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India, the proliferator

When India's Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee arrives in Washington today, he will be feted as a representative of America's latest 'ally.' There will be tall talk of selling sophisticated arms such as Patriot missiles and F-18 jets (not just yet), gushy remarks about the strategic partnership the U.S wants to build (but does not) and other such pabulum.

But in their hearts, American officials neither trust nor care for India -- our use for them is as a counterweight to China. No dual-use items and no nuclear technology -- unless we checkmate China. On the one issue that won't cost U.S a red cent -- UNSC membership -- they will play games. Like the "two or so" formulation they have arrived at. If they can identify Japan as one candidate, why not the other?

What has India done for the United States that we should do anything for you, an American scholar asked me recently. Not much, other than giving you the best minds of our generation, I said. A few days later, I chanced upon a copy of a National Geographic of 1946 vintage that was an eye-opener for me.

The fact that India provided tens of thousands of soldiers to the Allied forces is well-known. But India -- admittedly, British India -- also supplied jute, coir, burlap and other material that tied into Allied war effort. There was buffalo hide and goat skin. Textile factories in Bombay turned out parachutes, machine shops in Calcutta fabricated grenades and bren guns, and Bangalore made U.S war planes as far back as the 1940s.

There was Indian manganese ore which went into the making of steel used for American armor and guns. Peanut and coconut oil went into making of

glycerin, the basic ingredient for explosives. Oil from cashew shells was used as an insulating film for induction coils and other delicate electrical parts on marine and aircraft engines. The rare earths in the sands of Kerala went into making titanium, used on American navy vessels. By one account, India provided \$ 640 million worth of material (in 1945 prices).

There were three items from India that were particularly critical to the U.S. One was mica, which was till then used in India for ornamental purposes. Americans found mica useful for aircraft spark plugs, radio condensers and other electrical components. Since India was the major source of mica in the world, they convinced the ruling Brits to form a "Joint Mica Mission" to fly sorties out of India.

Then there was block talc – used in talcum powder – which the Americans found could be crystallized and machined with great accuracy for use in electronics. The best such talc at that time was known to exist in Sardinia, then in Axis hands. Then the Americans heard of quarry in Udaipur that produced even better talc. They were on to it in a jiffy.

By far the most critical element the U.S took from India was Beryl, a gem found in the Rajputana hills which they used with copper and aluminum to make them hard as steel. American fighter planes were equipped with beryllium bronze bearings which lasted ten times as long as those bearing traditional copper alloys.

Indian beryl, alas, also had another use. It was used in the atomic bomb to start the flow of uranium neutrons to produce nuclear fission.

Terrible, isn't it? We were guilty of proliferating nuclear material to the United States and providing it with dual use items. Shame on us. Perhaps Pranab Mukherjee should apologize to Donald Rumsfeld for our trespasses.