

## The soft power of India

There is a lot of talk these days, not so much among government circles as among the 'strategic community', about India being a major or even global power, with the capability, even responsibility, to play an 'important role' on the world stage as a balancing power between major powers and as a 'security provider' to others. We need to temper this rhetoric, be more realistic and less ambitious. The dividing line between national pride and national ego can be thin.

### Nehru's vision

India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was convinced that India was bound to play an increasing and beneficent part in world affairs. He had developed a zeal for diplomacy that was not backed by the needed military and economic hard power. He was banking on our moral high ground because he and the nation were proud of the non-violent manner in which we had achieved our independence. As early as 1948, he declared: "India had already become the fourth or fifth most influential country in the United Nations." This was a strange claim; just a year earlier, we were forced to withdraw our candidature for the Security Council when Ukraine, which was contesting the same seat, secured more votes than us in seven successive ballots in a single day. We have been afflicted with this malady ever since.

Over the decades, no doubt influenced by our experience in the early years in Kashmir and China, the idealist strain has diminished and eventually disappeared altogether; national interest alone would guide our policy. This is not necessarily an undesirable thing. The only caveat is that we have to be realists and check the inexplicable urge to play a big role in international relations.

We have to ask ourselves: What kind of role do we want to play? Where and how do we want to play the role? Do we have the means to play such role?

### Status and responsibility

Leaders everywhere look for a role for themselves. They believe, perhaps genuinely, that an increased prestige for themselves will translate into more votes domestically and ipso facto bring benefits to their countries. The driving factor is prestige, status. Often the leaders do not realise that playing a role carries with it responsibilities which we may not be able or keen to accept but which we might be dragged into. These responsibilities would be defined by others and would invariably involve us into tasks and areas which we may not wish to get involved in.

Are we clear about the kind of role we wish to play internationally? Do we have a role model for it? Do we wish to emulate what Vladimir Putin's Russia is doing in West Asia? Or, what the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan in the 1980s or what America did in Iran in 1953, in Indo-China in the 1950s and 1960s, and frequently in Central and South America? All those operations lacked legitimacy and for the most part cost the countries concerned dear in human and material terms. Nor did they bring them glory. One will look in vain for an example when such a role was played with benign intentions.

### Regional aspirations

If not global, what about a regional role, in our neighbourhood? Experts seem unanimous that India is certainly a regional power. But is it? Recent events do not lend support to that view and the government was right in not paying heed to that rhetoric. India is without doubt the pre-eminent power in South Asia. However, given our firm commitment not to use force and to non-interference in internal affairs in other states, our neighbours do not feel threatened by us. (We do not rule out

strong measures when we have to.) We did make a huge effort in Sri Lanka to bring peace and stability to that country and we did so at the request of its lawful government. The venture ended in failure and eventually cost the life of a former prime minister. Small-scale interventions in the Maldives and the Seychelles in the 1980s were successful in stabilising legitimate governments. To that extent, India was able to play a positive role in the region. In these examples, the motivating factor was not prestige, there were domestic factors at play. The resulting increase in our prestige was incidental. If intervention does not succeed, as in Sri Lanka, the ensuing loss of prestige more than offsets whatever prestige we might have gained in the other operations. Often, when a country gets involved in what might be assessed as a low cost foreign adventure, it remains bogged down even when the going gets tough precisely because it apprehends loss of face or prestige. It is easy to get in but difficult to get out.

### The real goals

Apart from protecting our people from adverse external factors and interventions, the principal criterion in the conduct of foreign policy for India ought to be lifting the poor from poverty. Whatever brings concrete benefits to our people should be encouraged. A mere wish to be praised as a global or even regional power should not be allowed to guide the policy. When other countries flatter us by describing us as a major power, it is invariably because they want to rope us into some schemes of their own. It is best not to get too entangled in the chess moves of other countries. The principal interest of most of them is to sell very expensive military hardware to us. Our single minded focus should be on economic development. Without the necessary economic strength, we cannot strengthen our military. We do need a strong military but for that we need undisturbed double digit economic growth for a generation. Prime Minister Vajpayee's seasoned adviser Brajesh Mishra's advice was sound: do not provoke nor get provoked for two decades, concentrate on building the economy. Since we do have to think critically about allocating our scarce resources among alternative uses, and since we are a democratic polity with a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society with a large number of poor, we have to think more than twice about defence spending. Even when at some stage we acquire credible hard power, we must not allow ourselves to be seduced by the flattering and mostly insincere talk of others about India playing a global role.

When I used to visit West Asia on behalf of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, my interlocutors expressed their admiration, not so much for our economy or military, but for the orderly manner in which power was transferred from one party to another and for the largely harmonious and peaceful, integrated manner in which people of different faiths lived together. An internally divided India cannot play any role externally. The 'strategic community' should concentrate on reinforcing this real soft power of India which is what the rest of the world appreciates and not lose time and resources in peripheral ventures that bring no lasting benefit.

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