

## Where India Doesn't Matter

The Manmohan Singh Dispensation for the second term seems to be stabilising slowly but steadily without offering anything new in policy formulation. After all politics in the 125-year-old Gandhian establishment is a path-dependent business—most elected representatives simply initiated the actions and language of those who came before them. And status quo-ism is nowhere so disturbing as in foreign policy orientation. With Rahul Gandhi being eulogised as ‘the quite revolutionary’ hoping to remake India and the Congress as well in the American media, Nehru legacy is once again gaining currency. More they talk of Nehru, more they strengthen the dynastic grip over the Congress Party and there are four members from the Gandhi family in the newly constituted 15th parliament. One area that gets frequently identified with Nehru is India’s foreign policy dilemma.

But the fundamentals of Indian foreign policy have virtually remained the same since the days of Nehru, the strategy to take forward overall goals keeps oscillating from one extreme to another. Even the saffron brigade—Bharatiya Janata Party—despite its hawkish stance nicely assimilated Congress theory and practice when it was the question of foreign policy.

It did not take much for the Nehru-led Indian republic to assume the leadership of newly independent states in the 1950s through non-aligned movement, switch to the US camp for the communist threat from the north in the 1960s, dump western democracies for Soviet largesse in the 1970s and then fall into the embrace of the White House and the Washington Consensus in the 1990s as soon as the Soviet bloc collapsed. But India continues to struggle hard to get recognised as the regional hegemonic power by its South Asian neighbours.

On the other hand China may congratulate itself for its overwhelming presence which is not denied even by its bitter critics. Naturally or by design China gives off the air of an independent empire, rather a ‘communist’ empire, that has always had the world falling at its feet. Khrushchev and his CPSU could not browbeat Mao’s China and CPC. Richard Nixon had to learn pingpong to halt Soviet advance in Asia and get rid of the Vietnamese trauma. And now Barack Obama knows better than anybody else how not to annoy the country with nearly USD two trillion foreign currency in these uncertain times. How Chinese money is financing American consumer spending is now known to everybody. And the resurrected Gandhi dynasty under the baton of Rahul Gandhi is no answer to the dynamics of the Middle Kingdom.

Strange it may seem, Beijing is always seen as a saviour by India’s neighbours. In truth they see it as a counterweight apprehending Indian conspiracy all the time. Even though the Chinese need Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal as much as these South Asian countries need China at international forums, there is a widely shared view in the region that the Beijing government, whether pro-Maoists or pro-Dengists run it, can be a rescuer in times of need. But time and again this assumption has proved wrong, rather wishful thinking. Governments, civilian or military, come and go but all of them are haunted by the common perception that courting China is an essential element to thwart Indian hegemony in the region.

But the Chinese communists are nationalist to the core. They do not understand anything but national interests. China has successfully capitalised on goodwill South Asian elites harbour about it, to expand its business in the region. So China is the largest supplier of arms and armaments to the Bangladesh military, recently surpassing India as the biggest trading partner. China's business conglomerates are reportedly going to build manufacturing facilities at Chittagong port city to capture South Asian market. Riding on the wave of favourable public opinion the Chinese are also promising Bangladesh nuclear power plants and a land link by destroying the Burmese rain forest cover without bothering about international environmental concern. Ironically communist China used its first veto in the UN Security Council, in 1972, to oppose the membership of Bangladesh.

As things are India's multi-lateral co-operation with America is scaling new heights but America cannot impose India as a regional superpower on South Asian countries where China is already ahead in the race because of historical advantages it enjoys. □□□