

Nuclear Deal Politics is Systemic Failure

President Bush is, with some justice, derided as a simpleton by large fractions of the foreign policy cognoscenti in the United States and around the world. His love of simple, big ideas has led to Iraq and also to his uncritical embrace of India. Faced with such a man, India's political leaders faced two options:

- (a) get the man to sign away the store before the next President – likely a Democrat with a large retinue of non-proliferation experts and Clintonian China experts – reaches the White House, or
- (b) conjure up the ghost of Krishna Menon to explain to Bush the error of his simple ways.

Quite remarkably, they have chosen (b).

I say quite remarkably, for there is really no question that Indian national security is enhanced by closer ties with the United States. An overwhelming majority in Parliament believes this – even allowing for the BJP's recent crafting of a distinction between strategic partnering and strategic subservience. The NDA described the United States and India as “natural allies” and the UPA has built on that. The outliers are the Communists whose visceral dislike of the modern world makes them unfit to govern India.

This consensus is unsurprising. From 1980 to the present day China's economic growth has outstripped India's so that its economic power as measured by GDP has gone from being equal to India's to being double India's. It is as if a second China has appeared on India's border. Evidently, the United States is a natural balancing partner for India in dealing with this development. On the other flank the challenge of Islamism to governments from Pakistan onwards is troublesome to India and has been the source of much bloodshed in Kashmir and of late also elsewhere in the country. While the US has not handled Iraq well, it is still the dominant outside power in that region and the one whose overall goals are most aligned with India's own interests. Afghanistan today is not perfect but is in much better shape from an Indian perspective – thanks to the US. Relations between India and Pakistan are friendlier than in a long time with at least some of that progress being attributable to the US being engaged in the region.

With such weighty reasons at stake, one might think that the system – collectively – could have produced outcome (a) and with some grace. The nuclear deal is, in any rational calculus, a net benefit for India. It will expand and modernize the civilian nuclear sector while leaving the military sector in no worse shape than it is today. It will move India from the margins of the NPT framework to, essentially, acceptance as a country legitimately in possession of nuclear weapons. It marks, in no uncertain terms, an end to the Indo-Pak hyphenation that Indians have long sought. In an incipient regime of carbon taxation, it is even economically rational.

Then there is the strange discussion of future nuclear tests at a time where the greatest obstacle to the reliability of the Indian nuclear deterrent over the next two decades or so is the limited nature of the delivery systems rather than the fine tuning of current warhead designs. Perhaps tests, of either boosted fission weapons or refined thermonuclear

warheads, would become essential in a future threatening national security environment. If the threat arises from China, why would a friendly US stand in India's way? If the threat arises from the US, as the paranoid obsess – then US domestic law will be the least of India's problems.

So really, there isn't much to argue about here. It is, then, a systemic failure that is preventing the Indian Parliament from sending a thank-you note to the American people through their President, and in that process to cement the growing favorable perception of India in the US as an emerging pillar of a democratic world order.

The systemic failure is not new. The Congress was equally vacuously critical of the major foreign policy and national security initiatives of the BJP, all of which it has continued in power. As far back as 1991, the late Chandrasekhar – man of the Left – allowed American planes to refuel in India during the first Iraq war and found himself excommunicated from the fraternity of the excessively moral by the late Rajiv Gandhi.

Democratic politics is messy and it is really not possible for it to “stop at water's edge”. The Congress has never taken kindly to being out of office and the BJP regards an India in the keeping of Sonia Gandhi and Prakash Karat as fundamentally unsafe. From such vantage points, elections beckon with predictable consequences for the national interest.

While all of this is narrowly, politically, understandable, it is far from desirable. It is high time that the two central governing parties, the Congress and the BJP sit down and work out a consultative process that – out of sight perhaps – allows them to jointly advance India's key national interests. This would still leave them free to seek to annihilate each other domestically and would reduce the frequency of elections only slightly. In improving systemic rationality, it would also enhance their joint claim to represent the Indian national interest above and beyond the more parochial interests represented by other actors in the political system.