

India and the Quest for World Order

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Region: [Asia](#)

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The Manmohan Singh Government's foreign policy may or may not be independent. What is certain is that it is not effective or imaginative.

In international affairs, minor details often tell us more about the big picture than ponderous declarations and weighty documents. Next week, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will travel to Brasilia and Havana for important meetings aimed at cementing India's trilateral relationship with Brazil and South Africa as well as its role in the Non-Aligned Movement. No doubt the visit will be a huge success. But on the long flight back home, where do you think Dr. Singh's aeroplane will make a fuel halt? Not Africa, which lies bang in the middle and which the Ministry of External Affairs and a large number of Indian companies have assiduously been cultivating, but Frankfurt.

Frankfurt? In the old days, the joke among wags was that Indian politicians liked a Zurich stopover to check up on their numbered accounts. Fortunately, Dr. Singh has no such accounts. Unfortunately, what he also doesn't have are advisors with imagination.

More than a dozen African countries lie on a straight line from Cuba to India and any one of them would have been more than willing to host the Indian Prime Minister for a brief unofficial or even official visit. Some of these countries, like oil-rich Chad, for example, have a lot of fuel and are even looking for new partners after having just thrown out Chevron-Texaco and Petronas. Sudan, too, has oil, some of which India has already invested in. Then there is Senegal, where the Tatas have a major presence and where Indian public sector companies are expected to play a major role in renovating the country's railways.

These are all countries where India is engaged diplomatically and economically. The only element missing is political, which could help to introduce a step change in the relationship. Compare the Indian approach with that of the Chinese. Hu Jintao, the President of China, has been in power for just a year longer than Dr. Singh. But he has already visited Africa twice on extended tours compared to the Indian Prime Minister's score of zero.

As for Latin America, the last time an Indian Prime Minister paid a bilateral visit there was in 1968, when Indira Gandhi travelled to Chile and Argentina. Her planned trip to Peru was cancelled because of General Velasco Alvarado's coup d'etat, and the experience evidently proved so traumatic for South Block that the entire continent remained terra incognita for subsequent Indian heads of government for the next 38 years.

Apart from the inexplicable and baffling absence of a Foreign Minister, Indian diplomacy suffers today from a combination of three ailments. The first is Eurocentrism, which looks at globalisation largely along predictable global axes, the second, a certain arrogance induced by the country's high growth rates and rising international profile, and third, diffidence in

dealing with major questions of war and peace. This results in an over-eagerness to “engage” existing centres of global power at the highest levels in locales as distant as Gleneagles or Vladivostok but to avoid political engagements elsewhere.

NAM as restraining factor

Given the emerging crises and conflicts in its extended neighbourhood, however, it is not clear how long India can afford to remain aloof. And the NAM summit in Havana provides an ideal opportunity for India to signal its eagerness to re-engage the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in a partnership that could restore a sense of balance and proportion in a world under siege from a variety of destabilising influences.

But in order to understand the relevance of NAM today, it is important to recognise the paradoxical truth that the erstwhile bipolar division of the world was only incidental to the project of Non-Alignment. During the Cold War, NAM’s utility lay in restraining impulses which its members felt were most negative in the international system, namely the use of military and economic power as an instrument of domination by the former colonial powers, the United States, and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union. The bipolar division helped NAM achieve this goal but was not as central to the Non-Aligned project as many believed it to be at the time. At the same time, it must also be conceded that NAM was not necessarily very successful in playing this restraining role since many of its members ended up being attacked by the superpowers.

In contrast to the certitudes of the Cold War era, the world order today is in a state of flux. While it is difficult neatly to characterise the international system as “unipolar,” “multipolar” or something in between, some understanding of the concrete nature of world order can be gleaned by examining the multiple points of disorder that have emerged in recent years. Among these are the crises caused by the Anglo-American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the continuing Israeli occupation of Palestinian and Arab land, the recent Israeli aggression against Lebanon, the fast-spiralling dispute over Iran’s civilian nuclear programme, which could lead to a huge increase in oil prices as well as war, the humanitarian crisis in Darfur in the Sudan, and the nuclear crisis in the Korean peninsula.

There are other points of disorder elsewhere — the conflict in Sri Lanka could easily become one of international proportion — but the ones enumerated above are surely among the most serious. All except Darfur lie in Asia. All of them have the potential of leading to war, with serious consequences for the national security and interests of India. But in each and every case, India — a major Asian power which sits at the very centre of continent — is not involved in efforts to try and find peaceful solutions. For Iran, there is the P5+1, for Korea the six-party talks, and in the Middle East peace process the Quartet. In Afghanistan, NATO is running the show while the U.S. occupation of Iraq shows no signs of ending. In Lebanon, India, which has a major troop contingent deployed as part of UNIFIL, chose not to get involved in the international discussions about the U.N. force’s new mandate.

The issue at stake is not Asian pride or Indian delusions of grandeur but the sobering fact that the dominant approach to each of these crises is not only not working but is actually increasing the likelihood of conflict and war and fuelling the growth of terrorism. As such, India has a vital interest in restraining the exercise of U.S. power in the region.

Well before U.S. troops invaded Iraq in 2003, the whole world knew the tragic denouement

that would follow. Similarly, if the U.S. insists on getting the United Nations Security Council to impose sanctions on Iran, the crisis will inevitably escalate. Just as surely as night follows day, the level of sanctions will be increased and Iran will eventually announce its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, as it is its sovereign right to do. At that point, Iran will either bite the bullet and be compelled to develop a nuclear weapon. Or will be subjected to aerial bombardment by the U.S., with disastrous consequences for the region.

Averting Iran endgame

More than the debate over the independent nature of India's foreign policy, it is this inability and unwillingness to involve ourselves in problem-solving that is worrying. The Manmohan Singh Government's foreign policy may or not be independent. But when it comes to being proactive in forestalling the danger of new wars in its neighbourhood, India is neither effective nor imaginative.

For example, whatever view one takes of India's vote against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency last September, surely the challenge confronting New Delhi today is to find ways of heading off this terrible ending that is all-too-predictable. As a country with vital interests in a peaceful settlement of the dispute, India cannot confine itself to making ritualistic statements about the importance of dialogue and negotiation.

Similarly on Lebanon, while it is laudable that Parliament passed a resolution condemning Israel's aggression, India did not leverage its much-vaunted friendship with Tel Aviv to counsel Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that the path he was taking would only make his country less secure. Mr. Olmert may have rejected any advice proffered by an Indian high-level envoy or even refused to meet the bearer of such tidings but India would have succeeded in sending a powerful signal to the region that there are more players than just the Quartet.

It was precisely this calculation that led the Foreign Ministers of India, Brazil, and South Africa (IBSA) to declare in March 2004 that they intended to insert themselves in the Middle East peace process alongside the Quartet. Sadly, the declaration was never followed up. Prime Minister Singh did well to appoint a special envoy for West Asia last year. But it is also a fact that the government grounded the envoy for several months for fear that a visit to the region would lead to meetings with Hamas and Hizbollah, which in turn would make the legislative passage of the Indo-U.S. nuclear agreement in Washington more difficult.

During the first-ever IBSA summit to be held in Brasilia next week, Dr. Singh must seek to turn the trilateral forum into a ginger group that can energise NAM to once again play the role of a moderating and restraining factor in international politics. And upon his return, he must appoint on a priority basis a full-fledged Minister for External Affairs, the absence of whom severely limits the effectiveness of Indian diplomacy.

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