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The Imperialism of Anti-Imperialism
The United States and India in the Second World War

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Abstract

This paper examines the United States' involvement in South Asia during the Second World War. It traces the evolution of American policy towards India against the backdrop of the US grand strategy during the war and its plans for a post-war international order. In this context it analyzes the tensions between American attitudes towards the Indian freedom movement and wartime imperatives of collaborating with the British Empire. By bringing into focus America's policy towards the region at a time when it rose to global preponderance, the paper casts into relief key longer-term determinants of the US' engagement with the subcontinent.

The historiography of the United States' involvement in South Asia is all but exclusively focused on the Cold War era. This is perhaps unsurprising. After all, the onset of the Cold War coincided with the British withdrawal from the subcontinent accompanied by its partition into the new states of India and Pakistan. Over the following decades, the confrontation with the Soviet Union played a major role in shaping American attitudes and policies in South Asia. In particular, the US' military alliance with Pakistan cast a long shadow over its involvement in the subcontinent during the Cold War and, indeed, after it ended.

Thus we have some fine historical accounts of the US' bilateral ties with India and Pakistan, the triangular relationship between these

countries, and the Anglo-American relationship in South Asia during the first two decades of the Cold War.¹ The historiography of the period after 1970 has not been covered as exhaustively, though the pivotal moment of 1971 has received some attention.²

While this literature has transformed our understanding of American involvement in South Asia, it has also skewed our historical imagination. On the one hand, it tempts us to read the more recent past primarily through a ‘post-Cold War’ lens. On the other hand, it neglects the period before the Cold War and so obscures the larger pattern of American engagement with this part of the world. We lack historical accounts that look behind and beyond the Cold War and traces the longer arc of American involvement in the region. Indeed, much of the best recent work on the Cold War attempts to place it against the backcloth of the wider currents of the twentieth century’s international history – in particular, globalisation and decolonisation. Within this broader historiography, there is renewed emphasis on understanding the trajectory of the US’ global dominance, which predates and succeeds the Cold War.³

This essay attempts to turn the historiographical tiller in these

¹ Rudra Chaudhuri, *Forged in Crisis: India and the United States since 1947* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Andrew Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947–64* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Dennis Kux, *Estranged Democracies: India and the United States* (Fort McNair: National Defense University Press, 1992); Dennis Kux, *Disenchanted Allies: The United States and Pakistan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Robert McMahon, *Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Anita Inder Singh, *The Limits of British Influence: South Asia and the Anglo-American Relationship 1947* (London: Continuum, 1990); Paul McGarr, *The Cold War in South Asia: Britain, the United States and the Indian Subcontinent, 1945–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

² Gary Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide* (New York: Knopf, 2013); Srinath Raghavan, *1971: The Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

³ From a vast literature, see, Charles Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Michael Hunt, *The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained and Wielded Global Dominance* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2007); Bruce Cummings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of the Global Order 1916–1931* (London: Allen Lane, 2014); Frank Ninkovich, *The Global Republic: America’s Inadvertent Rise to World Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); John Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America’s Global Role* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

directions. It examines American involvement in South Asia during the Second World War. Unlike existing accounts of the subject, I am not interested merely in probing whether the US under President Franklin D. Roosevelt was supportive of India's quest for freedom.⁴ Rather, I am interested in examining American policy towards India against the backdrop of the US' grand strategy during the war. The Second World War marked the US' rise to preponderance. By examining its approach to South Asia during this period, I hope to cast into relief some of the longer-term determinants of the US' engagement with the subcontinent.

II

The mid-1930s was the high-water mark of American 'isolationism'. As a doctrine, isolationism was composed of many strands that commanded varying degrees of public assent. Ruthlessly simplified, it amounted to the belief that the US, shielded adequately by two oceans, should avoid getting embroiled in external alliances or wars; that it should retain the freedom to act without binding commitments; that the nation's economic interests overseas were small in comparison with the domestic market; and that the US should promote liberal values by demonstration rather than imposition. The Roosevelt administration was sensitive to the currents of isolationism swirling through the American populace. Yet by the time the US was pulled into the war, public opinion had begun to shift away from isolationism. And the US began to plan not just to win the world war, but for world order after the war.

'We are not isolationists', President Roosevelt had declared in 1936, 'except insofar as we seek to isolate ourselves completely from

⁴ For contrasting views, see, M.S. Venkataramani & B.K. Shrivastava, *Roosevelt, Gandhi, Churchill: America and the Last Phase of India's Freedom Struggle* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1983); Guy Hope, *America and Swaraj: The U.S. Role in Indian Independence* (Washington DC: Public Affairs Press, 1968); Gary Hess, *America Encounters India, 1941-1947* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971); Kenton Clymer, *Quest for Freedom: The United States and India's Independence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). In *India's War: The Making of Modern South Asia* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), I take a broader view of America's role in India during these years. This essay builds on the treatment in the book.

war.’ At the same time, he had held that it was of ‘vital interest... that the sanctity of international treaties and the maintenance of international morality be restored’.⁵ Once the US entered the war, Roosevelt sought to create – after the defeat of Germany and Japan – an international security organisation capable of deterring or defeating any country that challenged the international order so created.

An essential complement to this vision of a liberal, law-governed world order was thriving international commerce. Although the US had pulled out of the London Economic Conference of 1933 and embarked on an attempt to reflate the American economy via the New Deal, Roosevelt and his colleagues – especially Secretary of State Cordell Hull – remained committed to reducing tariff barriers by the extension of the ‘most favoured nation’ principle. In particular, they sought to push this agenda forward in bilateral settings through the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1934.

This policy was not shaped by a straightforward drive to secure foreign markets as part of a renewed ‘Open Door’ policy. Rather, economic, strategic and ideological concerns were entwined in various ways in this vision of a liberal, capitalist world order. As the global economy fragmented into autarkic zones and as Japan and Germany went on the offensive in Asia and Europe, Roosevelt was convinced that the war was a consequence of the closing of the world economy. After the war, he declared, ‘the United States must use its influence to open up trade channels of the world in order that no nation need feel compelled in later days to seek by force of arms what it can gain by peaceful conference’. Business internationalists were worried whether ‘the American capitalist system could continue to function if most of Europe and Asia should abolish free enterprise’. A variant of this concern about the feasibility of capitalism in one country was that access to foreign markets was essential to reduce government intervention in the American economy to harmonise domestic production and consumption. Hull emphasised both these aspects when he told a Senate committee in February 1940: ‘The question

⁵ Cited in John A. Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's Global Role* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 142, 146.

of survival or disappearance of free enterprise is bound up with the continuation or abandonment of the trade agreements program.⁶

A State Department report in December 1943 briskly summarised the many reasons for which the Roosevelt administration aimed at promoting a liberal, capitalist world order: ‘A great expansion in the volume of international trade after the war will be essential to the attainment of full and effective employment in the United States and elsewhere, to the preservation of private enterprise, and to the success of an international security system to prevent future wars.’⁷ The desire for full employment indicated that the capitalist order aimed at by post-war planners would differ as much from that of the Gold Standard era as would the international security order from the old balance of power or the League of Nations.

From the outset, the Americans were confident of imposing their design on the post-war world. Their confidence stemmed from an awareness of the extraordinary margin of power that the US could command over its rivals and friends. As the Nazis punched their way into Western Europe in the spring of 1940, *Life* observed: ‘The German victories brought shock and deep fear into the United States, but they brought also a consciousness of national strength. The old nations of Europe may fall before the conqueror but the young, strong giant of the West will meet any challenge that Adolf Hitler dares to make.’ A few months later, Adolf Berle Jr., assistant secretary of state and long-time advisor to Roosevelt, wrote in his diary: ‘I have been saying to myself and other people that the only possible effect of this war would be that the United States would emerge with an imperial power greater than the world had ever seen.’⁸

In attaining the purposes of such preponderant power, the Roosevelt administration perceived the British Empire as a major stumbling block. The imperial preference system instituted at the

⁶ Cited in Patrick Hearden, *Architects of Globalism: Building a New World Order during World War II* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 14–16. Also see, Ninkovich, *Global Republic*, pp. 160–68.

⁷ Cited in Hearden, *Architects of Globalism*, 41.

⁸ Cited in Thompson, *A Sense of Power*, 183.

Ottawa conference of 1932, erected a high tariff wall around the entire British Commonwealth but allowed low duties on goods traded between countries of the empire. Not only did American exporters find their largest export market ring-fenced by higher tariff rates, but the Americans believed that the continuation of imperial preference after the war would encourage others to follow suit, and so keep the world economy divided in blocs. Dismantling this system became a key American objective.

The negotiation of a master lend-lease agreement in early 1941 gave the US an opportunity to lean on Britain to open up the Ottawa system. The British delegation led by John Maynard Keynes refused to hold out any such commitment. The Anglophile assistant secretary of state, Dean Acheson, tartly observed that after obtaining such vast quantities of American aid, the British must 'not regard themselves as free to take any measures they chose directed against the trade of this country'. After almost a year of wrangling, the British signed up to a generic clause agreeing to cooperate in securing the 'elimination of forms of discriminatory treatment in international commerce'. Then, too, Prime Minister Winston Churchill clarified that this was not tantamount to an advance commitment to repeal imperial preferences.⁹

Colonial monopolies were also one reason why Roosevelt and his advisors sought to prepare the ground for gradual decolonisation in Asia and Africa. The continued exploitation of colonial peoples, they worried, could touch off a wave of revolutionary violence leading to further wars. 'The colonial system means war', said Roosevelt to his son in 1943. 'Exploit the resources of an India, a Burma, a Java; take all the wealth out of these countries, but never put anything back into them, things like education, decent standards of living, minimum health requirements – all you're doing is storing up the kind of trouble that leads to war.'¹⁰ The Americans were also concerned that British, French and Dutch imperial subjects in Asia would be susceptible to the sirens of Pan-Asiatic ideas that had already emanated from Tokyo. In consequence, the new 'imperial power' envisaged by Berle that stood

⁹ Hearden, *Architects of Globalism*, 29–33, 42–43.

¹⁰ Cited in Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 67.

ready to dislodge the older ones was self-consciously anti-imperial: ‘the imperialism of anti-imperialism’, as Niall Ferguson wittily calls it.

But as with imperial preferences, the American stance on decolonisation had to triangulate between the wartime imperative of defeating Germany and Japan, and post-war objectives of creating a new international order buttressed by the US’ unexampled hegemony. All these considerations shaped US policy towards India during these years.

III

Before the Second World War began, the US evinced no strategic interest in India. To most Americans, India was a land of fantasy and faith. Popular perceptions of India were heavily shaped by the adventure tales of Rudyard Kipling and exotic Hollywood productions featuring magnificent maharajas and cool colonial officials. Among the cognoscenti, it was religion that served as a vestibule to India. Religion was also the conduit for the transmission of negative images of India. American missionaries, active in India since the early nineteenth century, were appalled at the practices such as self-mutilation and torture, immolation of widows and female infanticide. The influence of such perceptions lingered in popular imagination well into the next century. Commercial exchanges were meagre. American investment in India in the late 1930s amounted to less than \$50 million with over half of this in missionary schools, hospitals and other non-commercial activities.¹¹ All this would change rapidly with the onset of the war.

On 3 September 1939, the viceroy, Lord Linlithgow declared war on India’s behalf without any consultation with Indian opinion. Although the provinces of the Raj were run by Indian political parties, the viceroy did not deem it fit to sound anyone out. Piqued by his refusal to make any commitment on India’s political future after

¹¹ Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India* (New York: John Day, 1958), 259–67.

the war, the ministries of the Indian National Congress resigned in October 1939. Thereafter the viceroy and the Congress remained at loggerheads.

No sooner had war broken out in September 1939 than desk-level officials in the state department began insisting that 'the Indian attitude towards the War is of great importance'. Assistant Secretary of State Berle, head of the near eastern division dealing with India, was told that there were 'large American interests in India'. Meanwhile, American officials in India took a sympathetic stance towards the Indian National Congress' protests against the unilateral declaration of war by the viceroy as well as his subsequent refusal to carry the nationalists along. By May 1941, the US consul general, Thomas Wilson, had concluded that the situation in India was 'very serious indeed'. The viceroy was a man of 'small vision' and too hidebound to handle the crisis.¹²

The American press reflected these views. The viceroy's response to the nationalists was criticised as inadequate by such prominent magazines as *The New Republic*, *The Nation* and *Time*. The editorials in traditionally pro-British papers like the *New York Times* and *Christian Science Monitor* as well as others like the *Los Angeles Times* were sceptical of the British stance. Even the conservative *Reader's Digest* carried a favourable profile of Jawaharlal Nehru written by John and Frances Gunther. American journals also offered considerable column-inches for supporters of Indian nationalism to expound their views. Nehru himself availed of these opportunities to present the Congress' case at strategic points in April 1940 in the *Atlantic*, and in November 1940 in the *Asia*.¹³

Even before sections of the American press grew censorious, the British cabinet was alert to American opinion on India. Indeed, hardly any major decision on India was taken without reference to its impact on public opinion in the US. With a view to keeping a closer tab on American opinion as well as shaping it, the British government proposed to the state department in April 1941 the appointment

¹² Cited in Clymer, *Quest for Freedom*, 14–19.

¹³ Hess, *America Encounters India*, 18–21.

of a senior Indian official to its embassy in Washington. The state department expressed no objection to the proposed 'Agent-General' of India, but sought and obtained the reciprocal appointment of its own 'Commissioner' in New Delhi.¹⁴

The state department's demand stemmed from its growing realisation of the strategic importance of India. India had recently become a member of the Lend-Lease system, which was approved by the US Congress in March 1941. The Roosevelt administration was aware of India's contribution to the war effort. India, the US treasury noted in May 1941, had already raised over 300,000 men and could 'greatly increase' the number. India had sent 'important forces' to fight in North and East Africa and supplied garrison troops for the Far East. The Allied operations in Iraq and the Persian Gulf were entirely based on India. Further, from the beginning of the war, India had made a 'most important contribution' to war supplies. If India were to fully mobilise its 'enormous basic internal resources', it needed to be able to 'import finished and semi-finished manufactures and certain materials' for which the US was the sole source.¹⁵

Simultaneously, the state department grew concerned about the situation in the Middle East. And this brought to the fore the political problem of India. Berle believed that if the political impasse were not resolved, India could become an 'active danger' to the war effort in the Middle East. The British seemed to be doing 'nothing' about it. Berle recommended sending a formal note to the British government underlining India's 'vast influence' on the Middle East and the need to convert India into an 'active, rather than a passive, partner' in the war. They should pointedly ask Britain to 'promptly explore' the possibility of granting India equal membership in the British Commonwealth. Berle conceded that this may seem 'sensational', but added that 'this is no time for half measures'.¹⁶

At his suggestion, Secretary of State Hull met the British

¹⁴ British Aide Memoire, 17 April 1941; Hull to Halifax, 28 May 1941; Press release, 21 July 1941, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter FRUS), 1941, vol. 3, 170–74.

¹⁵ Memorandum on 'India and the Lend Lease Act', 14 May 1941, File no. 2, Roosevelt Library Papers, NMML.

¹⁶ Memorandum by Berle, 5 May 1941, *FRUS* 1941, vol. 3, 176–77.

ambassador and former viceroy of India, Lord Halifax. When Hull queried him about the possibility of further 'liberalizing' moves towards India, Halifax claimed that conditions in India were 'really very good'. Indians had self-government in provinces and had been offered berths in the viceroy's council. Despite Gandhi's opposition, the sentiment towards Britain was very strong. Halifax concluded that his government did not deem it 'feasible or even necessary now to make further liberalizing concessions'.¹⁷

There the matter rested until three months later when the Americans grew concerned about Japanese strategic moves in the Far East. The US ambassador in London, John Winant, felt that India had a 'large' role to play in securing the Far East. In the rapidly evolving context, it may be wise for the US to raise the question of India with Britain. The British, he observed, had emphasised the Hindu-Muslim divide as the main stumbling block towards a settlement. Winant, however, believed that the absence of a settlement 'handicaps the support of war in India itself'. It might be possible, he argued, at least to get the British to announce dominion status for India within a stated period after the end of the war. Among other advantages, such a move would have 'a sobering effect upon the Japanese'.¹⁸

Berle supported Winant. He suggested to Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles that they point out to the British government that this was a 'more opportune time' than ever for such a declaration. It would be 'very helpful' from the standpoint of American public opinion. Besides, India could become the 'nucleus of a Far Eastern alliance', which included China, Australia and New Zealand, and which could hold its own against Japan or possibly even Germany. Welles disagreed. He wrote to Hull that in his judgement the US was 'not warranted' in suggesting a status for India to Britain. But if the president was disposed to take up the matter, he might wish to discuss it 'in a very personal and confidential way directly with Mr. Churchill'.¹⁹

¹⁷ Memorandum by Hull, 7 May 1941, *FRUS* 1941, vol. 3, 178.

¹⁸ Winant to Hull, 1 August 1941, *FRUS* 1941, vol. 3, 178–79.

¹⁹ Berle to Welles, 5 August 1941; Welles to Hull, 6 August 1941, *FRUS* 1941, vol. 3, 179–81.

Three days later Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill met secretly off the coast of Newfoundland. While the principal objective of the meeting was to cement the Anglo-American alliance and discuss grand strategy, a statement of war aims – the Atlantic Charter – attracted attention the world over. In fact, the Charter had emerged without much deliberation.²⁰ Over dinner on 9 August, Churchill and Roosevelt talked about the possibility of a joint statement. The next morning the British advanced the draft of a five-point declaration. The third point originally read: ‘they respect the right of all people to choose the form of government under which they will live; they are concerned only to defend the rights of freedom of speech and of thought without which such choosing must be illusory’. Welles, however, was dubious of Congress and public support to such a sweeping pledge to defend human rights – rights that had been abolished by the Axis countries. Roosevelt accordingly suggested removing the second clause and substituting it with: ‘and they hope that self-government may be restored to those from whom it has been forcibly removed’. Churchill agreed, only suggesting adding ‘sovereign-rights and’ before self-government. Obviously all this was in the context of European countries under enemy occupation.

The Atlantic Charter took a life of its own and sent ripples of excitement through the colonial world. The Burmese premier asked if it applied to his country and dashed off to London to obtain an answer. Savarkar wrote to Roosevelt urging him to state whether or not the Atlantic Charter applied to India and whether the US guaranteed freedom to India within a year of the war’s end. If the US failed to affirmatively respond, ‘India cannot but construe this as another stunt like the War aims of the last Anglo-German war’.²¹ Indeed, the response to the Atlantic Charter was comparable in enthusiasm to that evoked among colonial subjects by Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points after the First World War.²² But Churchill scotched any such

²⁰ William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

²¹ Cited in Keer, *Savarkar*, 297.

²² Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International of Origins of Anti-Colonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

suggestion. On 9 September, he told the Commons that article three applied only to countries under Nazi occupation and that it did 'not qualify in any way' the various statements made about India from time to time.

In India, the reaction to Churchill's comment was uniformly critical. Even such loyalists as the Punjab premier, Sikander Hayat Khan, termed it the strongest rebuff ever received by India.²³ Gandhi was characteristically witty and incisive in his comments:

What is the Atlantic Charter? It went down the ocean as soon as it was born! I do not understand it. Mr. Amery denies that India is fit for democracy, while Mr. Churchill states the Charter could not apply to India. Force of circumstances will falsify their declarations.²⁴

Consul-General Wilson cabled the state department that Churchill's statement was a 'most unfortunate pronouncement', which went 'far towards banishing perhaps forever' any goodwill towards him in India. As for the Indian government, he wrote dyspeptically, there was 'no leadership worthy of the name anywhere to be found'.²⁵

Churchill had, in fact, shared in advance the text of his speech with Ambassador Winant, especially since it had referred to a statement issued jointly with the US. Winant felt that Churchill's references to the inapplicability of article three to countries like India was unwise. It ran 'counter to the general public interpretation' of the article. It would intensify charges of imperialism and leave Britain with 'a do nothing policy' towards India. Minutes before Churchill left for the Commons, Winant urged Churchill to omit the offending paragraph in his speech. The prime minister was determined to press ahead. He told Winant that this position was approved by the cabinet and, in any case, was a matter of internal British politics.²⁶

Desk-level officials at the state department urged that the matter be brought to the president's notice. Since Churchill had offered an

²³ Indian reactions to the Atlantic Charter can be sampled in *TF* 1941, part 1, 60–75.

²⁴ Interview to Evelyn Wrench, December 1941, *CWMG* 81, 348.

²⁵ Cited in Clymer, *Quest for Freedom*, 35.

²⁶ Winant to Hull, 4 November 1941, *FRUS* 1941, vol. 3, 181–82.

interpretation of the joint declaration, it was an opportune moment to raise with the British government the question of Indian politics and to do so along the lines suggested earlier by Winant. The political situation in India, it was felt, was ‘deteriorating rapidly’ owing to the stalemate between the government and the nationalists. This in turn was preventing India from doing its best to help win the war. Welles yet again threw a wet blanket on the idea. Interestingly, he now held that if article three had ‘any real meaning, it should be regarded as all-inclusive’ and in consequence applicable to India. Yet the US, at least for the present, was ‘facing a question of expediency’. He had been told by Halifax – the ‘most liberal viceroy India has ever had’ – that British officials were unanimous that an immediate grant of dominion status would trigger ‘internal dissension in India on a very wide scale’ and render it thoroughly useless for the war effort. US officials were not familiar with the problems of India. Nor did the issue mean ‘very much to public opinion’ at home. Above all, Churchill would feel that the administration was taking advantage of British dependence on America to force its hand against its considered judgement.²⁷

In the wake of Pearl Harbor, thinking within the administration underwent important changes. Apart from advocates in the state department, intelligence assessments by the Office of Coordination of Information held that the US had to help arrest the downward political slide in India.²⁸ Thus when Churchill came to Washington two weeks after Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt gingerly broached the question of India. The only available account of this meeting is in Churchill’s memoir. The prime minister claimed to have ‘reacted so strongly and at such length that he [Roosevelt] never raised it verbally again’. Towards the end of his trip, Churchill confidently cabled his colleagues that they would not have ‘any trouble with American opinion’.²⁹ This judgement would prove premature.

²⁷ Memorandum by Murray, 7 November 1941; Welles to Hull, 15 November 1941, *FRUS* 1941, vol. 3, 184–87.

²⁸ Clymer, *Quest for Freedom*, 44.

²⁹ Churchill, *Hinge of Fate*, p. 209; Churchill to Attlee, 7 January, 1942, in Mansergh et al. (ed.), *Transfer of Power* (hereafter *TP*), vol. 1, 14.

IV

On 11 November 1941, President Roosevelt had decided that the defence of India was of vital importance to the US and hence India could directly receive Lend-Lease supplies from America. While welcoming the decision, British officials realised that it was pregnant with problems for them. The US proposal to negotiate Lend-Lease supplies directly with the British-Indian mission in Washington was seen as ‘something of a bombshell’, for it threatened to displace Britain’s economic pre-eminence in India. The US’ economic importance for India was already growing. Indian imports from the US had increased from 9 per cent in 1939–40 to 20 per cent in 1940–41, while over the same period imports from Britain had fallen to 21.2 per cent from 25.2 per cent. Similarly, Indian exports to the US had risen from 12 per cent to 19.6 per cent while exports to Britain had fallen to 32.3 per cent from 35.5 per cent.³⁰

British officials were also aware of the Americans’ proclivity for driving a hard bargain. Earlier in the year, while negotiating a treaty of commerce, navigation and consular rights between the US and India, the Americans had sought a clause that would give private companies from both sides the right to undertake mineral and oil exploration in the other country. They were interested in securing rights for exploration in Balochistan. The government of India resisted this clause, claiming that its rights would only be theoretical as no Indian company had the requisite capital to extract minerals or oil in the US. American officials argued that they had a similar treaty with Britain, which too was only notional since Britain had no deposits of oil or minerals. An agreement with India would amount to actual reciprocity on the part of Britain.

The Americans also demanded a most-favoured nation clause explicitly clarifying that it would mean ‘the most favored third nation, *including the Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*’. The Indian negotiator, Sir Feroz Khan Noon, argued that this would contravene the agreement on imperial preferences between India and

³⁰ Voigt, *India in the Second World War*, 98–99.

Britain. He also observed that the deletion of this clause would exclude the other Dominions from the definition of most-favoured nation. State department officials, however, felt that removing the clause would have deleterious consequences for America's longer-term plans: it 'would accord recognition in a treaty to preferential tariff treatment now accorded certain British and Colonial products'. Although the US had recognised imperial tariffs in a trade agreement signed with Britain in 1938, it did so in exchange for a substantial reduction in the tariff. 'The recognition of imperial preferences in a treaty is a recognition of a more formal character and the initial compulsory period is for a much longer time.' The Indians, however, continued to plead their inability to sign on to this clause but requested a speedy conclusion of the agreement in the light of the war. Eventually the Roosevelt administration forbore from pressing its demand. Britain and India were informed that though the US had hoped that the treaty would 'embody the most liberal principles of international trade', it would refrain from raising this question owing to the 'unsettled world conditions'.³¹ Evidently once conditions were more settled, the US would rake up this issue.

With the onset of Lend-Lease, British Indian officials grew concerned that this might become the thin end of the wedge with which to prise open the system of imperial preferences. These concerns were stoked during the negotiations on the master agreement for lend-lease. When negotiations began for a similar agreement between Washington and India, the Americans pressed for the inclusion of a similar clause. On this occasion, it was the Indian member for commerce in the viceroy's Executive Council who demurred, arguing strenuously that it would be detrimental to India's fledgling industries. The Roosevelt administration refused to relent. And the negotiations had to be shelved – though the US reluctantly agreed to continue with existing arrangements.³²

The fact, however, remained that India's plans for the expansion of its war effort were heavily reliant on American economic assistance.

³¹ These negotiations can be followed in *FRUS* 1941, vol. 3, 192–99.

³² Voigt, *India in the Second World War*, 99.

Indeed by 1944–45, the US would account for 25.7 per cent of India's total imports, while Britain would lag behind at 19.8 per cent. None realised this more clearly than the Indian Agent-General in Washington, Sir Girja Shankar Bajpai. A senior official of the Indian Civil Service, Bajpai had previously served at the League of Nations and had been a member of the viceroy's Executive Council until 1940. Although he epitomised the 'Steel Frame' of the Raj, Bajpai – by his own account – did not regard India under British rule as 'the best of possible worlds'. Indeed, in private conversations with US officials Bajpai forthrightly disagreed with the stance espoused by Halifax.³³ At the same time, he was keen to leverage American assistance for India's war.

Soon after Pearl Harbor, Bajpai shared with Berle a report on India's war effort. The report observed that while India had 'modernized and expanded' its ordnance factories, it would continue to rely on Britain and the US for 'some key items of supply'. What's more, despite the increased flow of more modern equipment from Britain, 'the releases have never been and cannot be equalled to India's needs'. Indeed, these could only be met by a 'generous flow of help' from the US. India was similarly dependent on the US for general engineering equipment, especially power generation sets, motor and machine tools as well as motor vehicles, which were entirely procured from the US. The report also stated that India planned to raise 124 Indian infantry battalions, taking the total strength of the Indian army to 1.5 million.

Following the meeting with Bajpai, Berle felt that for a considerable time transportation of cargo from the US to the Far East would be 'limited, difficult and dangerous'. In consequence, it was in the US' interest to promote production in the region rather than shipping it from home. In this scheme, India bulked large. If, by providing 'technical assistance' alongside supplies, the Indian army could be strengthened then the US would achieve 'considerable economy' in the war effort, would make 'more effective use' of India's manpower and would be building up 'defensive and offensive striking

³³ Cited in memorandum by Murray, 24 April 1942, *FRUS*, 1942, Vol. 1, 640.

power in a region where it is vitally necessary'. Berle recommended sending to India a suitable representative to survey the possibility of increasing India's war effort.³⁴

When there was no movement for a month, Bajpai met Berle and impressed upon him the gravity of the situation in the Far East. While China had put up a splendid resistance, India was more accessible to the Allies and had a highly developed system of internal communications. Underlining India's potential, Bajpai trotted out a series of figures: 64,000 miles of railways; steel production capacity of over a million tons a year; an industrial base that already produced 85 per cent of the 60,000 items required for the war; and 'almost unlimited manpower' for the army, which had already proved its mettle in modern warfare. When Japanese submarines closed the port of Rangoon, Bajpai yet again impressed upon Berle to consider India's needs with 'very great speed'. He also wrote to the viceroy recommending an American technical mission to assess India's potential and requirements. Berle was sufficiently impressed to write directly to the president urging him to send a technical mission to India. Should things 'go badly in Singapore and Burma', he added, India's role might be of 'crucial importance.' On 2 February, President Roosevelt gave his approval.³⁵

V

The fall of Singapore in mid-February 1942 alarmed the state department. Above all, it brought to fore the latent yet lingering concerns about the political situation in India. Berle argued that they must 'immediately get to work' and the 'first item on the list ought to be to tackle the Indian problem in a large way'. The technical mission had already been approved by the president, but India's war effort would not go very far 'unless the political situation is handled with

³⁴ Memorandum of conversation by Berle, 23 January 1942, *FRUS*, 1942, vol. 1, 593–95.

³⁵ Memoranda of conversations by Berle, 23 January & 28 January 1942, Memorandum to President, 29 January 1942, *FRUS*, 1942, Vol. 1, 595–99.

extreme vigor'. He called for a joint Anglo-American announcement that India would be brought in 'as a full partner in the United Nations'. In other words, the Atlantic Charter would apply to India. Not only should Churchill make such an announcement, but the viceroy should be directed to convene a 'constitutional conference' in India. Even if the Congress did not come in at this stage, its stance would determine whether India cooperated in waging the war, or whether there was 'more or less passive resistance' which would be exploited by Japan 'to the limit'.³⁶

Interestingly, Berle noted that President Roosevelt had 'indicated his sympathy' for the view that Britain must promptly recognise India's aspiration to 'a freer existence and a full membership in the British family of nations'. For a range of reasons, the president's sentiment would be strengthened in the days ahead. To begin with, the American press turned sharply critical of Britain. Renowned columnists like Walter Lippmann and John Thompson as well as editorials in a series of newspapers and journals argued that Britain's imperial policy must change. The *New York Times* witheringly wrote that countries like India were no longer 'suppliants at the white man's door. Not all the faded trappings of imperialism, not all the pomp of viceroys...has much meaning for them now.'³⁷

These feelings were reflected in political debates. The US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee commenced hearings on the situation in the Far East. There was a 'serious undercurrent of anti-British feeling' among the senators, who argued that having done 'so much' for Britain by Lend-Lease the US was well positioned to 'dictate to England' political changes in the British empire. One senator went so far as to declare that 'Gandhi's leadership in India became part of America's military equipment'. India's contribution could only be secured by accepting 'Gandhi's political objective'.³⁸

The president's views also seem to have been sharpened by a gloomy letter written to Eleanor Roosevelt by the writer and Nobel

³⁶ Memorandum by Berle, 17 February 1942, *FRUS*, 1942, vol. 1, 602-4.

³⁷ Cited in Clymer, *Quest for Freedom*, 41; Hess, *America Encounters India*, 35.

³⁸ Long to Welles, 25 February 1942, *FRUS*, 1942, vol. 1, 606.

Laureate Pearl S. Buck, which the first lady shared with the president. The letter expressed deep concern at the prospect of the Allies planning a stand against Japan in India. Buck argued that there was a serious rift between Hindus and Muslims in India – ‘fostered by the British divide-and-rule policy’. Jinnah, in particular, was ‘a demagogue of the most dangerous type’. He had no love for his country and was the ‘perfect tool for the Axis’. It was a ‘fallacy’ to think that Indians could defend their country as the Chinese had done. They were ‘so filled with bitterness’ towards the British that there would be ‘revengeful massacres’ on a large scale – massacres in which American soldiers might well be caught up.³⁹

Finally, the president’s thinking was influenced by intelligence and strategic assessments. The Office of Coordination of Information now believed that India ‘might well be the decisive element in the war in southeast Asia’. Arguing that India ‘lights a gleam in the eye of the German and the Japanese’, the assessment concluded that the ‘Allied cause *requires* that India should cooperate more vigorously in the war than heretofore’.⁴⁰

A worried Roosevelt ordered a detailed report on the military situation from the combined chiefs of staff. On 15 February, the president himself drafted a tough missive to Churchill. After commenting generally on Britain’s attitude towards its colonies – out of date by a decade or two – and contrasting it with the US’ record in the Philippines, Roosevelt wrote that the Indians felt that ‘delay follows delay and therefore that there is no real desire in Britain to recognize a world change which has taken deep root in India as well as in other countries’. There was, he concluded, ‘too much suspicion and dissatisfaction in India’. In consequence, the resistance to Japan was not whole-hearted.⁴¹

Roosevelt turned the letter over in his mind until late that night. He hesitated to send it because he felt that ‘in a strict sense, it

³⁹ Pearl Buck to Eleanor Roosevelt, 7 March 1942; President to Eleanor Roosevelt, 11 March 1942, File no. 12, Roosevelt Library Papers, NMML.

⁴⁰ Cited in Klymer, *Quest for Freedom*, 45.

⁴¹ Roosevelt to Churchill (draft), 25 February 1942, Warren Kimball (ed.) *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence*, vol. 1, 400-1.

is not our business'. At the same time, India was of 'great interest' from the standpoint of conducting the war. Eventually, the president decided against sending the letter to Churchill. Instead he asked his representatives in London, John Winant and Averell Harriman, to send him an assessment of Churchill's thoughts on India.⁴²

Meanwhile the president received a message from Marshal Chiang Kai-shek of China, who had recently visited India to drum up support from the nationalists. Chiang claimed that if the Indian problem was not 'immediately and urgently solved, the danger will be daily increasing'. If the British government waited until the Japanese bombed India and Indian morale collapsed, or if they waited until the Japanese army invaded India, 'it will certainly be too late'. The danger was 'extreme'. If Britain did not 'fundamentally change' its policy towards India, it would amount to 'presenting India to enemy and inviting them to quickly occupy India'.⁴³

Even as Roosevelt read Chiang's cable, the British cabinet had stormy meetings about how to deal with the situation in India. At the insistence of Clement Attlee, Churchill reluctantly agreed to send Stafford Cripps to negotiate a settlement for India. The viceroy was aghast and threatened to resign. In explaining the decision to him, the secretary of state for India stressed the 'pressure [from] outside, upon Winston from Roosevelt' as a prime factor.⁴⁴ The Cripps mission was clearly intended to head-off further American intrusion into Indian affairs. It was impeccably timed. Hours after the mission was approved, the Roosevelt administration announced the appointment of an American advisory mission to assist the war effort in India. The head of the mission, Louis Johnson, was appointed as the president's special representative.⁴⁵

The next day Roosevelt wrote directly to Churchill. Expressing 'much diffidence', he suggested for India lessons from the history of the US. Between 1783 and 1789, the thirteen states had formed a

⁴² Message to Winant, 25 February 1942, *FRUS*, 1942, vol. 1, 604.

⁴³ T.V. Soong to Roosevelt, 25 February 1942, *FRUS* 1942, vol. 1, 604-6.

⁴⁴ Amery to Linlithgow, 10 March 1942, *TP*, vol. 1, 396-97, 404.

⁴⁵ *FRUS* 1942, 613, 617.

‘stop-gap government’ by joining the articles of confederation – an arrangement that was replaced by the union under the US constitution. Roosevelt suggested setting up a ‘temporary Dominion Government’ in India, headed by ‘a small representative group, covering different castes, occupations, religions and geographies’. This government would have executive and administrative powers over finances, railways, telegraph and other ‘public services’. It could also be charged with setting up a body to consider a more permanent government for India. Having put forth these radical ideas, Roosevelt wrote: ‘For the love of Heaven don’t bring me into this, though I do want to be of help. It is strictly speaking, none of my business, except insofar as it is a part and parcel of the successful fight that you and I are making.’⁴⁶

By the time Roosevelt’s special representative, Louis Johnson, reached Delhi on 3 April 1942, the Cripps mission was on the brink of collapse. In his first cable, Johnson requested the president to intercede with Churchill to prevent the failure of Cripps’ mission. Although Roosevelt refused to intervene, he wished to be kept informed of developments. Thereafter, Johnson worked hectically with Cripps and Nehru to try and hammer out an arrangement satisfactory to both sides. But to no avail.

Churchill was all along concerned about influencing American opinion. As soon as he received Cripps’ cable claiming that the Congress had rejected his proposals on the ‘widest grounds’, Churchill passed it on to Roosevelt. The prime minister also sent a copy of his cable to Cripps wherein he observed that the effect of the mission on Britain and the US was ‘wholly favourable’. However, Louis Johnson had already written to the president that the Congress’s rejection was ‘a masterpiece and will appeal to free men everywhere’. Johnson pinned the blame squarely on Churchill’s chest. Cripps and Nehru could overcome the problem ‘in 5 minutes if Cripps had any freedom or authority’. London, he wrote, ‘wanted a Congress refusal’.⁴⁷

On the afternoon of 11 April, Roosevelt sent a private message to Churchill urging him to postpone Cripps’ departure from India and

⁴⁶ Ibid. 615–17.

⁴⁷ Johnson to Roosevelt, 11 April 1942, *FRUS* 1942, part 1, 631–32.

ask him to make 'a final effort'. The president observed that Churchill had misread the mood in America. 'The feeling is almost universally held here' that Britain was unwilling to go the distance despite concessions by the Congress party. Roosevelt warned that if the negotiations were allowed to collapse and India was invaded by Japan 'prejudicial reaction on American public opinion can hardly be over-estimated'. Cripps was already on his way home. And Churchill sent an emollient reply to Roosevelt: 'Anything like a serious difference between you and me would break my heart and surely deeply injure both our countries at the height of this terrible struggle.'⁴⁸

Although Roosevelt refrained from bearing down upon Churchill, the prime minister took note of his warning about public perception in the US. And the British embassy in Washington swung into action. Even while Cripps was in India, Halifax had argued in a nationally broadcast speech that the Congress party was not prepared to assume responsibility for defending India, nor indeed for maintaining law and order. After Cripps had thrown in the towel, the British embassy persisted with this line of propaganda, adding for good measure that the communal divisions in India were another reason for the failure. These arguments were faithfully reflected in prominent pro-British newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in the immediate aftermath of the mission.⁴⁹ American newspapers also picked up on statements by Amery and Cripps in the House of Commons, which pointed to the Congress and the communal problem for the failure of the mission.

The Congress too was struggling to get its version heard in America. At Louis Johnson's urging, Nehru had written directly to Roosevelt, expressing the Congress' continued eagerness 'to do our utmost for the defence of India and to associate ourselves for the larger causes of freedom and democracy'.⁵⁰ Following his exchange with Churchill, Roosevelt did not reply to Nehru. Matters were made worse

⁴⁸ Roosevelt to Churchill, 11 April 1942; Churchill to Roosevelt, 12 April 1942, *FRUS* 1942, part 1, 633–35.

⁴⁹ Auriol Weigold, *Churchill, Roosevelt and India: Propaganda during World War II* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2009), 112.

⁵⁰ Nehru to Roosevelt, *SWJN*, vol. 12, 212–13.

by Gandhi's obiter dicta on the US. In May, he told the press that the US should have stayed out of the war. Criticising racial policies in the US, he added that Americans were 'worshippers of Mammon'. The following month, he called the presence of American soldiers in India a 'bad job' and the country itself a 'partner in Britain's guilt'.⁵¹ Gandhi's subsequent calls for Britain to leave India were spun by the British embassy in Washington as indicative of his alleged sympathy for Japan.

In this contest over American opinion, the Congress eventually found some worthy allies: American journalists who had descended on India in the summer of 1942. To be sure, not all of them were sympathetic to the Congress' stance. But at least two influential voices weighed in on their behalf. Louis Fischer of *The Nation* landed in India just as Cripps was on his way out. Fischer had spent long years in Moscow, during which time he had got to know Cripps. He had also met Nehru a few times in Europe in the 1930s. Fischer had returned to the US in 1941 and had plunged into a lecture tour where he made the case for a post-war world without imperialism. India naturally bulked large in his arguments. Fischer knew senior state department officials, including Cordell Hull and Sumner Welles. His trip to India had, in fact, been facilitated by Welles.⁵²

Fischer's stint in India overlapped with that of another influential journalist, Edgar Snow. Although junior to Fischer by a decade, Snow too had spent many years outside the US – in his case, in China, where he made a name for himself with his book *Red Star over China* published in 1937. In February 1942, he met President Roosevelt and discussed whether India 'might soon become an American problem'. Roosevelt asked him to write from India if he learnt of anything interesting and to report to him on returning from India. The president also asked Snow to tell Nehru to write to him.⁵³

On returning home, Fischer and Snow wrote important articles

⁵¹ Cited in Clymer, *Quest for Freedom*, 82.

⁵² Auriol Weigold, 'Cripps' Offer and the nationalist response: Constructing propaganda in the United States', *South Asia*, 23:2 (2000), 69–70.

⁵³ Weigold, 'Cripps' Offer', 67–68.

drawing on numerous conversations with Indian and British leaders. These articles at once punched holes into British propaganda about the Cripps mission and presented a sympathetic account of the Congress' predicament. Fischer published a two-part article, 'Why Cripps Failed', in *The Nation* in September 1942. Fischer's forensic pieces were laced with polemical verve.⁵⁴

Snow focused on the consequences of the failure of Cripps' mission. His article 'Must Britain Give up India?' appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* a week before Fischer's first piece was published. Cripps' failure, Snow wrote, had exacerbated the considerable mistrust of the British government harboured by Indians. Taking a broader view, Snow added that the humiliating defeat and withdrawal of British forces from Malaya, Singapore and Burma had made a hefty dent in the prestige of the Raj. India, he concluded, was the Allies' last bastion. If it fell, China and the Middle East would be endangered.⁵⁵

These views were echoed elsewhere in the American press. The well-known *Washington Post* columnist, Ernest Lindley, wrote that the Roosevelt administration would be 'remiss in its duty' if it failed to 'assert its influence on behalf of the treatment of the Indian problem which will best serve to win the war'. Halifax was troubled at this turn of opinion. Unless they did something to counteract this trend, he advised London, the American press would 'rapidly and perhaps completely change its attitude much to the detriment of Anglo-American relations'. The problem was not just the press. Senior officials like Harry Hopkins had spoken to him about the 'strong pressure now being exerted on the President from both official and unofficial quarters to do something'.⁵⁶

Halifax would have been still more alarmed had he known of the attempt by Gandhi to reach out to Roosevelt. Prior to Fischer's departure from Wardha, Gandhi had asked him to carry a letter as well as convey a verbal message to President Roosevelt. 'I hate all

⁵⁴ Louis Fischer, 'Why Cripps Failed', *The Nation*, 19 & 26 September 1942.

⁵⁵ Edgar Snow, 'Must Britain Give up India?' *Saturday Evening Post*, 12 September 1942.

⁵⁶ Halifax to Eden, 16 September 1942, *TP*, vol. 2, 969–70.

war,' wrote Gandhi. But he also knew that his countrymen did not share his abiding faith in non-violence in the midst of the raging war. Gandhi advanced a straightforward suggestion. India should be declared independent and the Allies should sign a treaty with the free government of India, which would allow their troops to stay on in India for 'preventing Japanese aggression and defending China'.⁵⁷

On returning to America in early August, Fischer sought a meeting with the president to share a message from Gandhi as well as his impressions of the situation in India. Roosevelt was busy so Fischer was asked to brief the secretary of state. Fischer, however, wrote again to Roosevelt, emphasising that the Congress might lurch towards civil disobedience. 'A terrible disaster may be impending in India.' Gandhi had explicitly said to him: 'Tell your president that I wish to be dissuaded [from civil disobedience].' The viceroy, Fischer added, was hardly inclined to do so.⁵⁸

By this time, however, the Roosevelt administration was not open to intervening on India. The president had no desire to break with Churchill, especially when the Congress seemed set on civil disobedience. A few weeks later, Hull pointed out to the president that they had expressed to Britain their 'unequivocal attitude' about the need for change in India on the basis of agreement between the government and the Congress. 'Our attitude', he added, 'has not been one of partisanship toward either contender. It was not clear that they could do more.'⁵⁹ The president agreed. This was not surprising: the Quit India revolt had just begun.

VI

Even as Indian politics juddered to a halt, the US had to focus on the demands of the war. In early March 1942, the US despatched a technical mission to assess the needs of Indian industry in supporting the war effort. Led by Henry Grady, a former assistant secretary of

⁵⁷ Gandhi to Roosevelt, 1 July 1942, File No. 12, Roosevelt Library Papers, NMML.

⁵⁸ Fischer telegram and letter to Roosevelt, 5 & 7 August 1942, File No. 12, Roosevelt Library Papers, NMML.

⁵⁹ Memorandum by Hull, 15 August 1942, File No. 12, Roosevelt Library Papers, NMML.

state, the mission stayed in India for five weeks and produced its report towards the end of May. The report stated that 'India is of great strategic importance to the cause of the United Nations...because India can be utilised as a base for an offensive against the Japanese in Burma, because India and Burma are essential links in the efforts of the United Nations to supply China with war materials, and, finally, because India possesses great natural resources which...must be fully developed for the benefit of the United Nations.'⁶⁰

The remainder of the report was at once a sweeping survey of Indian industry and a sharp indictment of the Indian government. 'The Government of India and the industries of India, with few exceptions,' the report noted, 'were not organized on a war basis.' No single official or group of officials were charged with coordinating the entire industrial war effort. A large number of industrial plants were 'mere jobbing shops'. The seriously congested railways plied goods with 'little regard for their importance or ultimate use'. Despite a shortage of electric power, no attempt was being made to curtail consumption for non-essential uses. There was no method for prioritising projects and allocating resources. Prices were rising but there was no mechanism for their control. The lack of coordination and inefficiency in the war economy was epitomised in a ship repair plant in Bombay which produced shoe-nails for the army and railway switch gear, while 'more than 100 ships waited in the harbor for major and minor repairs'.⁶¹

The report made specific recommendations to revitalise all major industries: transportation and communication, petroleum and minerals, iron and steel, shipping and armaments, motor vehicles and machine tools. The mission insisted that Indian workers had the mechanical aptitude to become 'skilled craftsmen after a short period of training'. In conclusion, the report emphasised 'India's great potentialities for industrial production because of its vast natural and human resources'.⁶²

⁶⁰ Report of the American Technical Mission to India, WO 32/10269, TNA.

⁶¹ Report of the American Technical Mission to India, WO 32/10269, TNA.

⁶² Ibid.

The Grady Mission's recommendations and plan came with a price tag of \$212 million. The joint chiefs felt, however, that the programme would throw an enormous burden on American shipping, machine tools and raw materials. Economic concerns were overlaid with strategic ones. Admiral King reacted to the mission's conclusion that 'the value...of an India strengthened by a program of this magnitude will be very great' by scribbling on the margins: 'especially to England after the war'.⁶³

Economic assistance apart, there were differences with the Indian and British governments on the strategy to be adopted in Burma and the resources to be devoted to it. These strategic, operational and logistical discussions were overlaid by sharp political differences. As earlier, the Americans were disinclined to shore up British rule in India or elsewhere, while the British led by Churchill were determined to restore the prestige of their Empire. Papering over these cracks proved almost as taxing as preparing to take on the Japanese.

The loss of Burma heightened American concerns about China's continued determination to resist the Japanese. The War Department's policy paper was tellingly titled 'Keeping China in the War'. Tangible support would have to be offered to Chiang in order to buttress his position. It was imperative to reopen the Burma Road; for airlifts alone could not deliver enough supplies over the 'Hump' to China. The strategic responsibility for an offensive into Burma had to rest with Britain and India – supported by the American Tenth Air Force and Lend-Lease supplies.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, General Joseph Stilwell – the American commander of Chinese soldiers who had retreated from Burma to India – wanted to train his troops in India.

Some 10,000 Chinese soldiers had escaped overland to India from Burma. Most of them were in a terrible physical condition, having had little access to food, water or medicines during the 200-mile trek. The Indian government decided to host them at a capacious camp in the town of Ramgarh in Bihar. The location was

⁶³ Cited in James M. Ehrman, 'Ways of War and the American Experience in the China-Burma-India Theater, 1942–1945', PhD thesis, Kansas State University, 2006, 49.

⁶⁴ Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Mission*, 151.

originally a prisoner-of-war camp, with several thousand German and Italian internees from North Africa. From early June 1942, Stilwell designated it the Ramgarh Training Center. Soon American supplies and trainers trickled into Ramgarh. In July 1942, the first trainload of Chinese troops arrived, followed by the rest in the next couple of months.

Chiang was prepared to fly more troops to India for training. Stilwell initially proposed to bring in an additional 8,000 troops. Soon he raised the number to 13,000, bringing the total at Ramgarh to 23,000. The Indian government, however, balked at the prospect of having more Chinese soldiers on its territory. The viceroy felt Chiang had more than an eye on the future. The greater the Chinese participation in an attack on Burma, the greater their influence in deciding its future after the war. Further, Linlithgow was wary of Chiang's dalliance with the Congress leadership and felt that the presence of large Chinese forces in Ramgarh might allow Chiang to meddle in Indian politics.⁶⁵

'So they are determined to bitch it', thought Stilwell in early October. '“Can't have the dirty Chinks”'; Long-range policy: fear of Chinese-Indian co-operation; fear of independent operation; or what not.' 'Limeys getting nasty about Ramgarh', he noted a few days on. 'How many [Chinese] troops, and what for. WHAT FOR? My God! I told them to help our allies retake Burma. They are making it difficult; they don't want to be beholden to the Chinese for anything. Same old stuff, like closing the Burma Road and refusing troops. They appear to learn nothing.'⁶⁶

Wavell was inclined to accede to the request, but sought to cap the numbers at Ramgarh at 20,000. Yet Linlithgow wrote to the secretary of state for India outlining his concerns. The British cabinet agreed with these. Accordingly, London requested Washington to withdraw the proposal. It was argued that there was no immediate military advantage in training such large numbers of Chinese in India. Besides,

⁶⁵ Exchanges between Delhi and London over Chinese troops in Ramgarh can be followed in WO 106/3547, TNA.

⁶⁶ *Stilwell Papers*, 161, 163.

there were considerable administrative and logistical difficulties in hosting them. The Americans not only persisted with their demand but increased the numbers. General George C. Marshal said that they envisaged bringing the Chinese force in India to anywhere between 30,000 and 40,000 troops. Even as Delhi and London engaged in another round of deliberations, President Roosevelt floated a figure of 45,000. The commander-in-chief in India, Field Marshall Wavell, thought this absurd; but it was clear that further stonewalling would not work. Eventually, Wavell and Stilwell struck a bargain at 30,000 troops: a corps with two divisions. Stilwell confirmed this – only to ask for an additional 4,000. Delhi and London had little choice but to acquiesce.

In February 1943, Chiang and Stilwell wanted to send another division worth of troops to train in India. Linlithgow yet again demurred: ‘The presence of Chinese troops may cause the Chinese government to meddle in Indian politics. They have already shown an embarrassing tendency in that direction... There may even be a danger of Chinese troops assisting the Congress Party... in the event of really serious civil disorders breaking out in India... [And] the greater the part which Chinese troops play in the reconquest or subsequent garrisoning of Burma, the greater the voice China will expect to have in the settlement of Burma’s future.’⁶⁷ The viceroy, however, gave in to London on the assurance that the number of Chinese troops was firmly and finally fixed at 42,000. Four months on, Stilwell returned with a demand to allow more Chinese troops: he wanted a total of 100,000. The additional 58,000, he informed Delhi, would arrive from August to December 1943.

The Americans, Wavell wrote to the chiefs of staff, had been ‘tiresome’ on this matter. They were continually asking for more, insisting each time that this was their last requirement: ‘it is rather like Hitler’s last territorial demand.’ There was no question of accommodating 100,000 Chinese troops. Administratively, it would impose an enormous administrative burden – not least in having to find

⁶⁷ Linlithgow to Amery, 25 February 1943, cited in Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, 310.

another location apart from Ramgarh. Strategically, it was not possible to employ and support so many soldiers in Assam for operations into Burma. Politically, the issue was 'even more complicated'. India was staunchly opposed to taking in more Chinese troops: 'there are obvious objections to a large Chinese force in India or to the Chinese being able to claim that they played a preponderant part in the recapture of Burma.' Moreover, an increase in Chinese troops 'undoubtedly means an increase of American influence and of American claims to run the campaign from Assam'. Ultimately, Wavell and Stilwell settled on 15,000 more troops from China.⁶⁸

An agreement on the strategy for Burma proved still more elusive. Stilwell's staff felt that the British 'have no intention of attempting to retake Burma in the foreseeable future'. This stance stemmed from 'a British conviction that no Asiatic possession is worth any appreciable diversion of strength from the British Isles; that the war will be won in Europe; and that lost possessions will at the Peace Conference revert with clear title to the British if those colonies remain upon termination of hostilities under enemy occupation, whereas if those possessions are reoccupied with Chinese and American assistance, British title may be compromised'.⁶⁹ This was a shrewd assessment of some of the impulses behind British attitude towards Burma. Yet the Americans were wrong in believing that in the summer of 1942 the British had no desire to take back Burma.

Even before the evacuation from Burma, Wavell had been thinking of its reconquest. Churchill wrote to Wavell that the proposed operations were 'very nice and useful nibbling', but his real interest lay in the recapture of Rangoon and Moulmein, followed by an advance on Bangkok. Following their recent losses, the Japanese navy would be cautious; so Wavell should plan to strike across the Bay of Bengal into southern Burma and thence Malaya. Wavell accordingly instructed his commanders and staff to undertake detailed planning for the limited operations in north Burma and to consider the question

⁶⁸ Wavell to CoS, 3 June 1943; Minutes of CoS Meeting, 23 July 1943, WO 106/3547 TNA.

⁶⁹ Memorandum by Davies in Gauss to SS, 12 August 1942, *FRUS* China 1942, 129.

of launching a major offensive with Rangoon as its objective. The latter was given the code name 'Anakim'.⁷⁰

In early December, Roosevelt approved of Anakim and directed that the requisite resources be placed at Stilwell's disposal. But Wavell's doubts about the enterprise were deepening. A major offensive on Burma in spring 1943 was out of the question. Even limited operations in north Burma could not be undertaken then. The problem was not of getting troops into the area but of maintaining them there during the monsoon of 1943. The British chiefs backed Wavell, insisting that Burma was a British theatre of war and India was operationally responsible.⁷¹ On 7 December, Wavell formally told Stilwell that Anakim would have to wait until autumn or winter of 1943. Operations in upper Burma in the spring of 1943 would also be premature.⁷²

Plans for Burma were picked up in mid-January 1943 at the Anglo-American conference in Casablanca. The conference was convened to arrive at definite decisions on grand strategy for the year. American and British joint planners submitted separate plans for Burma. The Americans emphatically called for Anakim, 'with a view to keeping China in the war, keeping pressure on the Japanese in this area'. The British felt that the operations 'certainly required in 1943' were recapturing Akyab, establishing bridgeheads in the Chindwin Valley, and covering the construction of a road from Ledo via Myitkyina to Lungling. While plans for Anakim should be made for the winter of 1943-44, they were not sure if the requisite naval and amphibious forces could be found. Diversion of these to Anakim 'cannot but react adversely on the early defeat of Germany'.⁷³

The Americans felt that the British were exaggerating the problem of resources. Marshall came down heavily on them: 'Unless operation ANAKIM could be undertaken he [Marshall] felt that a

⁷⁰ S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan Volume II: India's Most Dangerous Hour* (London: HMSO, 1958), 235-36.

⁷¹ Kirby, *India's Most Dangerous Hour*, 294.

⁷² Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Mission*, 247-49.

⁷³ Michael Howard, *Grand Strategy Volume IV: August 1942-September 1943* (London: HMSO, 1970) 248-49.

situation might arise in the Pacific at any time that would necessitate the United States regretfully withdrawing from the commitments in the European theatre.’ The carrot accompanying the stick was an American commitment to make up any deficiency in landing craft and naval forces. It was eventually agreed that all plans and preparations should be made to mount Anakim by 15 November 1943; though the actual decision to attack would be taken in the summer of 1943.⁷⁴

Although Wavell had swallowed the idea of Anakim, he strained at the requirements of the plan. The Americans in the delegation thought that his outline plan really consisted of ‘several pages of well written paragraphs, telling why the mission could not be accomplished’.⁷⁵ Indeed, Wavell’s qualms about Anakim deepened with every passing day. Wavell now felt that it might be better altogether to avoid a major offensive on Burma. For one thing, they could not hope to surprise the Japanese by an attack there: ‘this is an obvious move and must be expected by the enemy.’ For another, they could ‘only progress very slowly and at considerable cost’. Instead, Wavell felt that they should undertake an offensive to capture the Sunda Straits between Sumatra and Java. This would catch the Japanese off-guard and threaten Japanese control of Singapore and the Netherlands East Indies. Such an operation, he argued, would be ‘no more formidable than the capture of Burma’. The problem, of course, was in reneging from the plan agreed with the Chinese: ‘it will be necessary to conceal our intentions from the Chinese who are naturally anxious to see the reconquest of Burma... we can continue preparations and discussions with the Chinese on an offensive into Burma... We shall in fact make a limited offensive into Upper Burma, with the object of confirming the Japanese of our intentions to attack in Burma.’⁷⁶

Anakim, in short, should be abandoned. Wavell, however, reckoned without the resources for this ambitious new plan – as well as with the providers of these resources, the Americans. By early

⁷⁴ Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell’s Mission*, 270–71.

⁷⁵ Tuchman, *Stilwell*, 356.

⁷⁶ Kirby, *India’s Most Dangerous Hour*, 362–63.

April, he was complaining to the chiefs that the actual allotment of shipping to India fell far short of the monthly requirements agreed for Anakim. The target date of 15 November, he declared, was already impossible to meet. Wavell was right: decisions at Casablanca to press ahead with Anakim had been taken on a total misconception of the amount of shipping that would be available over the next six months. And the chiefs recognised that they had erred.

Later that month Wavell travelled to London to confer with the chiefs of staff. After some days of discussion, it was agreed that Anakim could not be attempted in the dry season of 1943–44. Apart from operational and logistical problems, it was felt that launching Anakim would commit British forces to a major operation not essential for the ultimate defeat of Japan. Only minor land operations should be undertaken from Assam in the coming campaign season.⁷⁷ The challenge, of course, was to convince the Americans. Opinion in Washington was divided. President Roosevelt seemed ready to drop the idea: “‘Anakim out’. Keep China going by air’, he had scribbled in a note. But the joint chiefs wanted to take ‘vigorous steps’ to launch Anakim.⁷⁸

In early May, Churchill and the chiefs travelled to Washington for the Trident conference. The prime minister had never been enthusiastic about an overland invasion of Burma – an undertaking that he likened to munching a porcupine quill by quill. Churchill favoured a landing at some unexpected point in the crescent stretching from Moulmein to Timor. This slotted smoothly with Wavell’s thinking about alternatives to Anakim.

At the conference, the British delegation expressed their inability to take on Anakim. The reconquest of Burma, however desirable, was not ‘indispensable from the military point of view’. Even if Anakim were successful, the Burma Road was unlikely to be open until mid-1945. After considering alternatives such as Sumatra, the joint planners recommended concentrating Allied efforts on increasing the airlift to China and operations in northern Burma. Wavell and

⁷⁷ Kirby, *India’s Most Dangerous Hour*, 368–69.

⁷⁸ Howard, *Grand Strategy*, 397–404.

the British chiefs sought to whittle down the latter, but Stilwell insisted that abandoning Anakim would devastate Chinese morale. Roosevelt eventually came round to the view that operations should be undertaken to clear north Burma and open a road from Ledo to Yunnan.

At the next Allied conference in Quebec in August 1943, the Americans were insistent on sticking to the earlier agreement. They maintained that reopening the Burma Road, and indeed the eventual recapture of the whole of Burma, was imperative. Churchill's suggestion on Sumatra was shot down by Roosevelt. The president argued that the Japanese could only be defeated by an advance across the Pacific towards Formosa and an advance from Burma into China proper. Ultimately, it was agreed that northern Burma should receive priority for the coming campaign season.⁷⁹

In any event, the Americans felt that British were reluctant to use their resources in India to retake Burma and reopen the road to China. The British seemed far more interested in harbouring their strength for a strike at Singapore.⁸⁰ Their desire to establish a new South East Asia Command (SEAC) under a British supreme commander was seen as a move in the same direction: to recover the prestige of the British empire. As Stilwell's political adviser, John Davies, trenchantly noted in October 1943: 'We have chosen to bring a third-class island kingdom back to its anachronistic position as a first-class empire. We are rejecting the opportunity to move boldly forward with the historical tide.'⁸¹

SEAC was soon dubbed 'Save England's Asiatic Colonies'. Stilwell's staff sang: 'The Limeys make policy, Yank fights the Jap, And one gets its Empire and one takes the rap.'⁸² Davies pointed out in December that by participating in SEAC operations, 'we become involved in the politically explosive colonial problems... we compromise ourselves not only with the colonial peoples of Asia

⁷⁹ Howard, *Grand Strategy*, 573–74; Kirby, *India's Most Dangerous Hour*, 419–22.

⁸⁰ Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Mission*, 359.

⁸¹ Memorandum by Davies, 21 October 1943, cited in Voigt, *India in the Second World War*, 222; Merrell to SS, 23 October 1943, *FRUS China* 1943, 879–80.

⁸² Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, 337.

but also the free peoples of Asia, including the Chinese'. It would, therefore, be best to restrict involvement in SEAC: 'after the recapture of North Burma there comes a parting of ways. The British will wish to throw their main weight southward for the repossession of colonial empire.'⁸³

The SEAC commander-in-chief, Lord Louis Mountbatten, had his own ideas about the best way to implement the decisions of Quebec. On 1 November, he informed the combined chiefs of staff that the best objective for the amphibious operation would be the Andaman Islands.⁸⁴ Affirming his amphibious orientation, Mountbatten shifted his headquarters from India to Ceylon, though the botanical gardens of Kandy were rather removed from the island's coastline. Much discussion ensued between SEAC, India, London and Washington on whether the land operations in north Burma (Tarzan) should be braided with an amphibious operation for the capture of the Andamans (Buccaneer) or one aimed at Akyab (Bullfrog). Stilwell was soon disenchanted with the supreme commander: 'The Glamour Boy is just that. He doesn't wear well and I begin to wonder if he knows his stuff. Enormous staff, endless walla-walla, but damned little fighting.'⁸⁵

By the time the Allies met next in Tehran in late November 1943, no agreement had been reached on the capture of the Andamans. Churchill felt that the operation was best postponed until the Allied landings on Western Europe had been successfully completed. After some consideration, Roosevelt sent a laconic message to Churchill: 'Buccaneer is off.' In mid-January, Mountbatten realised that it was too late to put into motion any amphibious operation for that year. So, the supreme commander issued a directive rescinding all previous orders for operations in 1944. The only operations that would now be undertaken were an overland advance on Arakan, a limited probe from Imphal-Tamu, an advance on the northern front to cover the construction of the Ledo road, and operations by LRP groups.⁸⁶

⁸³ Memorandum by Davies, December 1943, *FRUS China 1943*, 188–89.

⁸⁴ S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan Volume II: The Decisive Battles* (London: HMSO, 1961), 14–15.

⁸⁵ *Stilwell Papers*, 277–78.

⁸⁶ Kirby, *Decisive Battles*, 58–66.

Stilwell and the American chiefs made one more attempt to persuade the British to launch a serious offensive on Myitkyina. Roosevelt gave his go-ahead and a telegram was sent to Churchill. But the prime minister refused to consent.⁸⁷ And so the Allies remained deadlocked on Burma. The impasse would only be overcome when the Japanese launched their own offensive on India on 7 March 1944 and pulled the Allied forces back into Burma.

VII

The contours of American involvement in South Asia during the Second World War are best grasped against the backdrop of the larger wartime and post-war policies and plans drawn up in Washington. The former entailed keeping Chiang Kai-shek's forces in play and helping roll back the Japanese from South-East Asia. The latter called for prying India loose from the system of imperial tariffs with Britain. More importantly, the US had to encourage the British to promise India political freedom in exchange for full-fledged participation by the nationalists in the war effort. The tensions between the immediate demands of the war and the more distant plans for the aftermath ensured that the US was unable to pursue these objectives in a single-minded fashion. Moreover, South Asia was not a theatre of high priority for the US during the war.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Truman administration's grand strategy went well with Britain's own plans for India. The Labour government led by Clement Attlee wished to rid itself of the incubus of governing India (and Palestine) and to refashion the imperial system. Whitehall's policies on South Asia were mainly influenced by strategic considerations. The large standing army; the vast reservoir of military manpower; India's importance in defending the Middle and Far East: all of these mandated preserving Indian unity and ensuring India's continued presence in the Commonwealth.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Tuchman, *Stilwell*, 431.

⁸⁸ John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988); R.J. Moore, *Escape from Empire: The Attlee Government and the Indian Problem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

South Asia did not rank high in Washington's priorities in the emerging Cold War. It was neither industrially advanced nor a producer of key commodities like oil or rubber. It was a supplier of certain raw materials – mainly cotton and jute – to Japan and was potentially a large market for Japanese goods. It was also seen as 'a major source of raw materials, investment income, and carrying charges for the UK, thus strengthening the UK's and Western Europe's effort towards economic recovery essential to US security'.⁸⁹ In American eyes, too, the subcontinent mattered primarily because of its military manpower and its geographic location between the Middle East and South-East Asia. In this context, it is not surprising that the Truman administration supported Britain's efforts to ensure the emergence of a united, independent India and a stable transfer of power. But these hopes proved unfounded. By the summer of 1947 it was clear that India would be partitioned. The conjunction of the Cold War and the Partition of India created several new imperatives for American policy towards the subcontinent in the decades ahead.

That said, American approach and policy during the war set the tone for much that was to follow in the subsequent years. To be sure, wartime planners ended up confronting a world that was very different from what they had imagined. Their thinking was shaped by the inter-war years whereas the strategic, economic and ideological contexts of the Cold War were rather different. Nevertheless, the keynotes of American policy in South Asia had already been sounded during the war: the qualified acceptance of the importance of the subcontinent; the divergent views on free trade and economic policy; the challenges of dealing with South Asian nationalisms; and above all, the ambivalences in the 'imperialism of anti-imperialism'. These themes would form the warp and weft of the US' relationship with South Asia for the remainder of the twentieth century.



⁸⁹ Cited in Robert J. McMahon, *Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 13.

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