



RESEARCH NOTE

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US Missile Defence Program: Responses from South Asia

On 1 May 2001 President George W. Bush announced that the US would develop a new missile defence system. He stated that today's world requires 'new concepts of deterrence that rely on both offensive and defensive forces' and 'we need a new framework that allows us to build missile defense to counter the different threats of today's world. To do so we must move beyond the constraints of the 30 year old ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) Treaty.'¹

President Bush was supported by Australia, the UK, and, surprisingly given its previous opposition to any missile defence system which breached the ABM Treaty, a swift and positive response was also forthcoming from India. There was a measured response by Russia, and China reacted strongly against the proposals.

The Indian Response

In the debates leading up to the presidential elections last year, it had often been argued that candidate Bush's proposals for a National Missile Defense (NMD) would have a destabilising effect on South Asia, given China's opposition. It was maintained that a NMD would lead to China upgrading its nuclear and missile capabilities. Given the fact that India perceived a nuclear threat from China, this would elicit a response from India and a subsequent reaction from Pakistan.²

On a visit to Moscow in June last year, the Indian Foreign Minister, Jaswant Singh, had stated that a system that breached the 1972 ABM Treaty 'may curb prospects for nuclear disarmament and weaken the non-proliferation regime.'³

Consequently, the swift and positive Indian response took many observers by surprise. On 2 May, a day after the speech, a *Press Release* issued by the Ministry of

External Affairs (MEA) stated inter alia:

India, particularly, welcomes the announcement of unilateral reductions by the US of nuclear forces ... India believes that there is a strategic and technological inevitability in stepping away from a world that is held hostage by the doctrine of MAD to a *cooperative, defensive transition* [emphasis added] that is underpinned by further cuts and a de-alert of nuclear forces ...

India also lauds the desire expressed by the US President to make a 'clean break from the past' and, especially from the 'adversarial legacy of the Cold War.'

These events also happened on the eve of the visit of the Russian Foreign Minister to India. Before leaving he is reported to have welcomed the US offer to work with Russia on global security.⁴ After the visit, an Indian external affairs ministry spokesman, while making no mention of the ABM treaty, said the two sides 'also reiterated that bilateral agreements between the countries [Russia and the US] must be respected and any modification of such agreements should be through mutual consultations and understanding.'⁵

Indian Public Reaction

Reaction to the Indian statement was mostly negative among the opposition political parties, and divided among media commentators. The main criticism centred on the swiftness of the Indian response, lack of consultation and the fact that there was no debate within the ministry nor was the issue formally discussed by the Cabinet Committee on Security.⁶

A spokesman for the major opposition Congress Party stated: 'If the government can convince the nation that the US missile defence program is in the national interest, the Congress won't stand in the

way. But the Government must act in a mature way and take the opposition into its confidence.'⁷ The Communist Party of India (Marxist) demanded that the Government retract its stand, stated its belief that President Bush's announcement would result in a new nuclear arms race, and criticised the Indian Government for compromising its position on nuclear disarmament.⁸

The *Times of India* maintained that the Indian reaction was one of 'irrational exuberance' and the US claim that it would reduce its nuclear arsenal would happen 'only after Washington has thrown the ABM into the dustbin and introduced a dangerous dynamic into the stasis that the capability of mutually assured destruction (MAD) has imposed on the nuclear weapons world.'⁹

However, it can be argued that the Indian response was very intelligently drafted. The emphasis was on the US proposal for a reduction in its nuclear arsenal and its determination to consult friends and allies, Russia and China. There was no mention of missile defence.

In fact, the sharp reaction against the swift albeit non-committal response of the MEA elicited a further clarification. The MEA stated that NMD had not been mentioned: 'while NMD is still at the idea stage, it is very necessary for India to make a pronouncement ... *keeping in mind the way the Indo-US relations have evolved* [emphasis added].'¹⁰

A New Relationship

It was a reflection of the improvement in bilateral relations under the new US administration that India was one of the few countries that were informed of President Bush's forthcoming speech. A day before, his National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice, phoned the Indian Foreign

Minister, Jaswant Singh, to advise him about the policy statement.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage's visit to New Delhi on 11 May also appeared to have been successful, with the Indian Government appreciating his presentation and looking forward to 'further exchanges.'¹¹ He also carried a letter from President Bush in which he accepted an invitation to visit India.

These moves are part of evolving Indo-US relations. In a wide-ranging interview recently, the Indian Ambassador to Washington, Lalit Mansingh, made the following points.¹² Firstly, the nuclear genie could not be put back in the bottle, the two countries had to 'go beyond and look at common strategic interests.' Secondly, contrary to the perception that the missile plan would impel China to expand its nuclear missile stockpiles, at present India did not fear such an outcome, but he refused to say whether growing cooperation was aimed at deterring China. Thirdly, the two countries (despite current sanctions)¹³ are to resume military relations, beginning with a visit to New Delhi by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff later in May. In fact US military talks began in April when Jaswant Singh, who serves both as foreign and defence minister, met in Washington with Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld. Finally, during a visit to Washington by the Indian Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha in April, he had been assured that the US would soon lift economic sanctions.

What is not very well known is that on 3 April a Bill (107 H.R. 1358) was introduced in the US Congress designed to remove all economic and military sanctions on India and Pakistan. This bill also has the support of the Bush administration. During her confirmation hearings, the nominee for the U S Secretary of State for South Asia, Christina B. Rocca stated that sanctions had outlived their usefulness and were an obstacle to engaging both India and Pakistan.¹⁴

Pakistan's Reaction

Pakistan's reaction was slow and negative. The *Jang* newspaper

reported on 9 May, citing a foreign office spokesman, that Pakistan was aware of the international concern over the program and could not welcome it and that it would not help stop the proliferation of missiles and weapons of mass destruction.

On 12 May, Chief Executive General Parvez Musharraf, for the first time, said that Pakistan was opposed to 'any action that re-initiates [a] nuclear and missile race.' Significantly, he was speaking on the occasion of a visit by the Chinese Prime Minister and added that China and Pakistan had commonality of views on all issues.¹⁵ Given Pakistan's close relationship with China, his reaction was not unexpected.

Further, General Musharraf would not have been encouraged by Richard Armitage's comment in New Delhi the previous day (11 May) that 'We have questions about Pakistan. It is well known.' Three days later, in an apparent reversal of its position, Pakistan's Foreign Minister clarified that General Musharraf's remarks had nothing to do with the missile defence program.¹⁶

A New Agenda in South Asia?

In conclusion, with regards to China's response to the US proposals and its impact on India, it already has the capability to devastate several Indian cities. Secondly, given the ongoing improvements in Sino-Indian relations, to link US-China equations to threats faced by India makes for rather convoluted logic. Consequently, it can be said that India's swift (albeit ambiguous) response to the proposals was a consequence of its developing close economic and military relations with the US. Also, the US plan, in its current form is more of a vision statement, with no concrete details. It thus declares India's intention to be part of the consultations, discussions and debate on what form the missile defence proposals will eventually take.

For Pakistan, it is indeed a tightrope walk given its friendship with China and its dependence on international

financial institutions, strongly influenced by the US, to bail it out of its tough economic situation.

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1. *Washington File*, 1 May 2001.
2. Gaurav Kampani and Peter Sacacino, 'National Missile Defense Threatens Stability in South Asia', *Defense News*, 10 July 2000.
3. *Times of India*, 4 May 2001
4. *The Hindu*, 4 May 2001.
5. *Times of India*, 5 May 2001.
6. *Indian Express*, 8 May 2001.
7. *ibid.*
8. *The Hindu*, 11 May 2001.
9. 4 May 2001.
10. *The Newspaper Today* at thenewspapertoday.com, 10 May 2001.
11. *The Hindu*, 13 May 2001.
12. *Washington Times*, 3 May 2001.
13. Sanctions were imposed by the Clinton Administration on India and Pakistan as a response to the 1998 nuclear tests.
14. *The Hindu*, 19 May 2001.
15. *Associated Press of Pakistan*, 13 May 2001.
16. *The Hindu*, 16 May 2001.