

RIGHT FOR THE RIGHT REASONS?  
THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION AND INDIA

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### Introduction

The Reagan Administration's policy towards India was not a simplistic line encoded in some National Security Decision Directive (NSSD) but the NSSDs reflected an evolution of administration thinking as it responded to regional events as it debated priorities, as it learned more about its own interests, and those of India and Pakistan. This policy thus evolved between 1981 and 1988, with critical elements added in 1982-3 and 1984-6. Let us first look at the assumptions and background of those who made American policy before turning to the evolution of the strategic principles on which that policy was based.

### The Players

By the time the Reagan administration filled the various policy positions in State, Defense, and the White House some progress had already been made in rethinking American policy towards South Asia. The Carter administration had second thoughts about its erratic nuclear policy: it had already offered Pakistan a substantial aid package, and it had come to see the Soviet presence in Afghanistan as a serious threat to American interests. But it had lost credibility. Pakistan turned down the Carter offer of military and economic aid not because of the size of the program (which, on an annual basis was the same as that later offered by the Reagan administration), but because it wanted some assurance of long-term American support (Islamabad had concluded that the Soviets were unlikely to soon withdraw from Afghanistan--which was the Indian position at the time). The Pakistanis also wanted assurances against an Indian threat, but neither Carter nor Reagan were ever prepared to offer these.

The bureaucrats, politicians, and political appointees who filled key policy positions in 1981 were chiefly interested in containing Soviet influence. With a few exceptions they had virtually no regional expertise, those that did were more familiar with Iran and the Gulf. Francis Fukuyama's famous RAND studies were not a blueprint for administration policy but did reflect this central

concern with Pakistan's role in the containment of Soviet aggression and the shaky American position in the Gulf and Iran

Overall American expertise on India, and even on Pakistan was severely depleted. In the 1940s and 1960s there was a corps of regionally qualified FSOs, military officers, and other experts they had superb language skills and firsthand knowledge of both India and Pakistan and the region had attracted some of the best talent in Washington. By 1980 much of this expertise had vanished and South Asia had become something of a bureaucratic backwater.

Ironically, this lack of regional expertise had an adverse impact first on Pakistan. There was no established Pakistan lobby in the bureaucracy--nor was there much concern over Pakistan in Congress, the press, or academia. When the economic and military assistance agreements were finally concluded with Islamabad it took several years before they began to operate properly. Americans had forgotten how to deal with the Pakistani bureaucracy, the Pakistanis had not received substantial amount of U.S. aid for twenty years. For example, in 1981-2 there were misgivings in the Air Force over selling F-16s to Pakistan. These were in short supply, some thought that the Pakistanis could not properly maintain or fly them and there were fears that a renegade Pakistani pilot would deliver one to the Russians.

Later, in 1985, when the opening to India finally occurred the U.S. bureaucracy again had to learn how to deal with a new (and considerably more recalcitrant) set of bureaucratic partners. The sale of high-technology to India met with especially severe resistance from obscure corners of the Pentagon. This was not for South Asian reasons but because India was the first non-allied developing state to receive such technology and it not only had close economic ties to the Soviet Union but openly boasted that it would be a conduit to the Soviets for Western technology (American computers, for example, are matched to Indian machine tools and sold, as a package, to the Russians). This is perfectly legal and

perhaps in American public and corporate interests but it made the bureaucracy wary. It also raised a new policy issue: if we were to sell quite advanced technology to India could we sell it to Pakistan or the People's Republic of China? In some cases, the answer was no and India has received better terms than both of its rivals on certain items (especially computers and jet engine technology).

There were also regional stylistic factors that influenced the pace of change in American policy in South Asia. The Indian and Pakistani bureaucracies treated Americans in very different ways, and Americans, especially those not very familiar with the region, responded accordingly. Congressmen, bureaucrats, journalists, and politicians routinely received the red carpet treatment in Islamabad, and met with officials several grades above their own level (not infrequently, with President Zia). This contrasted sharply with the cool, indifferent, and sometimes outright hostile treatment by New Delhi of Americans who were not certified friends of India (i.e. uncritical supporters of New Delhi's policies). I personally enjoy the argumentative style, but have spent a number of hours trying to explain it away to infuriated American officials, who had earlier been sympathetic to Indian interests.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, a few additional factors should be mentioned for they began to affect American policy towards South Asia (especially India) during this period and are likely to grow in significance. These counterbalanced, to some extent, the lack of bureaucratic and political contacts between the U.S. and India and Pakistan.

<sup>1</sup> I know of one case where, on a mere courtesy call, a senior Indian official casually mentioned to a cabinet-level American official that the Afghan problem would end if the US were to cease its support for the Mujahedin and Pakistan. I am sure that there were similar horror stories on the Indian side. A great deal of effort must have been spent putting out brushfires caused by ignorant or careless remarks.

The first was the enormous growth of personal, educational, economic, and cultural links between the U S and both states. While the American military bureaucracies had had no real contact with India, most of the corporations interested in selling advanced technology and military equipment to India had on their technical and sales staffs large numbers of South Asian expatriates especially Indians. Northrop or Grumman could have mounted a Light Combat Aircraft program for India entirely using Indian scientists and program managers. Almost every member of every Indian delegation that came to the U S had close relatives or friends somewhere in the U S, and often in the corporations they were visiting.

The second new factor was an ideological transformation in the structure of informed American political thinking about South Asia. It is not well-known or understood, especially in India, although it was fully reported on by Indian journalists, especially Bharat Parthasarthy (Hindustan Times) and Dilip Mukerjee (Deccan Herald). It was simply that the cliché--that Republicans favored Pakistan and Democrats favored India--no longer had any basis in fact. The political consensus of the American left on India was weakened first by the Indian nuclear explosion of 1974, by the Emergency of 1975-77, and also by the opening of China. American liberals came to regard India as an ordinary country, worthy of support but hardly worthy of special consideration or praise.

While many liberals were abandoning India, some conservatives came to see it in a new light. India was, after all, a major power; it remained a democracy, and to many ideologically committed conservatives was preferable to the still-communist People's Republic of China. Further, some American conservatives had established contact with a new generation of Indians not influenced by chronic left anti-Americanism. There were very few of these pro-Indian conservatives, but they occupied key positions in the executive and legislative branches and were critically important at certain moments. But, they differed from some of their liberal

predecessors in that they refused to abandon Pakistan and the refused to see American policy in South Asia as requiring a choice between Delhi and Islamabad

### American Expectations

Turning to our central theme, what did the Reagan Administration expect from South Asia, and particularly, what did it expect from India? There are three answers to this, because there were three major American regional objectives. The first was the containment of Soviet power (for which there were few expectations concerning India) the second the encouragement of Indian strategic autonomy (defined as a lessening of Indian dependence on the Soviet Union a goal which was only partially met) and the third the prevention of nuclear proliferation (where India figured as a key player, albeit a somewhat disappointing one)

These three objectives were not equally pressing nor were they all adopted at the same time. But all were discussed and adopted at the very highest levels of the U S government and all, in one way or another, represented a departure from established policy. When these three goals were pursued simultaneously--they posed one of the greatest challenges to the skill and statecraft of policy makers in the Reagan administration, a challenge which has been largely--but again not entirely--met

### Strategic Expectations I Containment

The Soviet presence in Afghanistan was rightly seen as the major regional problem facing the U S in 1981. America's historic policy of keeping major hostile powers out of South Asia was reactivated.<sup>1</sup> The Soviet occupation also had implications for the conduct of US-Soviet relations elsewhere in the world and the future of the Eurasian balance of power

<sup>1</sup> This was a policy which had historically led the US to align with the British against the Japanese, with Pakistan against a perceived Soviet threat (from 1947), and with India against China (from 1962)

The Carter Administration had made some effort to back up friendly states in the vicinity, especially Pakistan. But the Reagan administration concluded that Pakistan was important for other reasons, as well. The conservative Gulf Arab states were nervous about the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan had good ties with several of these states. Iran itself was a pressing problem, but it could not be ignored. Again, Pakistan had retained good ties with Iran, despite the revolution. In each case there were parallels between American and Pakistani interests (and in each case these mutual interests did not conflict with important Indian interests). Finally, in the eyes of some policy makers Pakistan's close ties to the PRC meshed with our own strategic ties to Beijing, a case of our friend's friend being our friend. These relationships were seen entirely in Soviet terms: the idea that the US, Pakistan, and China might have a common interest in containing India is a fiction invented in New Delhi (or perhaps, Moscow). So, Pakistan had a fourfold importance for American geo-strategic interests: as a sympathetic player in the Gulf and Iran, as a friend of China, as key factor in Afghanistan, and as a possible target of further Soviet expansion.

India did not yet figure significantly in these calculations. If there were expectations from India at this point they were that India would at least refrain from pressuring Pakistan (India already had a substantial military lead over Pakistan, and was determined to maintain it despite increased American, Chinese, and Saudi support for Pakistan).

While India's behavior on this issue was proper its performance at the UN and its shrill attacks on modest American additions to Islamabad's arsenals made it seem highly unlikely to American policy makers that it could become a positive factor in persuading the Soviets to withdraw from South Asia. My own view is that the Indians had about the correct estimate of their limited influence vis a vis the Soviets, since they remained dependent upon Moscow for

advanced military hardware. Perhaps they, also did not believe the Soviets would pull out (although Indian officials all expressed optimism that they would) and this contributed to their reluctance to pressure the Soviets.

Initially, some Pakistanis warned against a joint Soviet-Indian attack but Washington has never quite accepted this argument (although Operation Brass Tacks led to some late nights at the office). The American judgement was that India would not help much on Afghanistan, but that it would not be a serious hindrance to either the effort to counter the Soviet forces or Pakistani and American diplomatic activities. This judgement was based on a correct estimate of India's own vital interest in getting the Soviets out of the region.

The broader policy of containing the Soviets by supporting Pakistan had three operational implications for U.S.-Indian relations.

-The first was a continuing American effort to encourage India-Pakistan strategic, political, and economic cooperation. This hortatory policy was not at first taken seriously by India since it was based on a concern for Pakistan, rather than Indian security. Supplementing this was strong support for regional cooperative initiatives especially the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

-The second operational consequence was to reassure Pakistan that the US was committed to assisting it against direct Soviet aggression. While these assurances never fully satisfied Islamabad they were firm enough to make credible the prospect of American assistance in case of such an attack, and thus to make the Indians think twice before acceding to Soviet suggestions for a joint attack on Pakistan.

-Third it became clear by 1982-3 that the India-Pakistan relationship could not be ignored nor would wishful pronouncements about India-Pakistan cooperation provide much incentive for New Delhi to undertake such cooperation. The U.S. had to establish a dialogue with India--if only to protect its position with Pakistan,



and this could be achieved only by expanding U S -Indian ties. However, as American policy makers calculated the possible gains from closer relations with New Delhi, they also came to see other benefits from such a policy. Thus was born a second major regional objective, the weaning of India from Soviet influence.

### Strategic Expectations II A Relationship with India

Simultaneously, a similar calculation was probably being made in New Delhi. Indian strategists must have reached the conclusion that the US-Pakistan tie could not be shaken unless India moved closer to Washington. What was called the opening to India in Washington was probably called the opening to Washington in Delhi.

Both sides saw a long-term relationship as beneficial quite apart from short-term considerations of their respective relations with Pakistan. Some Americans (especially among the conservatives) saw India as the emergent regional great power and an ideologically palatable alternative to the PRC. No one that I know of saw India as an alternative to Pakistan as long as the latter remained a front line state (a term more often heard in Washington than Pakistan). There were some Indians who saw long-term benefits from a renewed American tie, especially in matters of technology transfer and in dealing with the Soviets, when they showed signs of fading interest in Delhi.

I am sure that neither side actually intended to switch alignments even after the successful Rajiv visit in June, 1985 (India trading the Americans for Russians or the US trading Pakistanis for Indians). India was too dependent upon Moscow to contemplate much strategic movement and the US would never have abandoned Pakistan in the face of severe Soviet pressure.

Pakistan's attitude towards these American efforts to promote better Indo-Pak relations and to move closer to India itself were interesting. Unlike any past Pakistani leader, President Zia

enthusiastically supported these steps. He may have done so in the knowledge that New Delhi was likely to remain recalcitrant, but he had to overcome historic Pakistani fears that the US would once again choose the larger of the two South Asian states when it had the opportunity.<sup>1</sup> Pakistanis are legitimately concerned about long-term American support, but my judgement is that it has become an important enough state and has achieved such a degree of internal stability, that it will be a major factor in regional American policy for years to come, although that may not mean an expanded military relationship.

Speculatively, the Russians may have been nervous about improved Indo-Soviet ties. The Vladivostok speech of Gorbachev and his statements during a visit to New Delhi seemed to point to a lessened interest in India, but the Soviets have since provided significant new military technologies to India. If for no other reason than this the Indian opening to Washington seems to have paid off.

The basic American policy dilemma in attempting to wean India from Soviet influence was that advocates of this policy have not yet been able to shake loose sufficient military equipment and advanced technology to make the US a serious alternative to the Soviets. Indeed, few had such hopes, and there were many policy makers who were perfectly aware that their efforts would only help India drive a better bargain with the Soviets. That was not seen as harmful to American interests, per se, but there was lingering sadness that India had lost considerable policy autonomy, had become chronically anti-American in various international fora, and that the Soviets had obtained a foothold in India that no Indian government could

<sup>1</sup> I think he was sincere. Zia once proposed to Mrs. Gandhi that India sell advanced military equipment to Pakistan. Mrs. Gandhi, probably astonished, did not respond. India's failure to take seriously most of Zia's gambits--even if he was bluffing--may have been a tactical error.

eliminate, and that one day might adversely affect American strategic interests <sup>1</sup>

In the end, of course, it has been India that has benefited most significantly from the opening --whether Washington to Delhi or Delhi to Washington. Had the opening not taken place it is doubtful whether Washington would have so uncritically backed the Indo-Sri Lanka agreement which virtually sanctions Indian regional and oceanic ambitions. In fact, one suspects that it was Sri Lanka rather than Pakistan, that later became the chief motive on the Indian side <sup>2</sup>

### Strategic Expectations III Proliferation

The Reagan administration made three significant changes in American non-proliferation policy in South Asia. The first involved India the second Pakistan, the third a regional nuclear initiative. I think more could be done, but the policy has been successful so far in that neither state has an operational nuclear weapon and neither has conducted further nuclear tests <sup>3</sup>

An earlier American refusal to provide fuel to the US-supplied reactor at Tarapur had crippled US-Indian relations and certainly had no impact on the Indian or Pakistani military nuclear programs. The former had paid the price already, the latter had a clandestine program of significant scope which was based on the assumption that India already was a nuclear weapons state. The

<sup>1</sup> India has been used as a base for Soviet propaganda and disinformation with several world-wide anti-American campaigns originating there

<sup>2</sup> And China might have been a factor as well. The brief India-China border crisis of 1986-7 was certainly anticipated by India, which may have been testing the degree of support it would receive from both superpowers in case of a confrontation with China--or trying to demonstrate India's importance to the Soviets, by threatening a crisis with China? We may never know

<sup>3</sup> I have discussed alternative arrangements in South Asia's Nuclear Arms Race How the US Can Help Freeze It, Chicago Tribune, March 4 1988

decision to allow the French to sell nuclear fuel to Tarapur removed significant obstacles in U S -Indian relations, but there were no American expectations beyond that. The decision did anger Pakistan, which could and did quite accurately claim that the US was being tougher on a friend, Pakistan than on India.

The Reagan administration's second nonproliferation decision to link military sales to Islamabad's nuclear program, did create expectations with regard to Pakistani behavior and indirectly Indian. It was thought (and so far, correctly so) that as long as Pakistan received American military equipment it would halt or restrain its nuclear program, slowing the pace of regional proliferation. I have no doubt in my mind that had the US pursued a tougher policy towards Pakistan then the latter would by now, be a nuclear military power. My own view (in 1981 testimony) was that linking the military assistance package to Pakistani nuclear restraint would defer but not terminate Pakistan's nuclear ambitions. If there was a failure in policy, it was to explore and test this linkage, to see how much leverage the US had over the Pakistani nuclear program.

It was probably due to the fear of putting heavy pressure on Pakistan (and risking the entire operation in Afghanistan) that led American policy to a third initiative, that of encouraging a regional nuclear agreement.

This may have been doomed from the beginning because of the Administration's narrow definition of region. India could--and did--claim that China was part of South Asia's nuclear system and that any regional agreement would have to include Beijing. A truly regional agreement would also have to include the Soviets and might have to involve a joint declaration of South Asia as a nuclear free zone. A comprehensive, truly regional nuclear agreement might have stood a fifty-fifty chance of acceptance at least for a limited period of time, but no such proposal was ever fully articulated.

still, the limited American regional nuclear initiative did achieve some useful results. It forced both India and Pakistan to think more carefully about their own nuclear plans and the prospect of an unrestrained nuclear arms race. It may have contributed to those regional nuclear agreements that have been reached, and it certainly encouraged further public discussion of the nuclear issue in India, and--surprisingly--in Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

### Beyond Strategy Other Issues

There were a number of other policy objectives in the Reagan administration concerning India.<sup>2</sup> Two are of particular interest but can be dealt with briefly.

-For a number of years the Indian government has dismissed American concerns about terrorist acts, including hijackings. Indian leaders have conspicuously (and literally) embraced foreign political leaders who have advocated terrorism as an instrument of state policy. In turn, the US was criticized as either not being sincere about terrorism, or was somehow responsible for terrorism against its own innocent civilians and civil aircraft (through its support for Israel, Britain, and other governments under attack). This line was followed for a while when India itself was subjected to terrorism, and wild allegations were made officially and

<sup>1</sup> Until the issue was raised in a series of visits by Michael Armacost and others, almost all Pakistanis uncritically supported a military nuclear program. Three years later (and in a much freer atmosphere) there is a range of debate and discussion in Pakistan which is bound to contribute to more sensible policy making.

<sup>2</sup> Our focus here is on India, and regional policies affecting India, but the major American effort to encourage the democratization of Pakistan must be noted. American officials repeatedly and forcefully argued with President Zia, Prime Minister Junejo, and other senior Pakistani officials that democratization was an important factor in the US-Pakistan relationship. I think the military would have moved to a more open system (and a less fundamentalist Islamic one) on their own, but American pressure certainly helped.

unofficially about American support for Pakistani secessionists and terrorists<sup>1</sup>

Several years of very close government-to-government cooperation have ended such criticisms from responsible Indian authorities. From an American perspective Indian policies towards terrorism are considerably more sensible. These are subject to slippage however as when Rajiv hosted the Prime Minister of North Korea shortly after the murderous bombing of a PAK plane. But day-to-day cooperation remains excellent in bi-lateral matters, where both sides have much to gain by a close working relationship.

-Similarly, cooperation on combatting narcotics has been effective, after a slow start. India (like Pakistan) was reluctant to work closely with American narcotics experts. Both states have discovered, however, that access to American expertise, technology, and intelligence capabilities are important in their own efforts to stem the growth and shipment of narcotics. Both states also concurred with the American proposal that narcotics (and terrorism) be added to the list of SAARC subjects.

#### Summing Up

Given that few expected much concern for India in a conservative Republican administration, that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was the most important regional issue for the US (and an issue on which Indian policy was notoriously unhelpful, both publicly and privately), and given that Pakistani diplomacy proved to be extraordinary competent in pursuit of Pakistani (rather than American or Indian) interests, it is astonishing that American policy towards India turned out so well. It was not perfect, there were mistakes in judgement, timing, and implementation but by any

<sup>1</sup> Although the Indians had reason to be concerned about statements from Senator Helms and others these were never taken seriously in the Executive branch, and soon ceased from Capitol Hill once pro-Pakistani terrorism became widely known and understood.

standard these policies advanced American interests. Pakistani ones and at the very least, did not damage important Indian interests.

Certainly, the renewed US-Pakistan tie was a political setback for those segments of the Indian leadership that had hoped to achieve hegemony over Pakistan, but a vulnerable Pakistan dominated by the Soviet Union (or the battleground between pro-Soviet, pro-Chinese, pro-Iranian and pro-Indian factions) would have been an Indian catastrophe. And, although India has had to continue an arms race with Pakistan, it has been able to extract modern weapons from the Soviets, very sophisticated dual-use technology from the Americans, it has received superpower support for its operations in Sri Lanka, and it has still claimed that it is the aggrieved regional party, the victim of Chinese and superpower (especially American) machinations.<sup>1</sup> In short, India has been able to have it both ways. America might have preferred a different Indian response to some of its regional policies--a more serious dialogue with Pakistan on arms control issues, greater responsiveness on certain high technology items, and as flexible and as forgiving an attitude as New Delhi apparently shows to the Soviet Union--but the absence of such Indian policies did not threaten important American regional interests.

I am certain that things will be more difficult in the next few years.<sup>2</sup> A popular metaphor of American-Indian relations is that it has been a series of ups and downs over the years. This is another worn-out cliché. The real variable has been the dramatic engagement and disengagement of the US in South Asia over the years. The 40s and 50s saw a period of engagement, after 1965 a long spell of disengagement, and there has been a revived American regional role since 1980. During each period of American regional involvement, some important Indian interests have been advanced, a

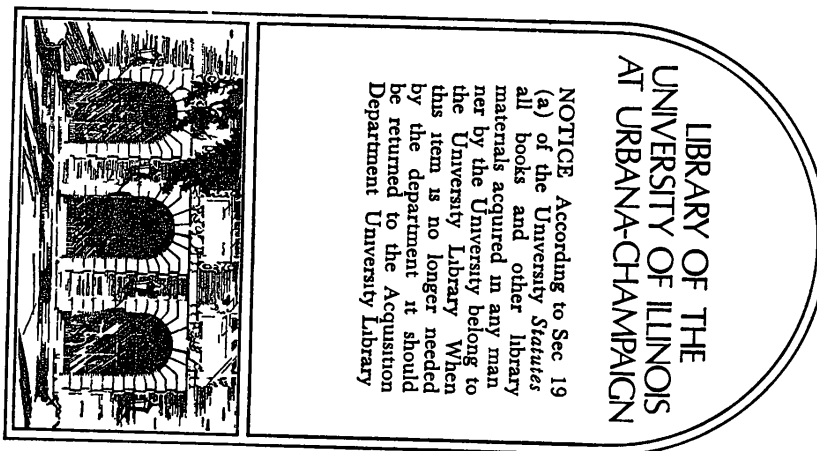
<sup>1</sup> See Rajiv Gandhi's speech of February 3, 1988, for this curious combination of bellicosity and fearfulness.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of post-Afghanistan American policies, see my Balancing Interests in South Asia, The National Interest, October, 1987.

few may have been damaged. The 1981-87 period was one in which significant Indian interests were accommodated by the US and India took important steps to smooth out the relationship. Both states were responding to a common regional event: the agony of Afghanistan and the presence, in South Asia, of Soviet military forces.

But things are going to change. An end to the occupation of Afghanistan will not mean the end of crisis in Afghanistan, it will not mean that the advanced Indian and Pakistani nuclear programs will be shelved and it will not diminish the impact of the Iranian revolution on India and Pakistan. The liberalization of the Chinese and Soviet systems--already responsible for serious unrest across South Asia's frontiers--will have new and still-unpredictable implications for both India and Pakistan. Finally, domestic factors will increasingly shape foreign policy decisions in both states, further complicating their own relations and their ties to the US.

New policies and new strategies will be required to deal with these issues, but because most are primarily regional in nature we cannot expect as active an American role. We may yet look back upon the past seven years as--if not a Golden Age of US-Indian relations--at least an era of mostly sound policies, usually, but not always pursued for the right reasons.



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