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INTERVIEW

The new currency of power

A discussion on strategic affairs with K Subrahmanyam

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K SUBRAHMANYAM'S "passion for national interests," P R Kumaraswamy writes in the preface to *Security Beyond Survival*, "never blinds him to India's follies. The respect he commands among students of national security is primarily a reflection of his own 'competence, knowledge and originality in thinking', to borrow his own words albeit in a different context. In his myriad of roles as an officer in the Indian Administrative Service, head of a strategic think tank, media commentator, and a prolific writer, he has always exceeded the standards set by his peers." Last month, *Pragati* sat down with Mr Subrahmanyam for a wide ranging conversation on the geopolitics of the 21st century, the role of nuclear weapons, India's national interest, military modernisation and much more.

Geopolitical strategy

Many Western strategists contend that America's unipolar moment is giving way to multi-polarity. But you have argued that the world became multi-polar with the collapse of Soviet Union. Recently, Parag Khanna put

forward a thesis arguing that US power is on the decline and that the EU and China will be the new 'poles'. How do you see the future shaping up?

It depends upon the time frame: if you are perhaps talking about next 15 years, Parag Khanna has a point. If you take the 30-40 years, then the Japanese, Europeans, Chinese and Russians are all going to age. The proportion of working population to non-working population becomes unfavourable. This automatically will lead to certain amount of decline. These countries then have to rely on migrants. Europeans might get more migrants from the southern Mediterranean; Japan perhaps will welcome some from the Philippines. The Chinese are going to face a major problem, as they will be an ageing society with skewed sex ratio. Russia will grapple with the growth of its Islamic population and decline in the white Russian population.

The only two countries that will be relatively young will be America and India. America will remain young because of immigration. India will

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be still behind the ageing curve by about 50 years. All projections are set to change under these circumstances.

During the next two decades, Americans will be looking to augment their brain resources to compete with China and the EU. India is the natural reservoir for them. This will enhance India-the US relationship. We don't have any clash of national interest with the Americans. There are some issues that usually arise because of America's dealings with third parties such as Pakistan. But at a time when the government-to-government relationship was not good, we still saw about two million Indians settling in America. If things improve, this trend will get stronger.

India has to leverage this situation and change the US-EU-China triangle into a rectangle. Until then it is in our interest to help America to sustain its pre-eminence. After all, in a three-person game, If America is at Number One, China is at Number Two and we are lower down, it is in our best interest to ensure that it is America that remains Number One.

Does the Indian government realise the need to transform its foreign policy in the light of the sharp changes in India's geopolitical status over the last two decades? Is a conscious rethink necessary or will it just happen by itself.

We have not fully thought through the notion of our foreign policy reflecting our rising status. I have said that knowledge is the currency of power in this century—that is my own perspective. The task force on global strategic developments that I headed also points out the same. However, the final report is yet to be released by the government. These ideas are still under development and are yet to be accepted by significant number of scholars within the country. These changes will take place over a period of time and we can very well say that we are in an initial stage of a very long process.

Nuclear Weapons

Yes, you have argued that warheads and missiles are not the currency of power in the 21st century: rather it

is knowledge. But strategic weapons are responsible for stability: in a sense, aren't they international public goods funded by taxpayers of India, China, US and others that are enjoyed by the rest of world?

Many people thought that these were public goods and perhaps many continue to think so. This is a very paradoxical situation. I used to explain to people that I myself represent that paradox. I have been convinced for a long time that a nuclear war cannot be fought. In conventional warfare, the war takes place in a limited space and various key decisions are taken outside that limited space. If a nuclear war is unleashed, there is no space outside. Where and how will one take a decision to terminate this war?

The Americans used to tell me that they have thought through this problem and they claimed to have found a solution, till of course the early 80s, when scholars like Bruce Blair started asking questions about command and control in a nuclear war. Then in 2005, Robert McNamara confessed that he too had been holding on to the same position ever since he was defence secretary (1961-68) but he could not articulate it as this stance went against the entire NATO policy. In a sense, there is a charade about it in the whole world. Kissinger advocated the use of tactical nuclear weapons in his PhD thesis. He, along with a number of former senior American officials, is now pleading that the world should eliminate nuclear weapons.

While I am convinced that a nuclear war is un-fightable, as long as the next person is not convinced about it, I have to be cautious. The only way to persuade others is for us to have a weapon ourselves. When I formulated India's nuclear doctrine, many questioned the need for one as none of the five nuclear powers had a doctrine. I believed that we owed an explanation to the people of India and the world as for a long period of time we had considered nuclear weapons as immoral and illegitimate. The doctrine says: we still consider nuclear war cannot be fought and use of nuclear weapons is illegitimate and therefore the "no first-use" policy.

But the NATO's doctrine seems to be still living in 1970s.

True, in 1999 when the NATO doctrine was being discussed, the Germans and the Canadians pleaded to include no first-use but the rest of them refused.

But you cannot eliminate a weapon that is deemed to be legitimate. The first step towards elimination is to delegitimise the weapons. The first way of delegitimising is to acknowledge the possession of weapon for deterrence but not for

warfare, that is, a no first-use policy. The 1925 Geneva Protocol against chemical weapons did not prohibit possession, it only prohibited the use, or rather, first use. It was only in 1993, 68 years after the protocol was signed, that all countries agreed to eliminate these weapons. Therefore the route to elimination of nuclear weapons is through delegitimisation and it starts with "no-first use".

National Interest

How would you define India's 'national interest'?

First and foremost, the state has to ensure 9-10 percent economic growth. Secondly, it has to ensure that poverty is alleviated and eliminated. Finally, to achieve these two, we need good and effective governance. All these factors are symbiotically related and I would consider these as the most important components of national interest. Once we have achieved this, the Indian entrepreneurship will ensure India's success.

Doesn't this interpretation contradict Morgenthau's. Modern Western Realists define the national interest as the survival and security of the state.

Morgenthau was writing about developed nations. I do not think he was even conscious of poverty as an issue. The basic principles of what he wrote are quite good but it needs to be revised under present circumstances. He was writing at a time where forcibly grabbing territory as well as resources was a major factor in the calculations of nations.

The Marxists criticise the notion of the 'national interest', arguing that it is merely an euphemism or proxy for the interests of the ruling class.

Meaningless—Marxism itself was hijacked by apparatchiks resulting in a Marxist state where the best cloth from Europe was procured for politburo members and suits were made by the best tailors. This was considered a non-elitist policy. Mao Zedong imported blue films and it was non-elitist. The problem is that once people are appointed to positions of power, whatever has to be done is done through them. Whether they have the people's interest in mind while taking decisions depends on their values and beliefs regardless of whether it is a Marxist or a non-Marxist state. There is no mechanism by which foreign policies will be made by the masses. Even in democracies, a party can publish its foreign policy manifesto but there is no way of ensuring its implementation.

Lessons from national experience

Looking back over the decades, what would you say were the best and worst moments?

The first step towards elimination is to delegitimise the weapons. The first way of delegitimising is to acknowledge they are for deterrence and not for warfare.

One of the best moments was on 16th December 1971, when we achieved success in Bangladesh and the other has to be split into two—18th May 1974 and 11th May 1998, when we conducted nuclear tests.

One of the worst moments was on 18th November 1962. I was then working in the defence ministry, when I came to know that Prime Minister Nehru had written to President Kennedy asking for American aircraft to operate from India soil against the Chinese. This was when India itself had not even used its own air force. The imposition of emergency on 25th of June 1975 was the second worst moment.

What were the learning points from 1962?

It is a learning point in a big sense. We had an army whose leadership was immature as they had been promoted too rapidly. They were incapable of handling such situations. This was true not only of military but also of the diplomatic community and to some extent it was true of politicians including Jawaharlal Nehru. He was persuaded that it would be either a full-scale war in which case other major nations were expected to support India or that it would remain as patrol clashes. That the Chinese could calibrate the operation so very carefully, mainly to humiliate him, and then withdraw, was something that did not occur to him. It was a very masterful strategy of the Chinese who took full advantage of Cuban missile crisis.

Have the lessons been learnt?

No. Take the liberation of Bangladesh as a case study. Pakistan held free and fair election in December of 1970 under a mistaken assumption that nobody would win a clear majority and the army would still be able to manipulate the country. I was convinced that the army would not hand over power and that we had to be prepared for problems. Then came the hijacking of the Indian aircraft that was blown up in Lahore after which Pakistani planes were banned from Indian airspace. The Pakistanis started building up troops in Bangladesh and the ships were going via Colombo. Everybody knew about it. But we didn't do

anything to warn our armed forces to be ready till 25th March 1971 when Pakistanis began the crack down (See page 21). When asked to intervene on 30th March, the Indian army requested for more time. When they got the time that they needed, they did the job beautifully well. But we did not anticipate this eventuality.

Let us take Kargil as another example. In the Kargil committee report, we have said that the Cabinet Committee on Security should have a regular intelligence briefing by the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee. But the government has not accepted this. There is no sensitivity to intelligence in India. The top decision-makers do not get themselves briefed on the state of affairs. They only expect to get an update if something happens. This attitude still persists and this is a major weakness.

The whole attitude to intelligence needs to change. Professor Manohar Lal Sondhi used to say that since I was the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, I should have nothing to do with academics! During the second world war, all the intellectuals were in intelligence. American professors used to encourage students to join the intelligence community. Even today, I see many CIA advertisements in university campuses across America.

But when I ask people in Jawaharlal Nehru University to consider a career in intelligence, they simply refuse. Many consider it unethical.

Military modernisation

In our recent issues, Pragati has focused on the modernisation of India's armed forces. It is clear that a critical aspect of national security is suffering from apathy, and neglect. And procurement scandals—which get a lot of media attention—appear to be the tip of the metaphorical iceberg. Is there a way out of the mess?

Modernisation is a complex process. I have said in the Kargil committee report that we have not modernised decision-making process ever since Lord Ismay prescribed it in 1947. Our military command and control have not changed since the second world war. While we are talking about buying modern equipment, the force structure and philosophy go back to the Rommel's desert campaign and Mountbatten's South-east Asia Command. Nobody has done anything about it.

Now there is talk about the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) model. It pains me to hear this. The British adopted the CDS system, as they would never fight a war on their own. CDS is not an institution for us. Ours should be the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs and theatre commands below him.

Apart from that, the entire arms industry is now getting concentrated. The European armament industry is being brought over by the Americans. Only the Russian armament industry is independent of that. There is no way that we will be able to produce everything for ourselves. Given the threats we face, we have to think strategically of what we should buy and what we should develop. We can't say we are going to buy 126 aircraft and this will not affect our future aircraft development philosophy. It is going to have a very serious impact. Instead of buying defence equipment *ad hoc*, on the basis of what is the best available price, we should bear our long-term strategic vision in mind and start expanding the capacity judiciously.

The whole problem of procurement is the refusal of the country to accept that the issue is of political corruption. However perfect the procedures are, the corruption takes place outside South Block. Tinkering with procedures will not end corruption. The solution might lie with campaign finance reforms.

Isn't military bureaucracy, like any other bureaucracy, status quoist and resistant to modernisation?

This raises another point. A civil service recruit becomes a district magistrate in six years and is in charge of a district of a million people but an army recruit gets independent charge only after 18 years of service. Why should it take 18 years for an army officer to progress to that level? During the second world war, a man with five years experience was leading a battalion into battle. With eight years of experience, one would command a brigade. This anomaly has been grossly overlooked.

Isn't there such information asymmetry about these issues, the public doesn't even know what questions to ask and politicians have their own agenda? What is the the way out?

It is going to be difficult. At least 30 or 40 years ago, there was time and inclination among our members of parliament to ask questions and discuss these types of issues. Today very little serious business is done in parliament. It has become a political arena for confrontation among different political parties. Modernisation does not begin with procurement of latest equipment. Before that we have to think through the structure, organisation and methods of functioning. Equipment should come last in the order of priority.

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