While addressing the MPs in the Central Hall of the Indian Parliament on 8th November 2010, the US President Barack Obama did voice his opinions on India’s P5 status seeking ambition in the UN Security Council. During the course of his speech, he commented that, “In the years to come I look forward to a reformed UN Security Council that includes India as a permanent member.” In his very next sentence, President Obama, however, then proceeded, with an effortless eloquence, to add a dampener, “Now let me suggest”, he said, “that with increased power comes increased responsibility. The UN exists to fulfil its founding ideals of preserving peace and security and advancing human rights.” The US President then went on to hint at India’s lack of a firmer stand on Iran’s nuclear brinkmanship and on the suffocation of democratic forces in Myanmar. “If I can be frank, in the international fora India has often avoided these issues,” he added. Not stopping here, the US President also went on to advocate, “When peaceful democratic movements are suppressed as in Burma- then the democracies of the world cannot remain silent. For it is unacceptable to gun down peaceful protesters decade after decade. It is the responsibility of the international community –especially leaders like the United States and India -to condemn it.”

Even as the pressure is building up on India to fall in line with the pro-US policy, the Indian defence officials are preparing for another high level exchange of delegations with Myanmar. The truth is that in New Delhi’s strategic circles, the western sanctions on Myanmar, mostly for having an abysmal human rights record and the debatable fairness of recent elections, have cut little ice. Three burning concerns have made India’s Burma policy what it is today:

- The 1,643 km long porous border with Myanmar, which has often been abused by the Northeastern region based militants, to fuel insurgency.
- China’s strategic build up in this eastern neighbour of India, where it is involved in civilian and military infrastructure developments.
- Energy security related issues like the need for natural gas supplies from the Irrawaddy basin.

Keeping in mind the above three variables, the mood of the day in New Delhi on the issue of a righteous condemnation of the junta rule in Burma by India seems to be that one has the luxury of raising questions but it is the Government which has the responsibility to deal with the compulsions emanating out of the neighbourhood.

It is not that Obama is the first major leader to have brought up this issue with India. In July this year, David Cameron, the British Prime Minister during his visit to India did bring it up, but it was Obama who said it in the Parliament. The question which now comes to mind is that, why is India not answering the US on its ‘lecture’ on Myanmar?

If the argument is that securing democracy is essential for creating peace and security, then a little introspection would not hurt the sole super power. The repressive regime of the Saudi Royals, accused of continuous human rights abuses; the corruption charges against the reign of Hamid Karzai, his widely criticized victory in the Afghan elections have all been conveniently and quietly ignored by the US. In fact, throughout the years the US has had a record of supporting destabilizing regimes, even when they were not in its neighbourhood and thus not directly infringing upon its security. The list includes that of Fulgencio Batista: Cuba’s military dictator(1933-44,1952-59); US intermittent support to Francois and Jean Claude Duvalier, who ruled Haiti from the mid-50s to the mid 80s; the Shah of Iran, accused of blatant abuses of human rights; Ngo Dinh Diem, the authoritarian South Vietnamese ruler who had a record of brutally repressing Buddhists and Montgnard natives; the Branco regime, supported as an ally against communism; the regime of Ferdinandad Marcos, whose twenty-one year rule in Philippines from 1965 was marked by corruption and despotism and the Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet, whose regime killed and tortured thousands in Chile during the 1970s-80s.

The US had also supported the Argentine Military regime during the junta’s brutal rule through the 1976-83; the early regime of Saddam Hussein, who was propped up in order to counter the Islamic Republic of Iran. So much so, that when the Taliban captured power in Afghanistan, the US was one of the only three countries to recognize the government, although briefly; Successive military regimes in Pakistan from Ayub Khan’s down to Pervez Musharraf’s one, have continued to receive the US support.

Obama’s Central Hall speech revolved around one recurring theme, which was that India was “...no longer emerging, it has already emerged”. And therefore, it has now to fall in line and follow the footsteps set out for it, obliged to succumb to a worldview as dictated to it from the high dais, by doing the needful. As Obama said, “Promoting shared prosperity, preserving peace and security, strengthening democratic governance and human rights-these are the responsibilities of leadership that United States and India can offer in the twenty first century.” However, with shared responsibilities come expectations, more from the reigning super power of the world, the one equipped with the power to affect radical change. These expectations from the US were not duly met with convincing reassurances. The issue that has been most disappointing of all, has been the
diplomatic tip-toeing around the issue of effective counter terrorism and that of seriously dealing with Pakistan with an ultimatum of some sort by the United States of America, especially given the shared tragic experiences by both the powers. Yes, the unstable Pakistan will need time to vanquish the monster it had itself created which now truly has become a hazard for them as well, but is the US going to just wait and watch as India being the other in the Pakistani psyche, the enemy, the immediate neighbour, will have to bear the brunt of initiating almost fruitless dialogues every time?

Pakistan is and has always been a major concern for India’s security. It has dramatically impeded peace and stability in the regional sphere. This being an unrelenting truth, the issue of moving on, so to say, as has been suggested by the American President does not arise, besides being incredibly foolish by proposing to downplay a pertinent threat. The idea of engaging Pakistan has practically remained just that after all these years. Although trade has increased between the two countries, people to people contacts have been initiated; the core issues have not budged even an inch. In this context India’s expectations of US taking a strong stand on Pakistan is not unjustified given the ubiquitous influence that the US possesses in the international politics and mostly because a proposition of shared responsibilities and common leadership is now officially on the table. A sharp note of criticism instead, has caused disenchantment, to say the least.

(Dipanwita Roy Ghatak is an M.Phil student in the Institute of Foreign Policy Studies, University of Calcutta. Her e-mail id is: droyghatak@yahoo.com)