

Backdrop

The cornerstone of India's international relations since independence has been the policy of non-alignment. While in most cases, the foreign policy of a country is dictated by its national interests, both Gandhi and Nehru wanted India to be an oasis of peace and tranquillity whose example others would follow. Pandit Nehru, the first Prime Minister of the country, envisioned an ideal world where peace and harmony would prevail and mankind would prosper and progress to eradicate hunger, disease, poverty and illiteracy through mutually cooperative efforts of all nations. At one stage, he even felt that India did not need any military since it planned to live in peace and promote friendship among all nations of the world. Steeped in the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence and an idealistic world view, he felt that a newly independent India would assume a leadership role in international affairs by charting the path of non-alignment.

The Second World War having just culminated in 1945, there was a general revulsion against violence, death and destruction. Nuclear explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki confronted mankind with the possibility of extinction if the mayhem continued. The craving for peace and survival resulted in the birth of United Nations. Simultaneously, decolonisation of a host of countries across the globe including India gave a fillip to the UN movement with the newly independent countries joining the bandwagon.

Nehru, along with President Gamel Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Joseph Broz Tito of Yugoslavia formed the non-aligned group which acquired huge popularity among the smaller developing countries of the globe, especially in the Afro Asian region. As the cold war between the US and the USSR started intensifying, a number of these countries which did not wish to take sides joined the Non Aligned Movement (NAM). Thus, while NATO and East Bloc groupings took shape, NAM also expanded exponentially. To be sure, compared to the other two, it was a loose grouping of nations with more of an ideological convergence on staying away from cold war than any economic or military association. But it had a tremendous appeal which surprised many.

Appeal of Non-alignment

From an Indian perspective, besides conforming to Nehru's world view, non-alignment suited us for a number of other reasons. Firstly, it gave us autonomy in decision making in international affairs. Secondly, British occupation for almost two centuries had ensured total exploitation of the country and its resources, leaving India in an underdeveloped, poorly governed state with rampant poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. We needed time and effort to rebuild and grow in a peaceful environment which non-alignment seemed to offer. Thirdly, being co-founder of NAM, India acquired a prominence in international affairs which was way beyond its economic and military might at that point in time.

However, the harsh reality of power politics hit us squarely when China overran our defences in a short and swift offensive in 1962. Mr Nehru was so disillusioned and shattered that one of the reasons ascribed for his early demise was this reverse which highlighted the chinks in his world view and foreign policy.

The global appeal of non-alignment seemed to diminish due to a series of other factors as well, as we approached the end of the last century. The passing away of founding leaders Nehru, Tito and Nasser left the movement in a state of disarray from which it never fully recovered. Secondly, India's rout in 1962 operations against China exposed the chinks in the non-aligned policy as the perception that non-aligned nations are on their own in the event of a crisis situation. Thirdly, in the intensity of cold war, increasingly large numbers of non-aligned nations were constrained to choose one side or the other purely to get aid and assistance for their growth and development. Lastly, the prognostication by the US and the West during the cold war that 'if you are not with them you are against them' nudged a number of fence sitters towards either of the cold war adversaries, particularly the US.

Even as the cold war came to an end with the break-up of the Soviet Union, India continued to pursue the policy of non-alignment in international affairs. While unipolarity of a world led by the US started giving way to a multipolar world with the emergence of tiger economies of Southeast Asia and rise of India and China by the end of last century, non-alignment provided India with autonomous decision making capability. It enabled us to adopt a merit based approach to international issues while at the same time protecting our national interest. Adherence to this policy may not have resulted in our making too many close friends but by the same token it ensured that we did not acquire too many enemies either. At another level, a healthy respect has been maintained for the Indian world view. More importantly, it has enabled India to grow in a difficult environment and create a place for itself.

A Review

The moot question that arises is whether we should continue with our present stance or should we tamper it to suit our national interest. There is, therefore, a requirement of a review and if need be, to reorient our foreign policy to suit the nation's interest in the long run.

Domestically, the Indian economy is well on its way to recovery. Easing of inflation, lowered oil prices, increased productivity and better governance have started making the difference and the decline in growth rate has been stemmed. Projections of approximately 7 per cent growth for the current fiscal portend a still brighter future with the measures taken so far by the present dispensation. Thus, as we compare our progress with the rest of the world, we find that we are among the faster growing economies of the universe and hope to continue with this trend.

Security Concerns

On the security side, however, there is cause for concern. Prodded by a dominant military, Pakistan has continued to maintain a confrontational stance. Despite being shaken by fundamentalism and terrorism for which it has conveniently laid the blame on India's door, there is no let-up in its efforts to destabilise India both internally and externally. Its

proxy war in J&K has shown no signs of slowing down and its attempts to foment sectarian trouble in the country are ongoing. State sponsored acts of terrorism and efforts to derail India's economic progress continue unabated.

Our boundary issue with China is not settled despite protracted efforts and interlocutor level talks over a prolonged period. Illegal occupation of Aksai Chin and claims over Arunachal Pradesh casts doubts over Chinese intentions. Development of massive infrastructure in Tibet accompanied by frequent intrusions all along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) leaves India with a degree of unease. On the other hand, India's expenditure on defence as a percentage of its GDP has been declining over the last five years and its development of infrastructure all along the LAC with China is stuck in environmental clearances and bureaucratic delays. The Border Roads Organisation (BRO), the prime infrastructure construction agency in border areas has neither the wherewithal nor the organisational structure to meet the challenge. With China spending more than three times India on its military modernisation over the last decade, we would be at a major disadvantage in case hostilities between the two take place.

There has also been an attitudinal change on the military side as the Chinese economy has developed and grown over the last two decades. China initially moved away from Deng Hsiao Ping's maxim of 'hiding capabilities and biding time' to increased assertiveness all along its borders with its neighbours. Now, this assertiveness has been replaced with further hardening of its stance, and aggressiveness is being resorted to. In fact, it is a determined attempt at one would say 'peripheral domination'. Unilateral declaration of its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), aggressive actions against its neighbours in the South China Sea and increased intrusions all along the Sino Indian border are clear indications of this shift in its stance.

This has caused reverberations in the entire region. Countries which are closely aligned with the US and depend on it for their security, like South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Australia are increasingly concerned about the growing Chinese power leading to apprehensions whether the US will come to their assistance if a crisis develops. Precisely, to assuage these apprehensions and in view of growing importance of the region, the US is repositioning its strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific. A second set of countries are those which are non-aligned but have boundary disputes with China and are concerned about the use of force by it to settle issues. Vietnam, India, Bhutan and Indonesia would fall in this category. Finally, in the third category are those countries bordering China who do not have any boundary issues with China but are nevertheless concerned about being swamped by Chinese Diaspora and expanding Chinese markets and influence. Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia belong to this category. The common thread through all categories is the apprehension about a rising and aggressive China.

India's Options

From an Indian perspective, what is of greater concern is the possibility of collusion between our two hostile neighbours. In the event of a conflict with China, the likelihood of Pakistan trying to take advantage and activating our western border is strong. In such an eventuality, India would be exposed to a debilitating two front war with resultant heavy losses.

To safeguard our interests, we need to develop relationships on which we can fall back in case of a crisis. While continuance of non-alignment is beneficial and should be persisted with, it must be tampered to suit our long term national interest. On issues of global commons, terrorism, drug trafficking, piracy and freedom of high seas, universally acceptable principles need to be followed and like-minded countries of the region must act in concert to ensure their adherence. Economics and security are the other two major areas of concern for all countries of the region.

Economic cooperation between nations of the region to ensure collectively beneficial growth needs to be encouraged and India must actively participate in it. In fact it would be totally in consonance with India's 'Look East' policy. China should be equally welcome to be a part of it. Massive economic potential of the Asia-Pacific region needs to be exploited collectively to achieve optimum results. Besides, growth of economic ties may diminish apprehensions of use of force and develop progressively harmonious relationships in the long run. Beneficial economic progress may also act as a deterrent to any planned attempts to change the status quo by use of force, thus resulting in turmoil and instability in the region.

Recent overtures by the US, Japan, Australia, Vietnam and other countries in the region for closer ties have been appropriately responded to. This policy enhances India's options while pursuing a path of peaceful coexistence. Like-minded nations acting in concert on issues of mutual concern is an internationally accepted practice and India must resort to it in its long term national interest. Within the ambit of non-alignment, it must have options to act in conjunction with other nations, including rendering and receiving assistance in case of a crisis. Collective action against a powerful potential adversary is a better response for weaker nations than individual action. While acting as a deterrent and imposing caution on the adversary, it also ensures better chances of survival for all of them, if and when a crisis occurs.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLV, No. 599, January-March 2015.