

“America’s Century” in Asia and the Pacific: India supports Washington’s Agenda

Between the Nimitz and the deep blue sea


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FORGET THE nuclear reactor on board or even the nuclear weapons whose presence Washington neither confirms nor denies. The real reason Indians feel uncomfortable with the government inviting the *USS Nimitz* to drop anchor off Chennai is their opposition to the deepening strategic ties with the United States that this visit represents.

This opposition is driven entirely by the perception that the U.S. is a factor for instability in Asia, that its invasion of Iraq and sabre-rattling against Iran have vitiated the security environment to our west, and that its thinly-disguised attempts at encircling China will do more harm to the prospects of cooperative security in Asia than good. A TV anchor snorted dismissively the other day that people were opposing the ship’s visit *only* because it was American. Well, that’s precisely the point. When was the last time anyone heard of Russian or French ships shooting up our neighbourhood? If the U.S. Navy wants the freedom to sail half way across the world to turn Iraq into a living hell for its people or intimidate Iran, why should anyone begrudge Indians the freedom to say they would rather not host such ships?

Though Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told reporters the *Nimitz* did not have nuclear weapons, the ship’s captain has been less forthcoming. Now the *Nimitz*, in all likelihood, is carrying only conventional weapons but some analysts have argued that even if the *Nimitz* were nuclear-armed, it would be hypocritical for Indians to object since India itself possesses nuclear weapons. This argument is ignorant and dishonest.

The Indian nuclear bomb is a necessary evil forced on to the country by the failure of the five big nuclear weapons states to disarm. Many Indians had misgivings about the rationale for the 1998 tests but the bomb cannot be wished away now that it is out in the open. However, the Indian nuclear doctrine does not envisage the first-use of nuclear weapons, nor will the country’s political culture allow them to be used as an instrument of blackmail against non-nuclear weapons states. In contrast, the American nuclear arsenal is based on

the principle of first strike. The U.S. has moved beyond the Reagan-Gorbachev understanding that a nuclear war cannot be fought or won. Low-yield nuclear weapons are being designed to make them more “usable” and missile defence is aimed at giving the U.S. the freedom to annihilate a nuclear adversary without being hit back.

Given these developments, which seriously vitiate Indian security at the global and regional level, one cannot be indifferent to the possible presence of nuclear weapons on the Nimitz. India should demand a categorical assurance from any country seeking to send a ship into Indian waters that nuclear weapons are not on board. Indian interests are not served by valorising the offensive nuclear posture and doctrine of the U.S. or any other nuclear weapon state, or by facilitating the easier forward deployment of such weapons. Likewise, if India were to commit the folly of sending nuclear weapons on to the high seas, any country where an Indian naval ship docks would be within its rights to seek assurances that there are no nuclear weapons on board.

From Kicklighter to Nimitz

Important though it is, however, the question of nuclear weapons is a red herring. For the true purpose behind the aircraft carrier’s “landmark visit” is to anaesthetise the Indian public to the Pentagon’s decade-long plans for logistics access and “interoperability” with the Indian military, thereby smoothening India’s eventual participation in U.S.-led “structures of cooperative vigilance” in the wider Asian region.

In a sense, the history of the Nimitz’s visit goes back to 1991, when Lt. Gen. Claude C. Kicklighter, erstwhile commander of the U.S. Army Pacific, handed over a set of proposals for army-to-army cooperation with India. These involved reciprocal staff visits and schooling and training for commanders as building blocks for more comprehensive U.S. access to Indian facilities. The 1995 ‘Agreed Minute on Defence Relations’ added joint exercises and held out the prospect of greater technology transfer but the Indian side soon discovered the U.S. was interested only in deepening service-to-service relations. The 1998 nuclear test disrupted the gathering momentum but by 1999 defence contacts were up and running again.

After India’s offer of military facilities to the U.S. for offensive operations in Afghanistan, the relationship took a new turn. The Pentagon preferred Pakistan as a staging post but used India’s offer to push for a logistics support agreement, as was acknowledged by Admiral Dennis C. Blair in February 2002. The pace of naval and air exercises shot up. However, the U.S. side realised a new charter was needed to tap the full benefits India offered. In particular, Pentagon planners knew a more relaxed policy on arms transfers was needed, not just as a sweetener for the Indian side but as a vital element in the pursuit of interoperability. As early as December 2001, senior U.S. military officials also floated the idea of an adjustment to American domestic nuclear legislation as an incentive for the Indians to cooperate.

Two weeks before the July 2005 nuclear deal, India and the U.S. signed a ‘New Framework for the Defence Relationship,’ which envisaged an action plan ranging from joint exercises, collaboration in multinational operations, “expand[ing] interaction with other nations” (i.e. U.S. allies such as Japan and Australia), enhancing capabilities to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, collaboration in missile defence, and so on. Two years on, several elements of this action plan have begun to fall into place.

Though India remains opposed to the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), the last two 'Malabar' naval exercises have seen PSI-related drills such as maritime interdiction and VBSS (visit-board-search-seizure) operations. Quadrilateral security meetings have begun. The recent sale of the *USS Trenton* (rechristened the *INS Jalashwa*) — now the second largest ship in the Indian inventory — will allow the Indian Navy to deploy a landing platform dock for the kind of multinational operations the new defence framework envisages. Hercules transport aircraft have also been purchased from the U.S. On the anvil now is the contract for 126 multi-role combat aircraft (MRCA) for which Washington is mounting an aggressive campaign.

Speaking last week at the launch of his book, *The New Asian Power Dynamic*, the distinguished Indian diplomatist and convener of the National Security Council Advisory Board, M.K. Rasgotra, asserted that the 'Asian Century'; — which is how the whole world speaks of the 21st Century with an ascendant China and a rising India — "is more likely to be an 'American Century in Asia'." Prime Minister Manmohan Singh listened impassively to this astonishing prediction. International affairs, he later said, was not a morality play. He is right. But this notion of an 'American century in Asia' is not just morally suspect, it is also a reflection of the inability of Indians to think strategically about the future evolution of Asia and to envision structures in which the region is able to deal with its economic and political problems without the destabilising intervention or 'leadership' of an outside power.

Washington knows this Indian weakness. That is why the bargain it proposes is this: the U.S. will 'help' India become a major world power in exchange for India doing all its can to ensure the 'American century in Asia' becomes a reality. The July 2005 nuclear deal was partly motivated by this aim and the same rationale is propelling the incredible bonhomie on the military front.

India knows this is the bargain but thinks it can get away with half measures. Its establishment realises that many U.S. policies in the region — such as towards Iran — undermine Indian interests. For example, the intelligence community's assessment is that Washington's intimidatory diplomacy (of which the Nimitz is a part) may contain the Iranian crisis for some time but it is also increasing the likelihood of military confrontation, with adverse consequences for India ranging from energy disruption, threats to the Indian diaspora in the Gulf, and the prospect of increased terrorism. And yet, the self-perpetuating, interlocking nature of engagement with the U.S. has a logic of its own, especially when it comes to the emerging relation between the two militaries.

Apart from the '123 to 126' equation linking the contract for the MRCA to the fate of the nuclear deal, Washington is exerting pressure in at least two other defence-related fields. It is keen for India to sign an Access and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) that will allow the American military to more frequently access Indian facilities. The March 2006 Bush-Manmohan statement said the agreement — dubbed a Logistics Support Agreement in deference to Indian sensitivities — would be ready soon but the Indian side is baulking at the demands the U.S. is making such as turning Goa and Kochi into "permanent ports of call" for the U.S. Navy deployed in the Persian Gulf. The U.S. also wants India to bring its Sindhugosh ('Kilo class') Russian-built submarines to joint exercises so that it can learn more about their underwater signatures. Pentagon planners consider this important because Iran has Kilo class submarines and any sea-based attack on Iran would be vulnerable to torpedo attack. At Russia's urging, the Indian Navy has so far refused to oblige.

When it comes to nurturing an ally, however, the U.S. has the stamina of a long-distance

runner. It took 16 years after General Kicklighter's visit to India for the USS Nimitz to drop anchor in Indian waters. The U.S. is aware that the more engagement it thrusts upon India, the harder it becomes for India to refuse incremental demands. In military terms, it has two goals. First, to make sure the Indian armed forces never become an obstacle to American hegemonic interests either by themselves or by bandwagoning with other Asian powers. And second, to outsource low-end tasks of hegemony, such as patrolling, humanitarian relief, peacekeeping, and stabilisation. The U.S. realises India will never agree to send troops into an expeditionary situation like Iraq. But three years down the road, for example, it would like to be able to get the Indians to, say, send INS Jalashwa to Somalia for a multinational stabilisation operation alongside its military ally, Ethiopia. Of course, India is no pushover. But Washington knows the more the two militaries get enmeshed, the costlier it will be for Delhi to refuse help when its 'strategic partner' says it needs it.

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