

Collateral gains of Indo-US accord

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*Whether or not the nuclear deal takes off, the strategic face of Asia
has changed forever, says Claude Arpi*

I don't know!" These are the words the Dalai Lama kept using during a recent interview. When I expressed some surprise that an "omniscient being" could give such an answer, he told me the story of his first visit to London in 1973. During his first press conference, he replied "I don't know" to most of the queries of the many journalists present. The organisers were shell-shocked: "How is it possible for the living Buddha to not know?" It took some explaining from the Dalai Lama to convince them, that he preferred to be frank and not pretend. This story came to my mind when I heard large numbers of analysts giving "live comments" on the Indo-US Accord on nuclear energy. Without being omniscient, they all knew. I personally find it difficult to know for sure if the deal is good or bad for India. Probably after a few years, once in the nitty-gritty of the implementation, we will know if India "sold itself" or won a great victory. It is, however, easier to comment on some side aspects of the agreement. First, the visit of President George Bush to India (and the resulting accord) has been seen as a great historic event for India. Everyone was impressed by the three Air Force One planes, and the fact that nobody knew which one the President was in. This obsession with the US reminds me of the situation in Albania several years ago. The country was living under one of the worst

totalitarian regimes and many Albanian started fleeing to European countries such Italy or France in which they were offered political asylum. Most of them refused this offer: They wanted only to go to America as Europe was not good enough for them. The situation is somehow similar in India today. Even though Delhi witnessed the State visits of President Jacques Chirac, Prime Ministers John Howard and Mikhail Fradkov in less than a month, nobody cared much about them, not only in the corridors of power, but also in the media and the general public. The fact that the French President offered Delhi the same deal (without having to go through a hypothetical clearance by the Congress) went unnoticed. This situation will probably continue for some years - the only direction to look at will remain Washington.

A more interesting side effect of President Bush's visit was his short visit to Pakistan and the fact that he remained firm that there was no question of signing a similar deal with it. As noted by a News Agency: "Putting a brave face in the wake of the United States' refusal to extend the historic Indo-US civil nuclear deal to Pakistan, President Pervez Musharraf has said that everything should not be seen in an "Indo-centric" fashion. He further declared: "I am a very strong believer that this tendency of being Indo-centric in all relations doesn't have a rationale."

The point is that the US has offered something to India without offering it to Pakistan for the first time, though for the gallery, President Bush assured Gen Musharraf that he "had started to play a role" in resolving the Kashmir issue. This delinking of India and Pakistan may have a different effect to the one pointed out by Islamabad: Hopefully, Delhi will stop looking at the world in a "Pakistan-centric fashion".

It is a fact that since independence, most of the efforts and energy of the Indian diplomacy as well as the security agencies have been geared towards reacting to Pakistan. It would be the most positive outcome of Mr Bush's visit if New Delhi could start looking elsewhere for friends and foes (particularly towards China, the major threat in the years to come).

In fact, Beijing must have sensed the change in balance. It declared: "There are concerns that the move will set a bad example for other countries as India has refused to sign the Non Proliferation Treaty after it conducted nuclear tests in 1998". The change in the relations between India, China and the US will probably be the main outcome of the US deal.

We should not forget that already in May 2005, the Chinese press was furious when it was reported that a Pentagon report on "China's military" advised Washington planners to "take more seriously the possibility that China might emerge as a strategic rival to the US." The conclusions of the report were clear: "The rapid rise of the People's Republic of China as a regional political and economic power with global aspirations is one of the principal elements in the emergence of East Asia... China's emergence has significant implications for the region and the world."

A few days before Mr Bush's arrival in Delhi, the Pentagon published another report in its Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) which points in the same direction. The Report reads: "India, Russia and China, will be key factors in determining the international security environment of the 21st century." Of the three nations, Russia is considered to be "a constructive partner" while "India is emerging as a great power and a key strategic partner." As for India, the Pentagon reiterates the importance of "shared values as long-standing, multi-ethnic

democracies provide the foundation for continued and increased strategic cooperation."

The semblance of a softer line towards India and the recognition of India as a civilian nuclear power had probably more to do with the new "Chinese threat", than the US love for democracy. The QDR thus defines the Middle Kingdom: "China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages absent U.S. counter strategies."

The main worry in Washington is that China continues to invest heavily in its military, particularly in its strategic arsenal and capabilities to improve its ability to exercise power beyond its borders.

The Department of Defence believes that the pace and scope of China's military build-up has already changed the regional military balance as Beijing continues to make large investments "in high-end, asymmetric military capabilities, emphasising electronic and cyber-warfare; counter-space operations; ballistic and cruise missiles; advanced integrated air defense systems; next generation torpedoes; advanced submarines; strategic nuclear strike from modern, sophisticated land and sea-based systems."

These implications are of interest to us in India. Since the end of the 1950s till today, China has been India's main rival in Asia. With a 4,000 km common border and a souvenir of the not-yet-healed scar of 1962, China's rise can only increase qualms in Delhi. The oft-spoken of "peaceful rise of China" worries Washington too though it welcomes "the rise of a peaceful and prosperous China, one that becomes integrated as a constructive member of the international community".

The Pentagon may not be wrong. The day Chinese Executive Vice-Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo and National Security Adviser MK

Narayanan were tasting Kerala's culinary delicacies, the People's Daily quoted "Tibetan Chairman" Qingba Puncog, "The eye-catching Qinghai-Tibet railway is expected to be further extended from Lhasa... to Xigaze City in the southwestern part of the region."

Mr Puncog affirmed that the section between Lhasa and Xigaze was expected to be completed during the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010). This is the next step towards India. The realignment of forces in Asia, with the US leaning towards India to counterbalance China, is probably the most important collateral of President Bush's visit to Delhi. Even if the nuclear deal does not come through, this change will remain; it will change the strategic face of Asia.