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afgazad@gmail.com

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The flying Sikh and the peacenik

By M K Bhadrakumar

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Senior Indian officials in their private briefing insist there was "almost a Zen-like spiritual quality" to the meeting between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and United States President Barack Obama in Washington last Sunday. However, the question being posed by the Indian strategic community is still: "Does Obama care about India?"

At the bottom of such poignantly contrasting characterizations of statecraft lie two factors. First, the residual feudal mindset of the Indian invariably attributes what are in reality flaws in policies to personal vagaries in the thinking of the leader. It's not so simple. Statecraft is a complex crucible where the witches brew is a broth of many strange ingredients that might or might not include "a pilot's thumb, Wreck'd as homeward he did come", as the first witch in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* claimed.

Second, generally speaking, India faces an existential dilemma insofar as it is never quite willing to admit it is solely responsible for giving its own life meaning and living that life passionately and sincerely. It fails [to account](#) for its "leap of faith", a phrase commonly attributed to the 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard - believing in or accepting something intangible or unprovable without empirical evidence.

Sunday's meeting between the "flying Sikh and the peacenik" - to borrow the words of an Indian editor - was keenly awaited. There is a lot of angst in Delhi about the orientations of the Obama administration's South Asia policies. Somehow the fizz has gone out of the US-India

relationship. This was most conspicuous from the fact that the two sides almost underplayed the Manmohan-Obama meet. The usual hype was lacking in [the White House](#) press statement.

According to [the Indian](#) strategic community in Delhi, the fault lies entirely at the doorstep of the Oval Office. Simply put, Obama is a different man from [George W Bush](#), who was by implication a passionate lover of India through a longstanding family relationship with the country.

Is Obama the real problem in US-India relationship today? Is it that he does not really care for India? An answer can be faithfully derived only if a close look is taken the three main "fault lines" in current US-India ties: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Asia-Pacific.

The Indian strategic thinkers take umbrage that the Obama administration is determined to end the fighting in Afghanistan and as a means of securing that objective, seeks the [Taliban's](#) reintegration and reconciliation. They feel badly let down. They want the fighting to go on and on till the Taliban are bled white and vanquished from the face of the earth.

They are unwilling to concede that the Taliban could be essentially a homegrown Afghan movement that outsiders have cynically manipulated over years. Thus, they feel "deeply disturbed" about what is unfolding and feel cheated that the Obama administration "shunned advance consultations on Afghanistan with its Indian partners".

The fact of the matter, however, is that those Indians are almost completely alone in the region in clinging on to their one-dimensional view of the Taliban as a 100% Pakistani clone. Almost all major regional powers of consequence to the Afghan situation - Iran, China, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Central Asian states - agree on the limited point that there is need of an inclusive pan-Afghan solution to the present problem if the peace dividends are to be enduring.

In Delhi, arguably, the Indian establishment also has grudgingly come to be aware that the "reintegration" of the Taliban is something that mainstream Afghan opinion itself desires and the international community seeks and India, therefore, doesn't have the *locus standi* to be unilaterally prescriptive.

But the so-called Indian hawks shall have nothing of such blasphemous thoughts.

There is also some sophistry here. The heartache among the Indian hawks about the reconciliation with the Taliban is actually all about their deeply flawed assessment of the Afghan situation in the past eight years. The sad reality is that the overwhelming bulk of the Indian strategic community has no clue about the fundamental aspects of the Afghan problem and harbors simplistic notions about its long-term ramifications for regional [security](#) and stability not only with regard to South Asia but Central Asia as well.

Until very recently, they fancied an Indian military [deployment](#) in Afghanistan and an open-ended war in which India and the US as allies work tirelessly toward purging the Hindu Kush of the Taliban movement through the use of force.

A Clausewitzean war

The Indians never really comprehended at anytime during the past eight years or so that this has been a Clausewitzean war that is also linked to the future of [the North Atlantic](#) Treaty Organization as a world security body, the long-term [US military](#) presence in "Inner Asia" and the US's containment strategy toward China's rise and Russia's resurgence. The result has been plain to see. Pakistan was shrewd enough to assess the potentials of the war and to work out its geopolitical positioning, whereas Indians find themselves in near-total isolation.

Besides, Indians overlook that Obama represents the US interests and his mandate is to show "results" in an increasingly hopeless war that is becoming unpopular in the West. The Afghan conflict has become unsustainable politically and financially over the medium term and become a futile war that is locked in stalemate with no real victors.

Also, a gifted politician like Obama has no intention of committing [political](#) hara-kiri as the campaign for the presidential election of 2012 draws close. He cannot continue with the war simply for the sake of pleasing the Indians and getting the US-India partnership in the "war on terrorism" to be waged ad infinitum. For argument's sake, it is highly doubtful such misconceptions would have figured even in Bush's grotesque world view.

Obama has an extremely erudite mind and sizes up that despite the shenanigans of the Pakistani military, he needs to forge a [working](#) relationship with Islamabad to extract as much cooperation as possible in bringing the fighting in Afghanistan to an end. All indications are that Obama conveniently looks away from raising dust over the Pakistani generals' doublespeak in the fight against terrorism since he is coolly logical about his priorities at this point in time.

He estimates that just as in Delhi, the political elites in Islamabad also have a zest to be co-opted as the US's principal instrument of geo-strategy in South Asia. He will be extremely unwise not to exploit the factors of advantage in the US's favor.

Having said that, Obama isn't overlooking, either, that the Indians almost instinctively sweat under their collar as he forges closer working relationships with the Pakistanis. He has therefore repeatedly made assuaging gestures toward the Indian leadership, stressing that the long-term imperatives of US-India relationship are not to be hyphenated with the emerging US-Pakistan partnership in Central Asia. Alas, he cannot help it if US-Indian cooperation in critical fields such as agriculture or education do not appear sexy enough to the Indian strategic community.

Despite Delhi's claims to be an emerging regional power, the hard reality is that relations with Pakistan remain the core issue in its foreign policy. A senior Indian journalist present at the Indian officials' briefing in Washington on the Manmohan-Obama meet on Sunday pointed out that there were as many as 30 direct or indirect references to Pakistan and, in fact, during the Q&A, 11 out of 13 questions from the media persons related to Pakistan. As he pointed out, "If she [the Indian official] had refused to answer any questions on Pakistan because the subject of her press conference was the highest level Indo-US meeting, there would have been only her [opening statement](#) and two questions: one about Obama's forthcoming visit to India and another about the sanctions Obama wants to impose on Iran soon."

Obama can't pressure Pakistan

To be fair to the Indian strategists, a huge and almost unbridgeable hiatus has appeared between the Indian expectations of the US pressuring Pakistan to do away with its terrorist infrastructure and the US's alleged unwillingness to apply such pressure on the Pakistani military. This is most evident in the Obama administration's dogged refusal to give Indian intelligence direct access to interrogate David Coleman Headley, a prime suspect behind the Mumbai terrorist attacks of November 2008, aside from allowing Delhi to extradite him.

The Indians have a point in saying that in a comparable situation over the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, the Americans would have bombed India to the Stone Age if Delhi refused to hand over its own Headley. Especially if it insisted on keeping him behind the *purdah* (veil) somewhere in detention in a south Indian city and argued that it had a "plea bargain" with him.

But then, these are the realities of world politics. The US never ever has hidden its inability to treat other nations as equals or its John Waynesque ways in world politics: that might is right under all circumstances. Neither has it given up its prerogative to pursue its national interests first and foremost even at the cost of other nations sacrificing theirs.

To be sure, if the Indian perceptions of recent years in the promised land of the US-India strategic partnership turned out to be full of weeds and bleached bones, is it Obama who is at fault? The Indians could have easily learnt from the Iranians who live in their close neighborhood or the Iraqis in Mesopotamia who were their ancient partners in the civilized world millennia ago, how ruthlessly self-centered the US could be when the chips are down. Yet Obama is an exception. He has not hidden his genuine warmth toward India and all the values of humaneness that Indians can legitimately claim as their historical legacy. More than that, as a pragmatist and patriot, he is intensely aware that ignoring or neglecting the relationship with India will deeply injure the US geopolitical interests in the Asian continent.

Equally, he has no reason to slight India, a country that he knows to be genuinely enthusiastic about almost everything American, which is extremely rare nowadays to find on this planet.

All the same, Obama's primary loyalty will still be toward his own American people. He must give overriding priority to safeguarding America's homeland security and the American facilities and lives overseas and as Vladimir Lenin once told Leon Trotsky, if it becomes necessary for securing peace in Afghanistan, he may even have to wear a petticoat.

However, that doesn't confuse Obama's true role as a democrat when his team deals with the tough generals in Rawalpindi.

Finally, what disheartens sections of the Indian strategic community most about Obama is that he is revamping the architecture of the US's Asia-Pacific strategy. They placed a touching faith in the US's grit and capacity to thwart China's rise and in that struggle, they visualized India's role as the great Asian "balancer".

It is Obama's misfortune that he is presiding over the global economic downturn as it exposes the US's inexorable decline as a superpower. At any rate, the Indians were naive to have overlooked that the US and China were locked in a deadly embrace of interdependence that didn't allow them the luxury of going beyond an occasional sparring. The bitter truth is the Indians are unwilling to admit that they misread the tea leaves when Condoleezza Rice led them up the garden path and today they would rather place the blame on Obama.

They are unwilling to ask searching questions about the entire basis of the global vision that the Indian policy makers subscribed to in the recent years, especially since 2005. Is Obama to be held responsible for India's gross neglect of its neighborhood policy, its cavalier demolition of India's traditional ties with Iran, the deliberate atrophying of its profoundly strategic partnership with Russia or India's unpardonable failure to come to terms with China's rise?

Again, the US is justified in securing its hardcore interests by striving to establish a vice-like grip over Indian policies but ultimately it should have been up to the Indian leadership to have created space for the country to maneuver in the highly volatile international system in order to pursue their interests rather than be boxed in.

There is no way Indians can justify their failure to pursue an independent foreign policy. If they find themselves today sitting on the ground and telling "sad stories of the death of kings", is it Obama who is at fault?

The existential angst in the Indian mind is in actuality nothing else than the experience of human freedom and responsibility. India is an emerging power in the world order and it cannot insist on living an inauthentic existence.