

The utter nonsense called 'deft diplomacy'

There are few phrases that betray the intellectual lethargy of the Indian foreign policy commentariat more than “deft diplomacy”. Sometimes the phrase used is “quiet diplomacy”, at other times “backroom diplomacy” and, sometimes, even more creatively, “deft diplomatic footwork”. The meaning is essentially the same.

One of the reasons these phrases are widely used is their versatility. For example, rather than looking at deeper structural factors behind a foreign policy success, you can simply credit the government’s “[deft diplomatic touch](#)”. On the other hand, you can also use “[backroom diplomacy](#)” to take credit away from the government. If you don’t have an answer for how India will counter the growing influence of China’s deep pockets in our neighbourhood, you can simply recommend the government exercise some “[deft diplomatic footwork](#)”. You can say that “[quiet diplomacy](#)” can help overcome the problems between India and Pakistan.

These phrases can also be used to resolve the grand foreign policy debate of India—should India partner with the US or maintain a balance between the US and China? One can always say that India can solve all of its problems with China through the magic wand called deft diplomacy, and save itself from moving into the orbit of the unreliable Yankees.

Let us take the latest example which has triggered this article. It was argued that India has maintained good bilateral relations with nations hostile to each other because of this thing called “[deft diplomacy](#)”. The immediate case in point was India’s cooperation with Iran on the one hand and its growing relations with Israel, the US and Saudi Arabia on the other. There are two main reasons why India has been able to perform this tightrope walk and neither of them is deft diplomacy.

First, India tends to avoid taking strong positions on any regional dispute in the Middle East. For example, in the latest instance India refused to take a stand on the blockade imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, saying that it was an internal matter for the Gulf Cooperation Council to resolve. To take another example, even as India develops its anti-terrorism cooperation with Israel, it refuses to take a stand on Iran-backed militias that many blame for destabilization of several countries in the region. India’s stands on the war in Syria and on the demands for a homeland for Kurds are also not much to write about.

This is not an argument for India to change its positions on regional disputes in the Middle East. What one needs to understand is that there are clear trade-offs involved. A global superpower like the US has to inevitably make tough choices and hence it makes many more enemies than India which tends to maintain neutrality. The moment India begins to take stronger positions, the illusions of the success of its deft diplomacy will quickly evaporate.

Second, there are deeper structural factors at work which have enhanced India’s standing in the Middle East. India recognized the state of Israel in 1950 but established diplomatic relations only in 1992. A number of scholars have delved into the reasons why India did not normalize its relations with Israel earlier. Let’s take one of them: India’s dependence on Arab countries for oil imports and access to trade routes. In 1956, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was not happy with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s decision to nationalize the Suez Canal but he went ahead and supported it because the Indian leader realized the importance of keeping Cairo in good humour to maintain India’s access to the Canal—a vital trade route. Similarly, in 1973 the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries’ (OAPEC’s) decision to cut back oil production was supported by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi despite the fact that the consequent increase in oil prices had a particularly debilitating effect on the Indian economy.

India's economic rise has now propelled it to the position of world's third largest oil consumer after the US and China. More and more countries outside the Middle East want to sell oil to India and this helps increase New Delhi's bargaining power. During the period of sanctions on Iran in the run-up to the nuclear deal between Iran and P5+1 (the US, the UK, France, Russia, China and Germany), India had to significantly reduce its oil imports from Iran. But this damaged Iran much more than it did India despite the fact that Iranian oil was best suited for some of the leading Indian refineries. It is, therefore, thanks to India's economic growth and concomitant build-up of market power that New Delhi does not allow an Arab or Iranian veto over its Israel policy. Deft diplomacy has little role to play here.

A lot of what is left to understand by the use of phrases like "deft diplomacy" and "backroom diplomacy" can better be explained by proper economic reasoning and strategic rationale. The use of phrases like "deft diplomacy" creates an impression that a country can sustainably overcome the limitations placed on it by economic and strategic realities. It cannot, the smartness of its diplomats notwithstanding—other countries have smart diplomats too. It is time strategic affairs commentators in India shed their sloth and deployed more persuasive arguments to back their propositions.

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