

SECURITY BEYOND SURVIVAL

ESSAYS FOR K. SUBRAHMANYAM

EDITOR

P.R. KUMARASWAMY



Sage Publications

New Delhi ♦ Thousand Oaks ♦ London

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First published in 2004 by

Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd

B-42, Panchsheel Enclave

New Delhi 110 017

Sage Publications Inc

2455 Teller Road

Thousand Oaks, California 91320



Sage Publications Ltd

1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road

London EC1Y 1SP

Published by Tejeshwar Singh for Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, typeset in 10 pt Calisto MT by Star Compugraphics Private Limited, New Delhi and printed at Chaman Enterprises, New Delhi.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Security beyond survival: essays for K. Subrahmanyam/editor, P.R. Kumaraswamy.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. National security—India. 2. India—Military policy. 3. National security—South Asia. 4. South Asia—Strategic aspects. 5. World politics—21st century. 6. Subrahmanyam, K. I. Kumaraswamy, P.R.

UA840.S357

355'.033054—dc22

2004

2004013131

ISBN: 0-7619-3267-4 (Hb)

0-7619-3268-2 (Pb)

81-7829-405-2 (India-Hb)

81-7829-406-0 (India-Pb)

Sage Production Team: Abantika Banerjee, Proteeti Banerjee,
Radha Dev Raj and Santosh Rawat

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KS: A PERSONAL IMPRESSION

SELIG S. HARRISON

K. Subrahmanyam is one of those brave spirits, rare in any society, who is not afraid to speak the truth. This has made him an important voice not only within India but also in the intellectual and policy dialogue between India and the US.

In their first encounter with Subrahmanyam at seminars and conferences, many Americans found his forceful, candid articulation of Indian perspectives during the Cold War decades both distasteful and unsettling. They preferred the diplomatic niceties of Indian interlocutors who were gentler on American sensibilities. Over the years, however, they learned that his merciless candour was that of a friend seeking to build a solid Indo-US relationship on a basis of genuine understanding. Americans of all persuasions respect him as the authentic voice of India on security policies, telling them what really drives Indian policies, and why, and what India really thinks about the US global and regional role.

In the early Nehru years, when India played its leading role in promoting global nuclear arms control and disarmament, it was Subrahmanyam who first made me understand that the nuclear 'haves' were on trial in Indian eyes. The Indian attitude towards developing its own nuclear weapons would change, he warned, over and over again, if the 'haves' clung to their arrogant assumption that the unequal global power structure was the irrevocable natural order of things.

Unlike many of my academic and journalistic colleagues, I was intellectually prepared for the transition that took place in Indian security thinking against the background of the persistent failure of the 'haves' to take meaningful steps towards nuclear arms control and disarmament. Subrahmanyam was a true believer in the dream of arms

control and disarmament so long as the 'haves' gave lip service, at least, to the dream. But their blatant disregard of Article Six of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) made it clear that the dream was dead even before Rajiv Gandhi made his remarkable offer in 1988 to rule out the development of an Indian nuclear weapons capability, with immediate effect, if the existing nuclear powers would make a time-bound pledge for the reduction of their own arsenals. Nehru's foresight in giving India the technological base for nuclear weaponry, while continuing to pursue the dream, made it easy to cross the Rubicon with the 1998 test explosions a decade after Rajiv Gandhi's offer. The Bush Pre-emption Doctrine of 20 September 2002 has now fully vindicated Nehru's vision and Subrahmanyam's recognition at an early stage that the nuclear weapons option would be unavoidable.

I remember vividly an exchange between Subrahmanyam and an American participant during a meeting of the Indo-American Task Force on the Indian Ocean in November 1984.¹ He was the Indian Convener and I chaired the US delegation. Indian members, explaining why they opposed proposals for a nuclear-free Zone of Peace in the Indian Ocean, argued that the US non-proliferation policies linked to these proposals were inequitable, since the NPT had not, in practice, barred the US from increasing its own nuclear arsenal. The tape-recorded passages of Task Force meetings presented in its report did not name the participants, but it was Subrahmanyam and Gary Sick, formerly of the US National Security Council, who engaged in the following exchange:

Indian: We never insisted that those who are deploying nuclear weapons in the Indian Ocean should submit to full-scope safeguards on their nuclear programs under the NPT; we only insisted, 'Please remove your weapons.' But those who were insisting upon the nuclear weapon free zone for the littoral wanted more than that: they wanted us to come under full scope safeguards under the NPT, which we have never accepted anyway because it is inequitable.

American: But why not accept the idea of a nuclear free zone and try to make it serve your objective of limiting the superpower presence? Such a zone could ban nuclear bases in the Indian Ocean. Why would India oppose that?

Indian: Basically, the whole idea of nuclear-free zones is neo-colonialism. The reimposition of protectorates If the nuclear powers decide not to introduce nuclear weapons in certain bases, well and good. It should be part of their own non-proliferation commitment. Why does that require any obligations on the part of the local powers? Why should local powers have to give undertakings in order to get the lords of the earth to give them assurances about the use or non-use of nuclear weapons! Don't you see that to do that would amount to a protectorate? ... The nuclear free zone idea, in the way it has emerged, amounts to non-nuclear countries accepting the guarantee of the existing nuclear weapon powers, accepting the legitimacy of their existing nuclear weapon arsenal

I touched off a revealing exchange with Subrahmanyam by proposing a trade-off in which the US would phase out its military aid to Pakistan in return for Indian recognition of the legitimacy of the US naval presence in the Indian Ocean. In the discussion that followed, involving other American participants, Subrahmanyam emphasised India's desire for its own access to sophisticated US military equipment, an issue that was still a focus of controversy in Indo-US relations two decades later.

American: Perhaps both of us are now ready to come to terms on a realpolitik basis, as two mature powers, to work out a trade off We should be prepared to recognize that India sees itself as an emerging great power and is determined to achieve a South Asian regional balance of military power commensurate with its overwhelming preponderance in population, resources and economic strength. I would like to see us rule out further sales of military equipment that would serve primarily to bolster Pakistan's balance of power with India, notably F-16's.

India, for its part, it seems to me, would have to recognize that the US has a legitimate interest in military access to the Indian Ocean in relation to its global strategic needs and its regional strategic needs with respect to the Soviet Union. You would have to maintain what I would call an even-handed posture towards the American and Soviet naval presence.

It should be a lot easier for us to work out a *modus vivendi* on Diego Garcia along these lines.

Indian: The implication, of course, is that we are not even-handed now. Just what do you mean by that?

American: I think that India has projected an attitude that the US is the principal intruder in the Indian Ocean We have become the largest naval power in the Indian Ocean in the last five years, and that has created a situation in which you focus more on our presence than on the Soviet presence.

Indian: To start with, once we give specific recognition to US global naval interests, we will be called upon to do the same for the Soviets. Why should we do that? We would rather avoid doing both, and we think it would be presumptuous, in any case, for us to start issuing certificates of recognition of legitimacy of this kind

Now about being even-handed. It is difficult for us to escape facts. The facts are that an American base was established on colonial territory, on territory taken away from Mauritius just before it was decolonized. It is still on colonial territory, it is a colonial intrusion in our hemisphere. Somehow or other, 1200 coloured people could be bundled out of Diego Garcia, but the 1600 people of white origin in the Falklands have to be given their representative rights

As we see it, we are being even-handed if we say that a colonial base should go and the deployment of the two powers in the Indian Ocean should be on the basis of their access to facilities provided by various sovereign littoral states ... in order to be even-handed, the way you want it, we would have to fuzz the facts.

American: You have shown many times that you know how to do that.

Indian: Well, we will do that when it suits our interests or when you make it suit our interests

American: If we did, would you?

Indian: Oh yes, ... I will present a list of how to make it suit our interests.

American: You mean what I suggested is not enough? It is not enough if the US stops big-ticket military assistance to Pakistan and agrees not to provide military aid to other countries in the region where it will impact on the interests of India. That is not enough?

Indian: It requires more than that. I will tell you what it is. The point is that while we would like to be even-handed we also have to be somewhat reciprocal, we have to reciprocate certain relationships. We originally started off with a military procurement relationship with Britain and at one time every screw of the Indian navy was of British origin. Then we came to you. I remember we went and argued with Robert McNamara when he was Defence Secretary, and we were told, 'no, not a screw, so far as the navy is concerned, for India.' Thereafter we had to turn to the Soviet Union. Even today, we would like to get many things from the United States for our naval development, but we are not able to get it. We get it from the Soviet Union even though we would prefer the Western stuff, which is much more sophisticated. So how are we to be even-handed? Here is one side which says, 'we shall contribute to building up the Indian Navy,' and the other side, which says 'not a screw for you.'

American: No, 'screw you.'

Indian: If we have to rely on the Soviet Union and then we're told 'you be even-handed,' I think you are asking for the impossible. We would like to be even-handed but then you make it possible. Even before Afghanistan, you wouldn't sell us arms. In 1978 we wanted to buy the Viggen aircraft from the Swedes, which has a GE engine, and the US vetoed it.

I am not saying, do not give anything at all to Pakistan, because they do need some arms. All that I am saying is, when you are giving all these things to them, at least when we are asking for dual-use technology, when we are asking for electronic systems, radar systems, various other kinds of things, why are you denying them to us? This is our complaint.

In Subrahmanyam's view of the global power game and India's role in it as a major player, Pakistan becomes important only to the

extent that US policies relating to military aid and military sales serve to inflate Pakistani power artificially in relation to that of India. His focus is on the big players and on how India can become one of them. During the Cold War, it was Subrahmanyam who helped me to understand non-alignment as a freewheeling posture designed to make the most of the superpower rivalry to maximise the growth of Indian power. Many Indian leaders and intellectuals attempted to cloak the realpolitik character of non-alignment with sanctimonious rhetoric. Thus, Americans who equated it with 'equidistance' or 'neutrality' were understandably critical when India judged each issue on its merits and steered an independent course in pursuit of its national interests.

As in the case of India's decision to develop nuclear weapons, Subrahmanyam prepared Americans for the abandonment of non-alignment when, after the Cold War, the quest for Indian power and for a more equitable world required a new national strategy.

NOTE

1. *India, the United States, and the Indian Ocean*, Report of the Indo-American Task on the Indian Ocean (Washington, DC: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1985), pp. 51–58 and 75–78.