

Book Review: Democracy and Diplomacy

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Title of the Book: “Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy and the Bomb”

Author: Strobe Talbott

Published in 2004 by Brookings Institution Press (Washington D.C)

Number of Pages: 279

Priced at Rupees 395

The book opens with India’s Pokhran II tests conducted on 11th and 13th of May 1998. The author, Strobe Talbott, writes about India’s nuclear test, followed by Pakistan’s nuclear tests, America’s reaction to this and the diplomatic wrangling thereafter - from a position of authority. He was the Deputy Secretary of State in the United States government from 1994 to 2001. Hence, the sources have been diplomatic personnel meetings and conversations, joint declarations issued by heads of governments and diplomatic personnel, policies of states, and others sources privy to diplomats. Hence, we are informed with various anecdotes and strips of conversation with heads of state and governments that would not be possible otherwise. The main theme of the book as the author writes “is the

story of the turning point in the US-Indian relations.”

Talbott has titled every chapter in a very interesting way. The first chapter titled, “The Lost Century”, mentions how India until its nuclear tests in May 1998, had been in the category of “merely important states” for the United States. Since there was no serious diplomatic engagement, the century before 1998 is called the “the lost century.” Due to this reason the US could not apprehend the coming Indian nuclear tests. Talbott in this chapter has clearly given the dynamics and complexities of relations among China, Pakistan and India in the Cold War context of super power rivalries. The fact of India leaning towards the former USSR and that of Pakistan allied with the western bloc has been

analysed deeply. This is followed by the history of the NPT from Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" program in 1953.

Following the tests, Talbott as Deputy Secretary of State conducted series of dialogues with India and Pakistan. In India, Talbott mainly met with Jaswant Singh who was the Minister for External Affairs from 1998 to 2004 in the BJP government led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. The author has shown considerable understanding of domestic context and underpinnings in both India and Pakistan. He writes that with the Indian and Pakistani tests, "what was at stake was the stability of the global nuclear order...the world would become a much more dangerous place. For their part, the Indians saw the matter in terms of sovereignty, security, and equity." In Pakistan, Talbott dealt largely with Shamshad Ahmed who served as the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan from 1997 to 2000.

The second chapter titled, "The Desert Rises", begins by explaining how Bill Clinton, as the first post-Cold War President wanted to mend ties with India. What had been hindering the relations was India's refusal to sign the NPT which was permanently extended in 1995. This was

against Clinton who was and is a votary of the NPT regime. After the Pokhran I tests on May 1974 (*Smiling Buddha*) conducted by India under former Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, the US had been consistently trying to contain the arms race between India and Pakistan. The turning point came when the nationalist/realist BJP came to power in India in March 1998, who had vowed to induct nuclear weapons in their arsenal. Moreover, Clinton since 1995 was fighting the Republican dominated Congress over the CTBT (which he had signed in 1996 but was regarded by the Republicans as a worthless ill conceived arms control initiative). As a result neither the Glenn Amendments nor the American pressure to sign the CTBT could stop the Indian Thar desert from rising with the "Shakti" Pokhran II tests on 11th and 13th May 1998.

Chapter Three is titled, "The Mountain turns White", which refers to the Pakistani nuclear weapons tests called "Chagai" on 28th May (1998) in a tunnel on the Ras Koh mountain range in the Chagai region of Baluchistan. After the Thar Desert rose in India, the US tried its best in various means (threat of sanctions, bribe of economic and military advantages, repealing the Pressler Act) not to allow Pakistan to test their nuclear warheads in

order to prevent a nuclear arms race in South Asia- but to no avail. The domestic compulsions on Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif were too much for him to resist a test. To stay in power in the government, he had to settle the score with India.

Chapter four, “Jaswant’s Village”, is about how India sent Jaswant Singh to mend fences with the US after the tests. India could not afford to remain estranged from the world’s superpower. Singh’s task was to make US-India relations reach a point (or land/village) where the US finally accepted India as a major power with an internationally recognized right to bear arms. The “village” for Talbott was different - his task was to induce Singh and his government into the land of CTBT.

Chapter five, “Stuck on the Tarmac”, deals with how US diplomacy with India and Pakistan refused to budge forward on the issue of them agreeing to sign the CTBT in a specific time frame. US demands from India and Pakistan also included a ban on the production of fissile material, a “strategic restraint regime” that would limit the types of ballistic missiles in the arsenal, no transfer of material or technology to other countries, and to resume dialogue to address the causes of tension including Kashmir. This would be

returned with the US lifting the sanctions, but to no avail.

Chapter Six, “Soft Stonewalling”, relates to how America was being softly stonewalled by India and Pakistan. Nawaz Sharif declared that Pakistan would “adhere” to the CTBT, whereas Vajpayee declared that by announcing a moratorium on further underground testing, India had already accepted the basic obligation of the CTBT. Both were unwilling to give a commitment to “sign” the treaty. This chapter also includes how terrorism became a major factor in US-Pakistan relations.

The seventh chapter, “Avatar of Evil”, deals with America trying to counter the view of the BJP that Islamic Pakistan represented the epitome of evil. It deals with the executive in the US having to also counter the fever in the US Congress to lift the sanctions on India. Moreover India champed at the bit stating the actual meaning of “credible minimum deterrence.” Other matters complicating the issue are focussed upon like the French trying their best to evolve a deal with the Indians in order to counter American hegemony and the quest of states like Iran, Libya, North Korea and Iraq to achieve the nuclear power status. However, the silver

lining would be the CBMs between India-Pakistan starting with the Lahore bus journey of Vajpayee.

“From Kargil to Blair House”, the eight chapter recounts the war between India and Pakistan in 1999 which almost became a nuclear fuse and Sharif’s visit to the US thereafter. The diplomacy that followed made Vajpayee more trusting of Clinton as while dealing with Shariff, Clinton had in all ways kept India’s interests intact. Talbott in the ninth chapter, “Sisyphus at India House” focuses on three important developments that took place in 1999- military coup in Pakistan by former President Pervez Musharraf, BJP coming back to power in India, the US Senate rejecting the CTBT and what effects they played on the changing role of diplomacy and vice versa.

The next chapter, “A Guest in the Parliament”, deals with how Clinton made the trip to South Asia despite both countries not having signed the CTBT. This was Clinton’s way of engaging with these nations with a view to implement what can be called influential diplomacy or transformative diplomacy. Talbott here brings out how, as relations between the US and India scaled to new heights, this was simultaneously accompanied by the

ever worsening relations between the US and Pakistan.

In the last chapter titled, “Unfinished Business”, Talbott focuses on the complexities of government change in the US with George W. Bush (Republican) coming to power and unfolding of War on Terror (Pakistan’s importance) following the 9/11 attacks. He makes it a point to mention that when sanctions were lifted on September 22, 2001, it was because they had long since passed the point of diminishing returns and not because of a new administration. Talbott makes a strong case for NPT here. He writes that although NPT might have its loopholes, still a world without it would be a more dangerous world. He writes, “Even when India and Pakistan detonated their devices and proclaimed themselves nuclear weapons states in May 1998, the international reaction overwhelmingly favoured keeping the treaty intact rather than carving out exceptions. The United States shared that preference and reflected it in its diplomacy.”

On the whole, reading this book is an enjoyable experience as Talbott has the ability to write about serious matters with a tinge of humour. He has focussed on the role of the media and how it can either

totally destroy or be helpful for diplomacy. The importance of the personality of the individual diplomat is also been given a lot of importance in making the relations successful. Here, he has compared the efficient Jaswant Singh with Shamshad Ahmad. The benefit of hindsight proves that India's diplomacy with the US has been successful. This will include the 2005 "Indo-US Nuclear Deal" where the US recognized India as a "responsible" nuclear state. Point is further proved by the 2008 agreement by the NSG to provide material to India despite it not having

signed the NPT. The book can be critiqued on the ground that it clearly shows Pakistan in a very poor light. These are of course the personal views of the author but it might have adverse consequences on US-Pakistan relations hereafter.

For students of diplomacy, in particular, and practitioners of foreign policy, this book would be immensely helpful as one could see what actually goes on behind the doors during diplomatic negotiations and how this is affected by and in turn affects a lot of other factors.