

## **Always the Bridesmaid**

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Our political practices are proving what has been a weak witticism to be a hard truth: we specialise in snatching defeat from the grasp of victory. The nuclear 'deal' is being scuttled, not because it is bad for India, but because we seem incapable of understanding why it is good for us. Our public discourse on the issue shows no awareness of its key importance: its instrumentality in making us one of the principal powers of the world.

All political parties surely want that, some even imagining we already are one. We are not — yet, and the latest developments have raised doubts whether the way we conduct our affairs will ever let us be one.

All who were witnesses to midnight felt sure independence would quickly give India that role in the shaping of world affairs, which our size, situation, civilisation and human talents were waiting to achieve. Half a century later we still hover on side-stage. What keeps us from taking up central roles?

Our inability to comprehend the role of power in the world or to develop the statecraft needed to handle it is partly a legacy of foreign rule: no Indian exercised power above the patwari kind for generations. But this initially understandable handicap has been perpetuated by a baffling refusal to learn. We not only lack strategic thinking; we cherish illusions of possessing some exceptional capability to function differently from others, eschewing the established processes of power. Our nationalist movement denounced power politics and the balance of power as instruments of imperialist wrongdoing, to the point that power itself was seen as an evil we could transcend by our higher moral virtues.

This is, of course, pure nonsense. Our 1962 China humiliation shook us into developing military power; and our economic surge has added that key underpinning. But above all, power depends upon a state's ability to conduct its affairs purposefully — precisely what our political processes prevent.

Sovereign equality is a myth: some states are manifestly more sovereign than others, your degree of sovereignty being in direct proportion to your power. Lesser powers are prevented or penalised if they attempt what countries like China or Russia, even France, let alone the US get away with.

Undeniably, the deal has imperfections, but it is self-defeating therefore to reject it. Agreements between two parties require modifying preferred positions. Only three questions count: are you losing more than gaining; will holding out gain more; and above all, are you giving up something so vital that even your gains are not worth it?

Analysts everywhere are astonished at the advantages we have been able to get. look at the howls against the deal in the US itself; to urge that we are better off without the deal, or claim we would get a better one, is peddling delusions — we won't even get this if we don't act swiftly and skillfully.

The gains should be obvious enough: an end to our nuclear isolation, access to denied but essential N-technology, acceptance of our weapons status, albeit in a lower category than the Favoured Five. The objections are, ostensibly, to that lower category, to being barred from further testing and to reprocessing limitations; more fundamentally, the deal is seen as symbolising and hastening our surrender of sovereignty to foreign (read US) control. Even if these were valid, they betray that failure to understand power and statecraft is holding us back: the greater your power, the greater your freedom of action. Far from subjecting us to foreign control, the deal is a means to increase our power.

That, of course, depends on our learning to use power as others do. At the root of the Left's objections (as distinct from the cynical politicking of some others) is the fear we will not learn that. All kinds of tilts towards the US are cited to substantiate the charge of weakness. One can certainly disagree with some of these decisions but why oppose the one means of strengthening ourselves to play the independent role we want?

There happens to exist a non-proliferation regime: flawed, unfair, flagrantly and frequently breached by its own upholders. Ninety-nine per cent of the world has accepted letting the Favoured Five enjoy privileges prohibited to others; to imagine we can change that legal position and join the privileged club as a full member is pure make-believe. We can only circumvent it, as the deal provides.

As for the bar on N-tests, it already exists: test again and the world will come down on us anyway; no worse with the deal than without it. If anything, the speedier expansion of our capabilities, which the deal facilitates, will strengthen our international position and inter-relationships so that others will be hesitant to invoke sanctions. As for any reprocessing dilemma, it is so many years away from becoming live that the increase in our importance and strength in the intervening years will alter our options.

Time and again, India has suffered by living in its own world, ignoring reality. Between self-righteous over estimation of our 'rights' and capabilities and timid refusal to seize opportunities — all results of that famous convoluted thinking that sometimes turns perverse — we keep wounding ourselves. Random examples of the first weakness: our frontiers are our frontiers map or no map, so we blunder into the China debacle — which incidentally also illustrates the baneful effects of misguided political pressure, boxing in Pandit Nehru. Cocksure of our Rann of Kutch case, we let it languish till forced into yielding more through arbitration than we need have by negotiation. Or, naively oblivious of our strategic needs, we almost lost Sikkim. But perhaps the failure paralleling the current crisis most closely was the whole series of mistakes that led to partition.

Whether partition was inevitable or not, but for the unforeseen carnage, less bad than alternatives, is irrelevant: the firm aim of our nationalist leaders was undivided India — and they lost it. One cardinal error was rejecting Dominion status and insisting on "complete independence". Only C. Rajagopalachari realised one should take what one could get and build on it. He was pilloried for it, but we accepted dominion status as leading to complete independence. And, it was too late to avoid partition. Are we not similarly insisting on rights that we cannot exercise or do not need or can exercise more fully if we have taken advantage of the deal? Rights are not conferred or taken away by others; they are what you have the power to exercise.

"Agar, magar, mumquin aur goya/ in chaaro ne Bharat khoya" — if, but, perhaps and supposing — these four have lost us India.

And here we go again.

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