

India, superpower in the 3rd millennium BC - and AD

By Koenraad Elst

In the 3rd millennium BC, the Indus-Saraswati civilization was the world leader in science and technology as well as in trade and philosophy. We are witnessing a return to India's roots, considering the bright prospects of India in the 3rd millennium AD, soon to begin. In current discussions about this development, the Pokharan nuclear tests were the inevitable main points of reference, because they have acted as an eye-opener to Indians and foreigners alike. The tests have made the point that India now plays in the top league: technologically, because Indian scientists have demonstrated their mastery of that very technology which, after 1945, decides a country's status in geopolitics; and politically, because India has demonstrated the will and capacity to assert its vision of a multipolar world, as opposed to the unipolar "new world order" inaugurated by the Soviet implosion. In this guest column, I would like to look into some of the implications of the emerging power equation.

India's relations with the Muslim world It is still customary in the Western media to see 'Hindu India' as one half of an antagonistic duo with Pakistan or the larger Muslim world. If this perception was ever valid, the nuclear tests and other developments have rendered it completely obsolete. Pakistan just cannot compete with India, and the Indian tests were correctly explained as necessitated by India's defense needs vis-a-vis China and the US. Contrary to all predictions by foreign 'experts', the BJP government has not built gas chambers for the Indian Muslims, and it has not given an anti-Muslim thrust to its foreign policy.

In this connection, I must congratulate the present ruling party, the BJP, for a policy of which I personally used to be a critic. When you study the BJP's foreign policy statements since the party's founding in 1980, you find that they strictly avoid any confrontationist positions vis-a-vis the Muslim world as such. There were of course harangues against Pakistan and its proxy wars, there were warnings against Islamic 'fundamentalism', but underlying all this was a basic assurance that a BJP government would continue India's policy of cooperation with Muslim countries, in parallel with the BJP's charm offensive towards India's Muslims. While independent Hindu revivalist intellectuals have analyzed relations with the Muslim world in terms of a 'clash of civilizations' since long before Samuel Huntington popularized this expression, the BJP's approach was strictly nationalistic: treat Indian Muslims as Indians, and likewise treat the Arabian Muslims as Arabs, the Ayatollahs !

as Iranians, rather than as representatives of a mythical pan-Islamic power. In years past, I used to deride this de-ideologization of the Hindu approach to the Muslims as a sign of intellectual sloppiness and opportunism; but in fact, it is eminently wise policy. While focusing on Islam as a doctrine remains a valid project for scholars of comparative religion, it would be wrong for politicians to treat Arab or Indian Muslims as essentially spokesmen of Islamic doctrine, reducing them to their religious identity. In reality, the national interests of Iran or Egypt and the individual interests of Indian Muslims are

shaped far more by objective realities than by religion. Hence the correctness of the BJP's approach of disregarding religious identities and emphasizing national identities instead.

Policy-makers in the West should pay more attention to the difference in economic and technological performance between India and the Middle-Eastern countries: while the former is poor but dynamic, the latter are rich but stagnant, unable to outgrow their status as a mere market for American goods. India's image is increasingly determined by its brainy engineers rather than by Mother Teresa, and the country should prepare to take a leadership role in the progress of its less dynamic West-Asian neighbors. Among other things, this will help all parties concerned to exorcise any remaining bad memories of religious conflict, and get on with their lives. For Muslims in India, it is now glaringly clear that their best interests lie in joining the mainstream. They have given up on Pakistan, witness recent occasions where Indian Muslims celebrated Indian rather than Pakistani sports victories. Pakistan, let's face it, is in a shambles: it is socially stagnant, educationally backward, economically bankrupt, and the number of Muslims killed in sectarian violence in the last five years is a hundred times higher in Pakistan than in India. Indeed, Pakistani Muslims too are reconsidering their position, increasingly emphasizing their ethnic (Sindhi, Baluchi, Pathan) identities and musing about some kind of confederation with India. While Pakistan as a state has an obsessive hostility to everything Hindu and Indian, India can treat Pakistan as just a nuisance, a failed state from which an increasing number of Pakistanis seek to free themselves. India plays in a higher league, it is one of the emerging world powers, and South-Asian ! Muslims want to be part of this, rather than play along in Pakistan's pitiable proxy wars.

India and the USA

One of the sad aspects of the Cold War was the estrangement between India and the West. For most of the time, India has been the only democracy between the Jordan and the Yellow Sea, and should have been the West's natural ally in the region. Attitudes on both sides were shortsighted and pre-occupied with ideological posturing and strategic calculations, but that should all be history by now. The aftermath of Pokharan saw a lot of anti-US defiance among Indian politicians and commoners, but now that the dust has settled, India should prepare for global partnership with the US, China and other countries to ensure peace and cooperation. The US, on its part, should of course invite India into the club of permanent Security Council members: this is a demand of fairness, but also of American interests. Both the US and India have been major targets of terrorism, so the US cannot continue to sponsor anti-Indian terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir all while combating anti-American terrorism in the Middle East. To the extent that the US sees China as a threat, it has an interest in treating India as a counterweight and check on Chinese expansionism. This is all so obvious to any rational observer, and it is about time US policy-makers wake up. Probably the gradual realization of the failure of the punitive policy against India, imposing 'sanctions' on a fellow nuclear power, which only draws more strength from them, will drive the message home.