



Global power aspirations ridiculous, says Indian politician

AZIZ HANIFFA

The biggest threat to our national security is ourselves,' declared Indian lawmaker Mani Shankar Aiyar at the conference on India as a Global Power, organized by the George Washington University's Sigur Center for Asian Studies and the conservative think tank Center for a New American Security.

'If we continue to live with the illusion that we are a global power or aspire to be a global power, then we will be endangering ourselves,' Aiyar said. 'But if we stick to our traditional concept of what foreign policy is about — which is eschewing the quest for dominance and use diplomacy as the instrument of promoting peaceful co-existence — then all threats to us get diminished.'

He argued: 'Our single highest priority ought to be the relationship with Pakistan... If we seize the opportunity being presented to us at the moment, it should be possible for us to defuse the tension with Pakistan and thereby remove what most Indians would agree appears to be the single-most imminent threat to India.'

He said aspiring to be a global power 'would be ridiculous for an India of today to do.'

Lalit Mansingh, former Indian ambassador to the US, disagreed.

'It's not a question of dominance,' said Mansingh, also a former Indian foreign secretary. 'It's a question of our right to exist as a nation as large as we are. And we need to find our place within our region. We need at least 10 years of uninterrupted growth at 9 to 10 percent in order to deal with our primary domestic issue, which is poverty.'

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Bharat Karnad, one of India's leading national security hawks who believes Delhi will not be acknowledged as a global power until it acquires considerable hard military power, last week said India doesn't deserve a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Karnad, research professor in national security studies, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, bemoaned how humiliating it is to watch 'every wretched visitor who comes to Delhi' being canvassed by the government to endorse India's bid for a permanent UNSC seat.

He was speaking at a discussion at a conference organized by the George Washington University's Sigur Center for Asian Studies and the Center for a New American Security.

Karnad, who in American think-tank parlance would be considered a neo-conservative, is the author of books on strategy in South Asia and lectures regularly at military and other fora.

India should not beg for Security Council seat: Scholar

He said, 'India can never become a great power and assume a seat, unless it assumes hard power status.'

Karnad said India would have to do it only through its strength, 'and not because the United States and its western friends endorse India's seating in the UN Security Council. What I mean is that if India becomes a great power, then I don't see a talk about per capita and so on, because given the kind of population, we can never reach per capita scores of the kind that the United States or Western countries will — it will never happen for another 200 years.'

India, he stressed, can be considered and respected only 'in terms of hard power, in terms of being consequential in the affairs of the world as it were. What kind of role you are going to play — and it has to be a substantial role. It has to be a role that other countries can't do without. Only then India will begin to be counted as a great power deserving of a seat. And we shouldn't beg for



From left, Bharat Karnad, Lalit Mansingh, Deepa Ollapally, T N Ninan and Mani Shankar Aiyar

Mansingh said for all of Aiyar's call for peaceful co-existence, 'there are countries, which are threatening this path of growth and the immediate threats are of the military kind and are only from two countries — China and Pakistan. I am not saying that there is an imminent threat of attack from China, but it is a concern.'

With regard to Pakistan, Mansingh implied that Aiyar was being naïve because Pakistan 'threatens India at the conventional level, at the sub-conventional level, which is through terrorism, and at the nuclear level. And, we need to face it not by mere discussion. We have been having a dialogue with both China and Pakistan for all these years — we haven't come to any particular understanding.'

Thus, Mansingh said, 'Many of us have come to the conclusion that India needs strength — domestic strength. It has to be strong economically, politically, militarily, and then discuss with countries like China and Pakistan from a position of strength. It is not that India is threatening anybody, but India has to have a right to protect its interests. And this is the basis of our foreign policy.'

It was Aiyar versus Mansingh on Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in India as well.

Such terrorism, Aiyar declared, 'is hardly a threat to the nation's security as a whole because the worst terrorist incident took place over a period of two or three days in Mumbai. Most other terrorist incidents take place in one or two blasts,

at one or two places. And we've got a lot of terrorism going, which is domestic rather than international.'

Acknowledging that 'the terrorism from Pakistan is definitely a problem,' particularly when it is 'either state-sponsored or quasi-state sponsored,' Aiyar argued: 'The best answer for India lies in establishing a cooperative relationship with Pakistan — in investigating these terrorist incidents as well as tracking down who are the people responsible. The most hopeful sign recently is the decision of Pakistan to send their judicial commission to India as part of the investigation of the terrorist attack that took place in 26/11, as also the continued activity of the anti-terrorist court, which is a special fast-track court in Pakistan.'

Mansingh poo-hooed these gestures by Islamabad and said Aiyar was clearly off base if he believed these Pakistan-sponsored terrorist incidents were 'episodic.'

'It is episodic if you regard 9/11 as episodic,' Mansingh said, pointing out that 60,000 people 'have lost their lives to terrorists in India. It's a serious issue and the groups based in Pakistan continue to receive the support of the Pakistani authorities. Their leaders go scot-free, they give public speeches — hate speeches — asking their followers to attack India, destroy India....You discuss with Pakistan and then you don't get anywhere.'

He added: 'Imagine, the fourth year after 26/11, we have completed the trial of the man we nabbed during that terrorist attack and who has been sentenced to death. Pakistan has not even begun the process of the trials. We ask for voice samples because we have voice samples of the people who were communication with the terrorists. The Pakistani authorities say we cannot give you the voice samples and that our law doesn't allow it. So, what kind of cooperation are we getting?'

Aiyar, a former Indian Foreign Service officer, like Mansingh also slammed India's ministry of external affairs, alleging that it simply had no vision. He said, 'Not until the MEA stops obsessing about Pakistan and starts thinking about our larger security requirements will we be able to move in that direction. When I get to become minister of external affairs, I hope to sack most of my colleagues.'

Mansingh quipped: 'I know that Mani desperately wanted to be minister of external affairs, and I made sure that he was not my boss when I was foreign secretary.'



Bharat Karnad, right, and Lalit Mansingh

it, as seems to be the case... It hurts the national self-respect begging for a seat... We will get it when we exercise hard power and begin to take responsibility for the security of the region — for the new order in the Indian Ocean and so on and so forth.'

Former Indian ambassador to the US and former Indian foreign secretary Lalit

Mansingh shot back: 'Why not India? Why do you have France, why do you have UK? Why not India? In 1945, if it reflected the power structure of the world, today does the present permanent membership reflect the power structure? Is it acceptable that you have one country representing three continents — Asia, Africa and Latin America? India has a right to be there.'

Richard Fontaine of the CNAS pressed Karnad on why India decided for 'technical' reasons to go with the European Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft instead of as expected go with the American fighter jets for 'geopolitical' considerations. Karnad said, 'The problem is that there is enormous mistrust, distrust, in the Indian military — and maybe it infects and seeps down to the government — that when it comes to supplier transactions, you simply cannot trust America's contractual obligations.'