

Failed Diplomacy

It's unlikely for the Sultans of Delhi to designate any year—2011 or beyond—as a year of good neighbourliness and friendship. True, the most extreme and sometimes silliest anti-India attitudinising is represented by Pakistan because of historical reasons but anti-India sentiments are equally strong and if not all-pervasive, in India's immediate neighbouring small countries, not necessarily for historical reasons.

India's diplomacy in the short-run as also in the long-run has been a disaster since the days of Nehru. The self-styled big brother in South Asia has succeeded over the years in isolating itself from its neighbours as it has failed time and again to handle correctly multiple contradictions left by colonial legacy. Despite the existence of SAARC (South Asian Area Regional Cooperation) for so many decades, nothing tangible has been achieved so far in terms of regional cooperation and mutual understanding. After each bout of SAARC exercise, they simply go back to basics—to explore the possibilities of improving bilateral relations in the future. And nobody really knows the exact distance of that future.

All expectations of robust bilateral relations with Bangladesh after Manmohan Singh's much publicised mission to Dhaka, were up in smoke in no time as the Teesta water sharing arrangement was deferred for an indefinite period much to the dismay of the people of Bangladesh. Also, India's banias didn't get much despite Delhi's liberal concessions to Dhaka in some areas of persisting discord. There is no denying the fact that most Bangladeshis fear not only India's corporate control of what they perceive as their assets but also that every Indian gesture is interpreted as an attempt to widen India's political and economic influence in the region. Farakka has been a source of continuing friction ever since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, and now Teesta is added to the woes of millions who on both sides of the fence want to live in peace and harmony.

Problems of lower riparian states are nowhere addressed properly despite clear-cut UN guidelines—they are always at receiving ends. Those who refuse to recognise the agony of Bangladesh, being disadvantaged because of its lower riparian status, are very much agitated against China because of their lower riparian position in respect of the river Brahmaputra. Frequent reports of damming the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra in Tibet just create ripples in fragile India-China relationship, notwithstanding too much hand-shaking and smiling diplomacy every now and then.

Unlike India, China is a successful player in diplomatic game even in areas where antagonism and mistrust left by history are unlikely to vanish in the foreseeable future. In 1971 they started ping pong diplomacy as nine American table tennis players came all the way to Beijing for exhibition matches with Chinese players which helped break the ice between China and the United States. Thereafter they never looked back. This year on July 5 they marked the 40th anniversary of Sino-US Ping Pong Diplomacy in San Francisco. Soviet Union is gone but Russia is still there. And China's efforts to articulate Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) grouping China, Russia, Kaza-khastan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan while allowing four observers—Mongolia, Pakistan, Iran and India and two dialogue partners—Belarus and Sri Lanka—seem to have paved the way for forming a viable counter-weight in the future. New Delhi is not marching onward when it is the question of diplomacy, notwithstanding so much media hype about India's emerging economic clout. India's postures are always seen as a threat and even Sri Lanka and Nepal don't see India as a friend. Nor do they think India could be a responsible player in international arena anytime soon.

During the Soviet era, India's diplomacy in international affairs was subservient to Moscow's foreign policy interests. Today its desperation to become an American satellite restricts it to exert independent initiatives even in areas where India's sovereignty and national interests are at stake. The Iranian pipe-line fiasco is a case in point. Tragically enough, New Delhi now solely depends on Uncle Sam to ensure its presence in Afghanistan though Afghan people, barring the hardcore Taliban sympathisers, consider Pakistan, not India, as their enemy. It is mutual interests that unite or divide, not religion as such. And yet India has failed miserably to project itself as a true champion of Afghan democracy. Indian corporate houses are there to reap post-war reconstruction bonanza and that is one reason it adjusts its diplomacy dancing to the tune of Washington.

India's role as a founder-leader of Non-Aligned Movement—NAM—is a forgotten chapter of history. At no point of time NAM became a truly non-aligned force—in most cases it aligned with the Soviet Union. And in the absence of Soviet Union and abrupt termination of cold war NAM has literally lost its relevance while curbing India's manoeuvrability in third world diplomacy. □□□