

Our grand strategy

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India cannot do justice to its security interests, much less fulfil its global potential, unless we start handling issues with systematic seriousness. As the decade closed, three summits in three weeks — Indo-US on November 24, Indo-Russian on December 7, and Sino-US of November 17, (with the Indo-Japanese of December 29 not far behind) — carry major messages. We prefer the distractions of trivialities — but may be sure Islamabad and Beijing are studying the implications carefully.

Though not as dramatic as 2008's nuclear deal, the outcomes of these summits sum up the opportunities and challenges the deal opened up. A.J.P. Taylor called diplomacy "a fancy word for doing business". These summits say: we can do business with you if you are ready to do business, but we have to do business with others too.

The business settled in Washington is not to be despised: agriculture, health, education, technology are significant underpinnings to a healthy relationship. Most importantly, Washington fully acknowledged India's rights in Afghanistan, and in eliminating terrorism there and in Pakistan. There are other Indian security interests America should take into account if an Indo-US "strategic partnership" is to mean much. There is no word about our larger Pakistan anxieties, and none on China.

With Russia, defence purchases remain a strong link, nuclear and other energy possibilities not far behind. The basic message: business will be business, the days of special interest and special concessions are past, although common strategic interests are there to develop.

The Sino-US statement which so upset many, requires most attention: it is confirmation of the reality we all know, but have yet to come to grips with. India has a potential waiting to materialise, China is way ahead in realising its own: others will watch what power we become, but will meanwhile deal with the power that exists. If we want to be dealt with differently, we must make ourselves count more.

We must start from our strategic needs. Regarding the two relationships which might conceivably erupt in military conflict, India stands alone. Pakistan has always been controlled by elements willing to use any means to do India down. Pakistan cannot be expected to openly acknowledge collaboration with terrorism, but if its rulers now genuinely see terrorism as threatening Pakistan, much could have been done quietly to further a common cause. Instead, there is the endless refrain that India must concede this or that, while evidence keeps mounting that terrorism remains a cherished instrument against us.

That need not make war inevitable, but leaves Pakistan as the most likely source of conflict. Both Russia and the US have carefully avoided the issue. Both have their own reasons for working with Pakistan, and India must take note.

The only other state that might consider military force as serving its national purpose is China. It serves no Indian interest to enter into confrontation; we rightly seek constructive engagement, but apart from all the worrying things China is doing that can actively harm us, prudent contingency planning — as China itself practises — must allow for adverse developments directed from Beijing. While Russia has its own apprehensions regarding China, it wants no part in our separate concern. And the US's acceptance of the rise of China is of course one of our era's great changes in the world's power equations.

So, on our primary security concerns we must look entirely to ourselves. Is there any national consciousness of what this calls for? The unbelievable ways in which we run ourselves are frightening enough; worse still is our indifference to the consequences for our security. Unless we organise ourselves to function as an efficient, purposeful state, we will get neither the influence nor the respect which can pre-empt conflict.

In spite of Partition and the assertion of China's control over Tibet, India remains a crossroads between West Asia, South East Asia, Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. As our first professional diplomat emphasised, our strategic frontiers are three concentric circles — from the Hindu Kush to the Irrawady, Aden to Singapore and Suez to Shanghai. In this coming decade we must seek to contain, if not prevent, the growth of forces that could operate from those concentric areas to our detriment. Presently that means four

vital interests: in the security of the Persian Gulf, the stability of Central Asia, the changing power equations in East Asia, and a range of Oceanic issues: tsunamis, piracy, helping small island states, keeping sea-lanes free. There are countless local or regional components of these issues India must deal with directly, but the one key power in each field is the US.

The implications of that reality are yet to be accepted. The intellectual climate in which it was seen as unpatriotic to contemplate cooperation with America has doubtless changed, but many still mistrust America as the source of capitalist assertiveness. Nor do commonalities of ends preclude differences, often deep or bitter, over how to reach them. Delhi and Washington could well be one on Gulf security, for instance, but are bound to differ on Iran. More immediately, countering terrorism in Pakistan is a common objective full of potential conflicts on methods.

But until we can organise ourselves to be key determinants, or at least far more influential than we are, in shaping the future of our primary strategic concerns, we do need to work with partners. No one will help if Pakistan or China precipitates war, but many powers would happily help us become so strong war would not be worth inflicting on us. Much can be simply bought: we can now afford to upgrade our defence capabilities to meet contingency assessments, even two fronts. But it is no less important to develop a web of interlocking interests with other powers which strengthens our international position in unquantifiable but effective terms. On the four primary strategic areas mentioned, others share our objectives.

Washington cannot be the be-all or end-all of India's interests; but it is still the one power that can, if it will, influence the course of events where it chooses. While recognising our interest in Afghanistan, the Washington statement stopped short of our other security concerns.

Maybe that is all we are ready for ourselves. But we still need to work out ways of meeting these other concerns.

Cooperating with America is both complex and dangerous in a very particular sense: unless handled with sureness and skill, it could be hugely counter-productive. While the summer's hullabaloo regarding China is rightly attributable to media inflation, there is no doubt of Beijing's increased toughness on several Indian concerns. Whatever Beijing alleges, India has done nothing to provoke such attitudes — with one exception: the N-deal was a striking show of Indo-American cooperation. That China turned tough soon after is no coincidence: we are being told Beijing does not like it, we better be careful, and the US should not count on a paper tiger. There will be Indians who would therefore urge distancing from America, but surrendering to pressure is no service to security. Like any major power, India must balance all kinds of interests, and learn to pursue commonalities alongside managing differences. The great pitfall to avoid is confusion; do not start what you cannot handle. And put your house in order.

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