

India's "Middle Path" Through War in Iraq

By Ninan Koshy | April 14, 2003

India's political leaders' responses to the U.S.-led war in Iraq are notable for what they say about the country's willingness to sacrifice traditional concerns regarding nonalignment and international law for the opportunity to raise its profile and power on the world stage. They have, in all but words, chosen to side with empire.

A Middle Path

Neither supporting the United States nor openly criticizing it for its aggression against Iraq, India's government has taken what it calls the "middle path," an indirect route to the U.S. post-war camp. But the policy is based on a misguided perception of strategic and economic interests, which is shaped by Indian authorities' obsession with what they view as "Pakistan-sponsored terrorism."

For its part, the United States would have liked to have received India's support in the war against Iraq, but it recognizes that the middle path in effect endorses the U.S. position. On the eve of the war, U.S. Ambassador to India Robert Blackwell claimed in a statement that the U.S. and Indian positions were the same.

Even after the United States defied the UN, international laws, and the international community with its massive military campaign against Iraq, the Indian government stuck to the middle path. The government of Prime Minister Shri Atal Bijari Vajpayee rejected opposition demands for a parliamentary resolution on the crisis. The prime minister scrupulously avoided mentioning the name of the United States in any of the war-related statements made inside or outside the Parliament. Advocates of the middle path claimed that through it the Indian government was gaining space to defend its long-term interests in Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

India did not even support the position the 114-member-nation Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) adopted at its recent summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in which Vajpayee had participated. The NAM, endorsing the concerns expressed by "millions in our countries as well as in other parts of the world," affirmed that it "rejected war" and declared "the war against Iraq would be a destabilizing factor for the whole world with far-reaching political and economic consequences." Meanwhile, the prime minister took advantage of the summit to lecture Iraqi President

Saddam Hussein on the need to disarm and spoke not a word of criticism against those who—in violation of the UN Charter—were resorting to the threat of force to carry out their will.

During a visit with Ali Akbar Veliyati, the special envoy of Iranian President Mohammed Khatami on March 23, three days after the war had started, members of the Indian government made it clear that India was not willing to take any initiative on Iraq, through NAM or otherwise, that could jeopardize its ties with the United States. By making the fear of U.S. displeasure the operative factor in dealing with the most critical international issue of our times, India has totally abandoned principles. The threat posed by the war on Iraq to the integrity of the international legal order established at the end of World War II is apparently of no concern to the rulers in New Delhi.

The Centrality of Kashmir

It appears that the Indian foreign policy establishment looks at the world solely through a prism of Kashmir terrorism made in Pakistan. "India seems to be drawing a link between American support for its position on Pakistan and Kashmir with its statements on the ongoing military invasion of Iraq," wrote Amit Baruah in the national daily *The Hindu* on March 28. "India seems to be drawing connections between what the U.S. says on India-Pakistan-Kashmir issues and India's formulation on the Iraqi issue. The message coming from official circles is that India's concerns in the immediate neighborhood are far more important than simply sticking to principles as far as the war on Iraq is concerned."

In fact, Vajpayee had given this message unambiguously to the All-Party Meeting on March 22. "We should be careful that neither our internal debate nor our external actions deflect our attention, or those of the world, away from the real source of terrorism in our neighborhood," he said.



India is Washington's closet strategic ally in the region. It is not known what assistance India has given to the United States in the war. There are reports that permission has been granted to use Indian airspace for the flights of U.S. military aircraft from Diego Garcia Navy Support Facility in the Indian Ocean to the Gulf region. It is also likely that several U.S. naval vessels engaged in joint patrols with the Indian navy in the Indian Ocean have gone to join the fleet in the Gulf region. One of Washington's most senior Army officers visited New Delhi in the beginning of February and had discussions with the chiefs of the Indian army and navy. Indian officials did not provide any details about the visit by U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki, though they hinted that the issue of Kashmir had topped the agenda. The timing of the meeting, six weeks prior to a war anticipated by the United States, raises questions.

A Rising India

It was not without significance that on March 26, the very day the UN Security Council was discussing the U.S. attack on Iraq, Christina Rocca, U.S. assistant secretary of State for South Asia, in her testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hailed India as a "rising global power" and said the United States was expanding security cooperation with New Delhi through military exercises. The middle path, it was evident, was within the framework of the role assigned to India.

The Indian leadership hopes that in the new world order being fashioned by the military might of the United

States, which will transform institutions such as the UN and NATO as well as strategic and nuclear orders, it will have a more prominent place than at present, and for that it is important to be on the winning side. There is no apology in New Delhi for the replacement of principles with pragmatism.

But is there a middle path between war and peace, between occupation and freedom, between foreign military-established rule and sovereignty of a nation? The misguided policymakers in New Delhi want us to believe there is. The people of Iraq know better: There is none. It is therefore not surprising that in trying to explain such an untenable and unethical policy, the Indian prime minister utters inanities bordering on nonsense only to be parroted by spokespersons and emissaries.

The middle path is a euphemism for a Washington-approved policy that India has adopted with the clear intent of attaining a prominent position in the new imperial world order made in the name of the War on Terror. The United States knows full well that India is with the empire, not against it.

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