

Will we ever learn?

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Whether our politics sinks the nuclear deal or the deal sinks our ruling coalition and how we arrived at such a turning point, carries lessons crucial to India's place in world affairs and for the kind of country we will become. Make no mistake: it is a turning point. We go towards a global role, knowing what we are doing, self-confident without braggadocio, capable of bold, imaginative, forward-looking thinking, respected abroad for our strengths at home or we drift off into the backwaters, immersed in parochial trivialities, out-dated ideas and petty purposes.

Much of the opposition to the India-US nuclear deal is just childish touchiness. It's no longer about the deal's merits, it's about our ways of functioning. Had no deal arisen, the world would just wait for us to be that world power we prematurely imagine we already are, but certainly are on the verge of becoming. Our handling of the opportunity, however, raises profound doubts about whether what goes into our decision-making can allow us to rise to that top level or even manage our international interests effectively. A well-known statesman asked: "India wants to be treated as a great power, why behave like a small power?" How to explain our unfamiliarity with a great power's ways?

Three reasons for completing the deal, individually compelling enough, are collectively imperative. If you don't realise these reasons, especially if the last two deter you, certainly the deal looks dispensable. It is not. It ends the denial of countless things we need both for our nuclear programmes and for our greater progress generally — and which we cannot get without the deal. It shows the world that we have outgrown slogan-mongering, can think independently and think big, as great powers do. Most controversially but importantly, the manifestation of American interest in working with a stronger India has made other States, not least China, start taking us seriously. Nobody is dictating terms to us; we seek this situation for our own sake and as an independent, strong player.

Prejudices having overtaken reason regarding the deal's pros and cons, reviewing them is useless. Honest critics have valid doubts, but show no other way India can attain its nuclear necessities, or all the things high technology prohibitions cost us. That we are not getting all we would like, nobody denies; that we gain immensely more than we forego, who is ready to understand? Whatever our super-patriots claim, our nuclear future is unacceptably limited, our existing programmes critically hampered if we cannot escape the stifling impositions of the existing non-proliferation regime. Beyond the nuclear problem, countless national needs like education, health, agriculture suffer because means for meeting them are denied because they are liable to nuclear misuse. Resent it as we will, a non-proliferation regime exists, and no state is willing to exempt us from it, except, surprisingly if partially, through this deal. There is simply no public consciousness of what we are missing or how far the nuclear haves are leaving us behind.

So many misgivings have been spread to obscure the real benefits that they are hard to dispel. Deliberate misrepresentation has been matched by the government's weakness in pushing it. What is actually our passport to international cooperation has been seen as a purely Indo-US agreement, with all the attendant hang-ups. It is easy to go through the documents line-by-line and pick holes; it needs a broad strategic-thinking capability and a practical sense of statecraft to see how greatly the deal can increase our strengths. Far from impairing our sovereignty or freedom of action, the deal provides ways to enhance them; being strong pre-empts pressures and creates options the weak do not have, provided you know how to use your power.

This leads us to the last two points. The very thought of India doing anything that suits the US dismays so many people that we miss out on what suits us. Certainly the US offers the deal for its own purposes. They see India as a balance to China. But cooperation is not collaboration,

much less subservience. Surely we can do what makes us strong without ganging-up against China? Has anyone noticed how China and others have started paying more attention to us since the deal? Or that those happiest at seeing the deal in trouble are the neighbours who don't like us being strong?

Underlying an honest — as distinct from a carping — opposition is the fear that we don't know how to serve our national interests, that we bend to others and accepting anything from America means becoming its satellite. Of course, if we don't believe in ourselves, it hardly matters whether we get this deal. We'll remain a middling — and muddling — power. We certainly provide the grounds for being considered that. But surely a country like India cannot be anyone's stooge; where is our self-respect?

Few politicians seem to understand what is at stake here. Some claim they can get us a better deal, which is pure fantasy; or that government's survival is more important, which is pure power-hunger. Most pervasive of all are suspicions merging into hostility regarding America. They are missing in any sense of national power, of the strategic challenges and opportunities before us. Much of the opposition is just childish touchiness. If Americans say they have a timing problem, we protest against coercion — 'we will proceed at our own pace'. But there is a timing problem. What is wrong with it being pointed out? The Opposition complains that the government did not consult them or sent low-level officials. But on matters so vital to the nation's interest, why can't they think for themselves? Now we are told the deal makes us part of a non-proliferation regime India has always opposed; we opposed the regime's restrictions. Now if we are spared those, why persist in opposition, especially when it is vital for India to work against proliferation? One party says it's too late to reconsider; what urgent preoccupations make it too late?

Another argument is that Muslims everywhere are alienated by American attitudes, the deal would cost Muslim votes. Has anyone asked our Muslims? Most oddly, instead of pressing the deal and claiming credit for it, the ruling coalition lacks heart, seeming almost ashamed of its great leap forward. One partner, having fully supported the deal, suddenly finds misgivings; others, also committed if Cabinet unity has any meaning, suddenly say the deal can wait; what matters is keeping government in office. Why? Then comes economics: so many want to do business with India, we will get what we want anyway. Pipedreams: economics is essential but not enough.

Saddest of all is the lack of civil dialogue among parties. Yes, politics is about winning, any stick is good enough to beat each other with. But some issues transcend politics. One had hoped democratic evolution would bring better practices; instead, it seems to drag us down to callowness. These are not the ways of a great power.

Democracies find foreign affairs hardest to handle. It was his study of America that led Alexis de Tocqueville long ago to observe: "Foreign politics... require the perfect use of almost all those qualities in which it is deficient... Democracy can only with great difficulty regulate the details of an important undertaking, persevere in a fixed design, and work out its execution in spite of serious obstacles. It cannot combine its measures with secrecy or await their consequences with patience. These are... precisely the qualities by which a nation... attains a dominant position." (Emphasis added.)

If we do not find ways to overcome such weaknesses, we will always be held back.

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