

estimated 60,000 Kazakhs. However, business representatives speaking at a CII conference on India's business prospects in Central Asia in May 2003, lamented the state's failure to "market the Indian nation as whole" and urged the formation of an apex authority through which the government, chambers of commerce, trade and tourism promotion bodies could work in tandem to further Indian interests. Other impediments highlighted include inadequate banking facilities in the region that hinders conversion of local currency into US dollars; the paucity of credible credit reports of local companies to forge joint ventures with; the convention of *payment after delivery* that is cumbersome for small and medium Indian companies; steep telecommunication tariffs (e.g. a telephone call to India costing up to \$2.8 per minute from Kazakhstan) besides the inadequate trade promotion initiatives by the government, which is strikingly deficient considering that the US and UK bodies are "virtually holding conventions every week."²³⁷

Such encumbrances are understandable considering that Central Asian economies, by and large, have not yet recovered fully from the economic disruption caused by the break-up of the erstwhile USSR. Although resource-rich, the extent of control exercised by Moscow on the same resources did not necessarily translate into an improvement in fortunes and instead necessitated a fresh search for alternative markets for their oil and gas resources. The landlocked status of these republics and the political ferment therein compounded the difficulty. In any case, as economist Dipankar Sengupta points out, meaningful linkages with the world economy through resource revenues would have raised the incomes of the people of the regions only *indirectly*, as the state would be the primary beneficiary. The option, then, for Indian businessmen under such conditions is to bid for construction projects (competing with global majors) financed by the state or oil companies to make a mark in Central Asia, as is currently the case. But this has the unhappy effect, for an economy like India, of stagnating the nature of the Central Asian consumer goods market, which remains small in the face of the relatively slow exploitation of resources. Importantly, "disposable incomes in most of these regions are low and thus the potential market for Indian exporters who have to face competition

²³⁷ Proceedings of seminar on "Central Asia and Indian Business: Emerging Trends and Opportunities," organized by the *Confederation of Indian Industry* (CII), 22 May 2003, New Delhi.

from China is also low.” This calls for some innovation if India is to nurture and develop this market. Sengupta, therefore, argues:

Indian exporters must enable Central Asian entrepreneurs to develop suitable products for the world market and help them export such products to the rest of the world and if possible introduce these products into the Indian market itself. For example, India can help export Central Asian floricultural products to the rest of the world. Such products can be grown in this region and depend on air transport (overcoming the disadvantage of being landlocked). India could import cotton from these regions and add value to it. As incomes in Central Asia rise as a result of these efforts, purchasing power in this region will rise creating a market where Indian goods may be sold. This is because such activities put money directly in to the hand of economic agents and not the state. The Central Asian market requires patience and ingenuity to crack; shortsightedness and myopia will not serve India well in this region.²³⁸

Advisedly, India would need to work on such initiatives if it intends to provide serious competition to China, which has already attained a formidable stake in the region. It has, for instance, invested over \$500 million in the non-energy sector across the region with a growing emphasis on small and medium companies; the kind of which is expected to grow 30-50 times over the next 10 years. In the energy field, China National Petroleum has invested an impressive \$4 billion in Kazakhstan alone.²³⁹ Even though Chinese business is expected to face severe American competition after 9/11, it has already gained a significant foothold, symbolized by the use of Shanghai as Kazakhstan’s primary port. In fact, the fear that China will fill in the vacuum in Central Asia as it strove to do so in South East Asia after the end of the Cold War appears to animate India’s engagement of the CARs, but the commensurate institutional energy is not yet forthcoming, even though the MEA declared 1999 as the Year of Central Asia.²⁴⁰

²³⁸ I am indebted to Dipankar Sengupta, Research Fellow, Centre de Sciences Humaines, for contributing this comment, made earlier at the May 2003 CII summit, *ibid*.

²³⁹ See Niklas Swanstrom, “Chinese business interests in Central Asia: A Quest for Dominance,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 18 June 2003, http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=1495

²⁴⁰ Amrita Abraham, “Take the long view,” *Indian Express*, 22 December 1999.

Convergence of values and emerging multilateralism

Notwithstanding the weak economic linkages, there is a strong convergence of political interest between India and the CARs on the matter of regional security and terrorism that forebodes well for New Delhi as a new power dispensation takes shape in Southwest and Central Asia. Such concord has previously translated into agreements such as “Principles of Inter-State Relations and Cooperation” with Uzbekistan and a “Declaration of Principles and Directions of Cooperation” with the other four republics that affirm their common stand on terrorism and drug trafficking. Which appears for most part a platitudinous substitute for lack of economic depth in the relations, but one that have assumed significance following the increased terror threat during the late 1990s and overtly in the aftermath of 9/11.

India seeks to be part of multilateral arrangements that have recently emerged such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), a grouping of 16 nations from Central Asia, South Asia and Middle East, that had its inaugural meeting in Alma Aty in June 2002. The CICA is a useful forum that facilitates interaction among member states like India, China, Pakistan, Russia, Israel, Iran, Egypt and the Central Asian states. While this affords the prospect of furthering political dialogue and economic links, it lacks definite goals beyond combating terrorism which is its current primary concern. Also, the presence of adversaries such as Israel and Iran or India and Pakistan can serve to undermine collective purposes. For instance, in the inaugural meeting the Indian and Pakistani delegations refused to meet together despite the entreaties of Russian President Vladimir Putin.²⁴¹ In addition, the absence of the US with its major presence in the region undercuts the authority of the grouping.

India is also seeking membership in the Chinese initiated six-member Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO, the erstwhile Shanghai Forum) that includes Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and

²⁴¹ Aibat Zharikbayev, “Conference of Asian States limited in its ability to promote regional stability,” www.eurasianet.org, 6 June 2002, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav060602a.shtml>

Russia.²⁴² China had conceived of the SCO to consolidate alliances in Central Asia, secure its western frontier, and take advantage of waning Russian influence in the region by positing a grouping that also pointedly left out the US even though, Washington, at the time of its creation in June 2001, had acquired a significant interest in the region. However, 9/11 allowed the US to have a strategic foothold in Central Asia and forced China to acquiesce with the security arrangements, like military bases, that are still in place in the region, effectively robbing China of any chance to establish an unhindered sphere of influence in the region.²⁴³ For India, though, gaining entry into groupings like the SCO and CICA offers the option of denying Pakistan a free hand in multilateral settings besides the added benefit of providing contexts to further bilateral relations.

CICA's contemporary focus on transnational terrorism conveys the level of concern regarding the problem in Central Asia capitals. This has allowed India to forge defense ties with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In 1999, India and Uzbekistan declared their intent on deepening defense relations and holding regular consultations on Afghanistan, apart from Track II initiatives. In principle, India also accepted the Uzbek offer to provide product support for some Indian Air Force (IAF) planes, particularly the IL-76 Ilyushin transport planes which are manufactured in Tashkent.²⁴⁴

Its defense relationship with Tajikistan is more intensive, facilitated in part by the presence of Russian bases in the country and the mutual concern and coordination regarding Afghanistan. Reports indicate that India established a military base at Farkhor close to the Afghan border manned by a handful of defense "advisors" that has been "quietly operational" since May 2002.²⁴⁵ Rahul Bedi reports that the base was used to advise the Northern Alliance during the war against Taliban. Also helicopter technicians from RAW's India's Aviation Research Centre (ARC) repaired

²⁴² The SCO members signed a charter in June 2002 and agreed to establish a permanent secretariat in Beijing besides establishing an anti-terrorism unit in Bishkek. Elizabeth Wishnick, *Growing US Security Interests in Central Asia*, op. cit., p. 17.

²⁴³ On China's strategic losses after 9/11 see Mohan Malik, *Dragon on Terrorism: Assessing China's Tactical Gains and Strategic Losses Post-September 11*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute monograph, October 2002, esp. pp. 33-35.

²⁴⁴ Atul Aneja, "India, Uzbekistan to deepen defence ties," *The Hindu*, 19 May 1999.

²⁴⁵ Rahul Bedi, "India and Central Asia," *Frontline*, Vol. 19, Issue 19, 14-27 September 2002.

the Northern Alliance's Soviet-made Mi-17 and Mi-35 attack helicopters during anti-Taliban operations.²⁴⁶ Furthermore, according to agreements reached during Defense Minister George Fernandes' April 2002 visit to Dushanbe, India will train the Tajik Air Force and other defense personnel, service its Soviet/Russian military equipment besides imparting English language instruction to the Tajik armed forces.²⁴⁷ It was also reported that nearly all of Tajikistan's 190 fighter aircraft, including the MiG 21, MiG 21s, MiG 27s, MiG 29s and Sukhoi 24s, are "operated" by the Indian Air Force (IAF).²⁴⁸

Effectively, India's Central Asia outlook is governed largely by geopolitical constraints that are compounded by its own economic debilities and ministerial inattentiveness. Its access to the region is impaired by Afghan turbulence, which it attempts to circumvent through a combination of Iranian geography and Russian networks. Its weak economy prevents it from being a major player in the Central Asian stakes but it has at least been able to use the anti-terrorism plank to strengthen bilateral relations that would serve it well should it economically be able to do so. At a politico-strategic level, India's ability to maintain good relations across regional faultlines should prove useful in Central Asia as well. Its Iranian and Russian links facilitate commercial benefits that are important for the landlocked states while mutual links with Tel Aviv²⁴⁹, sustained by security interests allow India proximate access to multiple security networks in the region to counter Islamist terror. However, India would still need to seriously step up its economic activity in Central Asia if it envisages a major role in the region.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ See Shaikh Azizur Rahman, "India strikes for oil and gas," *Washington Times*, 2 September 2002 and "India To Help Train Tajik Air Force," www.eurasianet.org, 24 January 2002, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/tajikistan/hypermail/200202/0003.shtml>

²⁴⁸ Bedi, "India and Central Asia," op. cit.

²⁴⁹ On Israel's relations with the five Central Asian Republics see Bulent Aras, "Post-Cold War Realities: Israel's Strategy in Azerbaijan and Central Asia," op. cit., pp. 72-77.

CONCLUSION

An overview of India's foreign policy in the Middle East and Central Asia conveys a good deal about New Delhi's approach to the post Cold War international order. It offers a slant on the assumptions of its strategic elite, its responses to normative pressures, tackling of alliance prospects and reconciliation of diplomatic ambiguities. It also helps in evaluating its reaction to great power politics and its capacity for foreign policy autonomy or subordination, which is the substance of strategic thinking.

Taxonomy of India's strategic thought

The idea of India's strategic thought has been subject to lively academic treatment in recent times, principally due to George Tanham's essay wherein he reckoned contentiously, among other things, that the absence of a strategic culture is underlined by the deficiency of literary materials that bespeaks a lack of intellectual interest in statecraft.²⁵⁰ Apart from the objection that Tanham entirely overlooks the oral tradition, Kanti Bajpai argues that in the absence of extant sources, "the researcher on Indian strategic culture must ... take a more collage-like approach to textuality, fashioning a composite text out of scattered writings in the press, academic journals and volumes, think tank publications, biographies and autobiographies, and so on."²⁵¹ In doing so himself, Bajpai provides a neat taxonomy of the Indian strategic elite dividing them into Nehruvians, Hyper-realists and Neo-liberals and explicates their paradigmatic worldview assumptions and stances on central issues facing Indian security.²⁵²

As a shorthand summary of their worldviews, Nehruvians are akin to liberal institutionalists who reject the notion that conflict is endemic to humanity and place faith in international institutions and negotiations to remove misperceptions among states that is assumed as the root cause of

²⁵⁰ George Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretative Essay* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1992).

²⁵¹ Kanti Bajpai, "Indian Strategic Culture," in Michael R. Chambers eds., *South Asia in 2020: Future Strategic Balances and Alliances* (Carlisle: US Army War College, 2002), p. 249.

²⁵² For a brilliant survey see *ibid.*, pp. 245-304.

conflict. Neo-liberals accept realist notions such as the balance of power but reckon that economic power is the ultimate basis for national power and urge states to use economic interdependence to transcend power rivalries. Hyperrealists recognize power, the potential and exercise thereof, as the only currency in international politics. They urge states to define interests narrowly, build military power, and threaten the use of force to achieve ends and discard all liberal affectation in statecraft deemed as a Nehruvian illusionist legacy.

When abstracted on these lines, India's policy in the Greater Middle East can be characterized as demonstrating a hyperrealist skepticism towards Arab unity or the prospects of any regional political concert in favor of Palestine that was hitherto a factor in its posturing in the region and a corresponding alliance with Israel which is suited to its contemporary security needs. This operates alongside a neoliberal pragmatism that endorses economic engagement of West Asia that is necessitated by energy needs.

A chronological proviso is perhaps in order. Though the relations with Israel have intensified during the current BJP-led government's reign, links with both Tel Aviv and Tehran were forged during the previous Congress reign, indicating a diversified perspective towards the region intending to reconcile immediate defense and security needs with existing commercial interests. Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh's visits to Cairo and Riyadh in January 2001 to smoothen ruffled feathers over links with Israel suggest the felt need not to alienate Arab opinion. The pre-September 2001 approach to West Asia was characterized by a neoliberal emphasis with a hyperrealist sub-text vis-à-vis the absence of political cooperation with Arabs, which was in contrast to security cooperation with Israel. But in the face of eventful traction in the region, India has shown a propensity for hyperrealist short-term policy making, striving for spoils from a region living out a unipolar American moment, thus arguably diluting the vaunted Nehruvian value of maintaining foreign policy autonomy. This is evident given that India's political stance towards the region is currently defined by a consonance with American aims in the region that serve Israeli interests as well.

Ministerial distractions and structural deficiencies

To a large extent, India's preoccupation with Pakistan in the late 1990s, the diversion of diplomatic energy towards the US after Pokhran, has nudged New Delhi towards a binary reading of the region that caused a neglect in exploring substantive bilateral relations with Arab and Central Asian countries. Since May 1998, the MEA was caught in the diplomatic maelstrom by virtue of joining the nuclear weapons club; principally through the strenuous talks between Jaswant Singh and the US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott amid parleys dealing with the status of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and responding to demands for delineating India's nuclear doctrine and so on. In addition, India witnessed the collapse of the Lahore Declaration, fought a demanding war with Pakistan over the Kargil incursions in 1999, and experienced the fiasco of the Agra summit in 2001 while being subject to frequent terror attacks in Kashmir. It is worth mentioning that during this time there was no significant development worth reporting on relations with China.

Besides, structural deficiencies of the MEA such as workforce shortages²⁵³ and its inert style of functioning also undermined initiative towards the region at large, necessitating creative political intervention to provide the thrust for key relations such as Israel and Iran. Writing on the inadequate progress of relations with the US, that is consistent with the convergence of strategic views, a recent publication makes the scathing remark that "the unique tendency of the MEA to act as the gatekeeper for all Ministries in the Government of India on all matters relating to foreign countries, despite its patent inability to do, leads to abnormal delays in the decision-making process and sub-optimal solutions."²⁵⁴ The case of India in the Greater Middle East at large, is thus similar to that of its 'Look East'

²⁵³ By one estimate, the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) is "spread too thin for all the roles it should perform" by having barely 770 officials of the rank of Third Secretary and above to man the MEA, the 113 embassies and permanent missions abroad. Importantly, of the 770 officials, 521 are abroad, leaving the MEA with only 172 to orchestrate policies on all the regions, coordinate with the military forces and intelligence agencies plus operate the various passport offices in India. See Kishan S. Rana's letter in "Express your voice," op-ed. page, *Indian Express*, 5 July 2003. For a telling overview on the structural constraints and critique of MEA functioning see Shekhar Gupta, "Indian Fossil Service," *Indian Express*, 28 June 2003, and responses to Gupta, apart from Rana's mentioned above.

²⁵⁴ *India-US Relations: Promoting Synergy* (New Delhi, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2003), p. 68.

policy which in Amitabh Mattoo's words "has not acquired the thrust, or indeed the institutional requirements, to pursue its interests in the region in a systematic and purposeful manner."²⁵⁵

Dual drives of current foreign policy

Thus the lack of a coordinated focus on West and Central Asia as a whole conversely throws the India-Israel relationship into higher relief. The India-Israel relations is clearly a landmark in New Delhi's policy reorientation that has been governed by Israel's search for new allies beyond the Middle East, to shore up its struggling defense industry; to obviate encirclement by hostile powers and form partnerships that can insure against any short-term American disinterest in the post Cold War world. For India, Israel provides access to high-technology weaponry and serves as a critical ally in its fight against the global terror network by way of intelligence sharing and training. The shared values of respective policy elites in both countries regarding Islamist violence, and the use of force to tackle the same, have led to the rapid consolidation of relations particularly between the defense establishments. The BJP's weakening commitment to secularism in India's public life is primarily the outworking of an anti-Muslim worldview. This is in accord with a constricted, negative definition of Israeli state interests, typified by the current Ariel Sharon government, setting the stage for a long-term convergence of values among sections of the respective strategic elites. After the cataclysmic events of 2001, the Indian policy elite has also used the Israel connection to firm up relations with Washington in part due to the advocacy of the pro-Israel lobbies like the American Jewish Committee (AJC) which will soon have an office in New Delhi. In a sense, Israel facilitates the gratification of the dual drives in the BJP establishment – that of an antipathy towards Islam and an ingratiating impulse vis-à-vis the US.

To clarify the latter assertion, which is of particular import to India's role in West Asia: There is, to be sure, a strong anti-American stream within Hindu nationalism, especially within the RSS that opposed Gulf War II against Iraq. This refers though to pro-US elements in the BJP-led government who are ideologically impelled towards embracing

²⁵⁵ Amitabh Mattoo, "ASEAN in India's Foreign Policy," in Frederic Grare and Amitabh Mattoo eds., *India and ASEAN: The Politics of India's Look East Policy*, op. cit., p. 92.

Washington as a superpower, a stance that is endorsed by the influential diaspora in the US. This impulse has been acted upon by the BJP-led government in recent times that in turn has a bearing on India's Greater Middle East outlook. For instance, the erstwhile foreign minister Jaswant Singh adumbrated the possibility of a contextual alliance with the US in his 1999 book where he writes that :

US pre-eminence in the global strategic architecture is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future. Meaningful broad-based engagement with the United States spanning political, economic and technological interests and commonalities, will impact beneficially on our external security concerns with a resultant albeit less visible impact on our internal security environment.²⁵⁶

The US and India have forged deeper ties since the May 1998 nuclear tests, importantly recognized the value of security cooperation in recent years which has assumed a greater urgency after 2001. Both countries recently signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in December 2002 that ensures the sharing of military intelligence between India and the United States.²⁵⁷ A fairly secretive joint Indo-US army exercise codenamed "Balance Iroquois 03-1" or Vajra Prahar was also conducted in end April 2002.

Assenting to US grand strategy

Importantly, the post 9/11 phase has seen India enlist as an active partner of the US in the 'war against terror'. In fact, India's reaction to 9/11 has been compared with that of Britain's to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that, according to British columnist William Rees-Mogg, amounted, after the horror, to "a huge sense of relief that the USA was now involved in World War II."²⁵⁸ It has since used every opportunity to elicit American pressure on Pakistan to end "crossborder terrorism," a common refrain in recent policy pronouncements. If National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra's call for a joint US-Israel-India alliance to fight terror is

²⁵⁶ Jaswant Singh, *Defending India* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 7.

²⁵⁷ Rahul Bedi, "A year after Sept. 11, U.S. reaps strategic bonus in Asia," http://www.cyberdyaryo.com/features/f2002_0911_03.htm

²⁵⁸ Sultan Shahin, "India's startling change of axis," *Asia Times Online*, 13 May 2003, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/EE13Df01.html

representative of things to come, it signifies two things. One, that India will in the foreseeable future continue to look to the US for restraining Pakistani adventurism in Kashmir, underlining the impression that India uses multilateralism to reinforce its dominance in South Asia.²⁵⁹ Also, the recent tendency to appraise every policy initiative, particularly towards the US, in terms of outmaneuvering Pakistan has the effect of eliciting a pro-US stance on issues resulting in the relative loss of Indian foreign policy autonomy. This was evident during Gulf War II, where India practiced a kind of a *fait accompli* realism by eventually endorsing the winner of the outcome while waffling through the buildup to war – effectively subordinating the inherited positions on state sovereignty, superpower intervention and third world solidarity to its currently perceived security need to ally with a superpower.

This was confirmed too by the government's response to the US request to send 17000 troops to Iraq to "police" areas of Northern Iraq. Even though it decided on 14 July not to send the troops, there was little indication that the government was opposed to the idea on principle, even though the perfunctory preference for troops to operate under the UN flag was aired. In itself, it was remarkable considering the implication of nearly endorsing of what is widely regarded as an occupation force for a country proud of its anti-colonial record. Official responses indicated that negotiations pertained to the UN role, location of operations and modalities of financing the Indian forces rather than contesting the propriety of the proposed project. Deputy Prime Minister Advani's criticism of the Congress Party in Washington for outright rejection of the idea suggests that sending the troops was definitely on. India seemed to have eventually held back owing to the domestic fallout following the possible spectacle of body bags arriving home. This factor was probably prominent in the consideration, given that five crucial states were headed for provincial elections in late 2003.²⁶⁰ The extremely hazardous ground situation in Iraq as, on mid July 2003, was also a factor. This was said to have eventually

²⁵⁹ Frederic Grare, "In search of a role: India and the ASEAN Regional Forum," in Frederic Grare and Amitabh Mattoo eds., *India and ASEAN: The Politics of India's Look East Policy*, op. cit., p. 121

²⁶⁰ See Jyoti Malhotra, "Between Iraq and a hard place, Govt to say no," *Indian Express*, 14 July 2003.

persuaded both Advani and Brajesh Mishra to join the naysayers in the government. Presciently enough for New Delhi, less than a week after India's troops decision, a Pentagon team admitted that "time was running out" for the US to establish law and order in Iraq. The team stated that there was growing potential for "real chaos" if urgent action was not taken within three months to provide security, basic facilities and political opportunity for the Iraqis.²⁶¹

However, the fact India seriously considered putting its troops in a situation wherein they might shoot Arab civilians is emblematic of the shift in India's priorities and its disposition to orchestrate a Middle East policy that might pass off as a burgeoning sub-plot of American security management of the region. This is particularly a feature of post 9/11 foreign policy, the tenor of which was missing earlier, evinced by the odd inclination to criticize American airstrikes on Iraq (in 1998) or persist with dealing with the Hussein regime. Thus, despite the measured judgment to protect its expatriate interests that might have been jeopardized by troop action in Iraq, India tacitly endorses contemporary American grand strategy in the region that has parallels with the Pakistani endorsement of the Eisenhower doctrine in the 1950s that culminated in the 1955 Baghdad Pact (later CENTO). The only exception being the absence of formal treaties that might be considered redundant instruments in a unipolar world, especially since they presume a volitional accord among actors which is not always forthcoming, in this case regarding Iran as discussed elsewhere.

To this end, the establishment of formative military ties with Saudi Arabia and Oman serve both American interests besides signifying tentative attempts to encircle Pakistan and safeguard the Indian Ocean. India and Oman agreed in October 2002 to hold joint military exercises and join

²⁶¹ "'Time running out' to secure Iraq" *BBC News*, 18 July 2003, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3076531.stm . News reports soon after indicated that the US was considering giving the UN a bigger role, virtually an admission that things have not gone on in Iraq as planned by the Bush administration. See Jonathan Wright, "U.S. says open to changing Iraqi mandate," *Reuters*, 18 July 2003, <http://reuters.com/newsArticle.jhtml?type=politicsNews&storyID=3118685>

hands in training and defense production.²⁶² India has sought to improve defense and military relations with Saudi Arabia. Reports indicate that India has been discussing the prospect of joint military exercises, offering to launch annual naval exercises with the kingdom before offering aircraft and ground systems.²⁶³

The hyperrealist calculation to acquiesce with American initiatives in the region to the extent possible without harming short-term economic interests, a marked departure from its previous stances, is borne out of the perceived lack of Middle Eastern empathy with India's security situation highlighted over the years by the ambivalent responses to the Kashmir issue and a perceived intrusive interest in the situation of Indian Muslims. This was underscored recently too by the fact that none of the Arab countries barring Qatar, Oman and Syria condemned the 13 December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian parliament.²⁶⁴ The fluid fortunes of Palestine in evoking a Western response and the lack of a concerted state response in the region to the issue lends a realistic rationale to India's recasting its approach to the region notwithstanding the ideological preferences of the current Hindu nationalist regime.

Dissonance over Iran

Situational challenges are however scarcely customized for strategic schools of thought.²⁶⁵ There is a tension within Indian policy between a hyper-realist dependence on Israel and the US versus an omni-engagement of Iran that simultaneously serves as a market for Indian goods and services, a conduit for commerce with Central Asia, an ally in maintaining the Afghan stalemate, a source of energy and a potential strategic partner that helps encircle Pakistan. Incidentally, the India-Iran relations feature in RAND Corporation's recent list of ten key "international security developments

²⁶² The Chinese collaboration in building the deep sea Pakistan port at Gwadar is said to have brought the two together. "Military relations with Oman bridge a key gulf," *Hindustan Times*, 10 October 2002.

²⁶³ Another effort to counter the strong Saudi-Pakistan links that include annual military exercises and joint weapon production. *Middle East Newslines*, April 2002, http://www.menewslines.com/stories/2002/april/04_01_4.html

²⁶⁴ "Indo-Israeli ties not to affect support to Arab cause," *The Hindu*, 8 January 2002.

²⁶⁵ Which explains the complexity in establishing a causal link between strategic thought and practice. See Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Spring 1995, pp. 52-64.

that are not getting the attention they deserve.”²⁶⁶ Besides, Bush administration officials have warned that the New Delhi-Tehran alliance could “raise obstacles in our burgeoning defense ties” with India despite arguments that both countries could be the key to regional stability since they share a mutual fear of the destabilizing potential of the Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam.²⁶⁷

However, the US has scarcely hidden its intent in favor of regime change in Iran as well, which has thus far been rejected by the Indian leadership. This would be cold comfort for the current regime in Tehran given that New Delhi contemplated sending troops to Iraq after characterizing Saddam Hussein as a friend till late last year while Vajpayee declared that American unilateralism in Iraq would scar the UN. India might therefore not be expected to resist a future regime change initiative of the Bush administration in Tehran notwithstanding the distaste it might share concerning it with Russia, another close ally of Iran.

Effectively, India currently thrives on its neighborly presence as a huge market and a source of technology and services. It is also well aware of the continuing American presence in the region and realizes that while the flawed authority of Middle Eastern regimes makes elites interchangeable, state interests of the region will not risk alienating New Delhi over the long run owing to its formidable structural profile.²⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the absence of a multilateral concert like that of Arab nationalism, as opposed to say the ASEAN that facilitates its “Look East policy”, necessitates a contextual bilateral approach rather than a catchall perspective on the region. What would complicate India’s Middle East policy in the short run though would be a vacillating anti-Iran policy of the Bush administration if it were unsure either of the outcome or its value in becoming a re-election issue in November 2004. Staccato destabilization of Tehran by the US would severely test the depth of India-Iran relations and potentially undermine New Delhi’s Central Asia plans and might well accelerate closer Iran-Pakistan ties.

²⁶⁶ C. Christine Fair, “The Teheran-New Delhi Axis”, in “Headlines over the Horizon,” *The Atlantic*, July – August 2003, p. 86.

²⁶⁷ Stanley A Weiss, “India + Iran = A foundation for stability,” *International Herald Tribune*, 6 February 2003.

²⁶⁸ This might also account for the greater public disclosure of the substance of ties with Israel in recent times.

Implications for the Emerging Power debate

What implications do such ambiguities have on the debate on India's claims to be a major power? India does not fulfill many of the conditions generated in scholarly treatments on the subject. For instance, Robert Keohane's expectation leans towards singularity when he defines a great power as "a state whose leaders consider that it can alone exercise a large, perhaps decisive impact on the international system."²⁶⁹ Jack Levy posits a slightly tempered definition as a state "that plays a major role in international politics with respect to security-related issues. The Great Powers can be differentiated from other states by their military power, their interests, their behavior in general and interactions with other Powers, other Powers' perception of them, and some formal criteria."²⁷⁰

Though India has impressive national power attributes such as military strength, sizeable territory, population size and economic strength which elicits a consideration in the "great" or "emerging" power debate, two particular conditions invoked in the debate are relevant to this discussion. One is the ability of a regional power like India to project power into another region²⁷¹ and the perceptual clout that an emerging power can command. Paraphrasing Levy, Nayar and Paul state that "great powers are differentiated through perceptions that others hold of them and perceptions they hold of themselves with respect to their status."²⁷² This is, in a way, linked to the intangible notion of *soft power* that Joseph Nye elaborated upon, namely the ability to influence the preferences of other nations through the exercise of norms, assuming leadership role in international institutions, culture, state capacity, strategy/diplomacy and national leadership.²⁷³

When applied to the Greater Middle East, India's sizeable military force, nuclear weapons capability aided by its missile program, make it a

²⁶⁹consulates⁶⁹ Robert Keohane, "Lilliputians Dilemmas," *International Organization*, Spring 1969, pp. 291-310. Cf. Nayar and Paul, op. cit., *India in the World Order*, p. 30. Nayar and Paul provide an excellent historiographical treatment on great powers in the international system, *passim*.

²⁷⁰ Jack Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495-1975*, Cf. Nayar and Paul, p. 30.

²⁷¹ Cohen, *Emerging Power*, op. cit., p. 31.

²⁷² Nayar and Paul, op. cit., p. 30.

²⁷³ Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), Cf. Nayar and Paul, p. 32.

power to be potentially wary of. Its ability to project armed power beyond South Asia is severely suspect for the foreseeable future given the extent of American involvement in the region. But what is particularly striking is India's inability to derive economic advantages from geopolitical shifts in the neighborhood, in a manner similar to that of China in Central Asia. India has thus far been unable to translate its industrial and service expertise plus the English language advantage into a sizeable economic engagement of the region. Some telling statistics convey the inherent weaknesses in its economic profile that limit its power projection capacities. In 1997-98 India had an external trade deficit of about \$6.8 billion and an external debt amounting to 29 percent of its GDP. In the same year, the foreign direct investment was as low as \$2 billion as compared to \$40 billion for China, while its share of the world trade stood at 1.7 percent, including goods and services. India has done better in recent years with foreign exchange reserves reaching \$80 billion by May 2003,²⁷⁴ which is well below China's reported reserves of \$286.4 billion by December 2002, significantly registering an increase of \$74.2 billion over the previous year, almost the same as India's entire reserves.²⁷⁵ Further, the Rupee has experienced 300 percent devaluation in relation to the US dollar between 1985 and 2001. Particularly telling is the fact that in 1988 India's per capita GNP was marginally higher than China; but by 1996 China's per capita GNP was more than double that of India.²⁷⁶

This relative weakness tangibly confines India to the subcontinent and frustrates its emerging power status even though its geographic location and other national power attributes warrant a larger role in maintaining stability in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf so far as grand strategy is concerned. Conventionally, status of powers in the international system is said to vary following a major war or cataclysmic events. In view of the arrogated Indian role as part of the 'war against terror' following 9/11 which signaled a changed tenor of dealing with the region, it is conceivable that the current anti-terrorism climate allows India to step out of its South Asia straitjacket, tempt it to assume a larger geopolitical role and importantly compensate for its economic frailties by fitfully endorsing the Bush

²⁷⁴ "India's forex reserves top record \$80 billion, <http://in.news.yahoo.com/030531/137/24sdv.html> , 31 May 2003.

²⁷⁵ "Foreign exchange reserves hit US\$ 286.4 billion," <http://www.china.org.cn/english/government/54544.htm> , 27 January 2003.

²⁷⁶ See Prahlad Basu, "How is India doing? A Score Card," *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 1, March 2003, pp. 13-26, passim.

administration agenda in the Middle East. Nayar and Paul write that great powers contain, accommodate or strive to make satellites of emerging middle powers. The policy of accommodation is particularly pertinent which leads to devolution of regional responsibility to “apparently constructively disposed middle powers.”²⁷⁷ While India is not strategically capable of assuming that role in the Persian Gulf owing to its inadequate naval power, it does not appear politically averse to do so under the current regime.

At the level of perceptions in the region, it is conceivable that “the contraction of the moral consensus”²⁷⁸ in Indian foreign policy during the 1990s has a bearing on India’s stature given its renunciation of diplomatic activism on Palestine and fluid responses to both the Iraqi crises in 1991 and 2003. That is not really a problem given that the region is laden with regimes with weak democratic authority that makes their elites predisposed to state centric short-term calculation thus enabling a power like India to forge reasonably good ties. The fact that most Middle Eastern regimes are striving to be on the right side of the ‘war against terror’ lends India a good retrospective brush of approval to its neoliberal thrust and corresponding idealist disengagement from the region. But the Middle East as a region with its complex interplay of religion, oil, political cultures and imperial involvement has a historical knack of engendering scenarios that force normative choices on nations that have an abiding interest in it.²⁷⁹ However, India, which has calibrated a post Cold War diplomatic strategy to straddle the faultlines of the region, might yet weather future contentious situations given its own structural profile, relative distance and the region’s propensity for short-term calculation.

²⁷⁷ Nayar and Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁷⁸ Sanjoy Banerjee, “India’s human rights diplomacy: Crisis and transformation policy,” in David P. Forsythe ed., *Human Rights and Comparative Foreign Policy: Foundations of Peace* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2000). Banerjee demonstrates that India moved from an *assertive human rights diplomacy* during the Cold War to a *defensive* stance after 1991 partly due to the international scrutiny of its own domestic human rights situation.

²⁷⁹ Carl Brown captured this well: “For roughly the last two centuries the Middle East has been more consistently and more thoroughly ensnared in great power politics than any other part of the non-Western world. This distinctive political experience continuing from generation to generation has left its mark on Middle Eastern political attitudes and actions. Other parts of the world have been at one time or another more severely buffeted by an imperial power, but no are has remained so unremittingly caught up in multilateral great power politics.” L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 3.

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