

India's 70-Year Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy

by

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There is a common thread running through the foreign and security policies of successive governments of India until this one, irrespective of their various political persuasions and compositions and different leaders. It has been the pursuit of strategic autonomy for India.

It has been called by different names: Jawaharlal Nehru's coinage of non-alignment for the most part, "genuine non-alignment" by the Janata government, and more recently strategic autonomy.

In practice it has meant keeping decision-making power with ourselves, avoiding alliances, and building our capabilities while working with others when it was in India's interest to do so.

Even in moments of dire peril, as in the immediate aftermath of the Chinese attack in 1962, when Nehru was compelled to seek military assistance from the US, it was his simultaneous attempt to maintain his own freedom of manoeuvre by also turning to the Soviet Union for support and supplies.

Why has this pursuit been so constant since India's independence in 1947, despite tremendous changes in the international situation and in India's own condition and capabilities? Why has independent India never chosen to bandwagon or ally with a superpower or another great power?

Clearly, India did not fight for independence in order to willingly hand its decision-making power, recovered at such great effort, to another power. That was a particularly strong motivation in the decades soon after independence when India's weakness and the four wars that she was forced to fight led some at both political extremes like the Swatantra and Communist parties to urge alliance with one or the other superpower. But those voices were few and far from the mainstream or power.

The pursuit of strategic autonomy also meets the fundamental needs of maintaining our sovereignty and improving the lot of our people. Ours is the only nationalism and identity not based on religion, language, ethnicity, or ideology. Nor have we so far relied upon bowdlerised or self-serving versions of our own history to build our nationalism. It is our awareness of our common destiny, and of all belonging to India, irrespective of language, religion, caste, or regional differences, that is the basis of our nationalism. This makes us unique in the world. It also imposes a unique set of responsibilities and demands on our policies to maintain the democratic balances, pluralism, and diversity that are the necessary bases of our internal and external policies.

No other country shares our precise set of interests for the simple reason that no other country shares our history, geography, size, culture and identity, and our domestic condition, all of which determine what we seek from the international system. What we have sought is an external environment that supports the transformation of India, that enables us to build a modern, prosperous and secure country, eliminating poverty, illiteracy, disease and the other curses of underdevelopment from the lives of our people. That is our core interest.

Because that core interest is permanent, strategic autonomy has served our interest best despite changes in the international situation. During the Cold War, when the world was divided into two hostile camps, it obviously served our interest not to be dragged into external entanglements decided on by an ally or alliance. When the bipolar world ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union we entered two decades of globalisation, of an open international trading and investment climate. Once again it was in our interest to pursue a multi-directional foreign policy, working with all the major powers in the pursuit of India's transformation.

The results of the pursuit of strategic autonomy speak for themselves: Over thirty years of 6% GDP growth and a much more secure and capable India, which has pulled more of its citizenry out of poverty and grown faster than it ever did in history. Only one other country, China, can claim a better record in the recent past in terms of improving the quality of life of its people and in rapid economic growth. As a result of that period of accelerated growth and change, India is today much more integrated into the world than when she began reforms in 1992. We have a growing interest in the world and in creating, to the extent that we can, an enabling external environment for India's transformation.

Today we are in a much more uncertain world, where the global economy is unlikely to recover from the the crisis of 2008, where ultra-nationalism is on the rise, where strongmen promise much and deliver little, and where societies are being churned on an unprecedented scale. The rise of China, the new communications and information technologies, digital manufacturing, and an energy revolution, promise to remake our external environment and pose new challenges to our policies.

Indeed, fear of a rising China, of the scale of change and uncertainty, and, possibly, domestic party political compulsions lead some of our countrymen to advocate shifts away from strategic autonomy to a much greater reliance on outside powers for our own security. Some recent actions also give credence to this view. I sense that we may be at risk of losing the sense of our own unique destiny that guided us for almost seventy years, that we are losing sight of the responsibilities and goals of our foreign policy, that we could compromise our strategic autonomy.

To my mind this is dangerous. We live in a time of rebalancing among all the powers. China is rising; the US is not declining in absolute terms but is vacating space — economic space by abandoning the TPP, and casting doubt on the credibility of its extended deterrence and alliance commitments as she turns inwards. Neither traditional security arrangements nor a G-2 between China and the US can deal with or settle today's security issues of global terrorism, the chaos in the Middle East, the South China Sea, North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, and so on. The powers like Russia, Japan and our other friends are reevaluating and readjusting their policies to new realities.

For larger powers, like India, who want a greater say and an improved international order, some disruption may open up possibilities. Smaller states see their space shrinking and rebalance towards China, as Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand seem to be doing. Indeed they hedge, balance and bandwagon simultaneously. China herself, uses the opportunity opened by uncertainty and US disengagement to attempt to organise and consolidate the Eurasian land-mass through the Belt and Road Initiative and other geopolitical means.

This is hardly the time for India to abandon strategic autonomy as the desired goal of our policy. The higher the uncertainty in the international system, the more important it is that we have our own capability and maintain the ability to independently decide and respond to events and situations. The purpose of policy is to increase options, not to limit them by abandoning strategic autonomy. And this requires building our own capabilities, far beyond the military, where the global hierarchy is relatively set, but in the economy, in our society, as a producer of knowledge and technology through science, and in our cultural outreach.

To my mind, strategic autonomy is the only way forward if you believe that India will be a great power, one of the poles in the world of the future, a different power. Strategic autonomy is essential if we are to succeed in transforming India.