

ISAS Special Report

No. 13 – 5 July 2013

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassec@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



India's Strategic Autonomy *Mantra*¹

P S Suryanarayana²

As China and the United States seek to refashion today's unsettled global order, India remains committed to staying the course of "strategic autonomy". A political message of this magnitude has been spelt out by India's External Affairs Minister, Mr Salman Khurshid, during a dialogue session under the auspices of the Singapore-based Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS).

It is debatable whether such a pronouncement can or will silence the critics who have never tired of seeing India as a rising power that might fall because of its failure to conceptualise and act on the basis of a "strategic vision". However, a sense of urgency has been thrust upon India in the emerging global context of China and the US trying to move towards "a new type of relations between great powers", namely these two countries themselves.

An Informal China-US 'G2'

Truly significant in this context was the latest summit between the American President, Mr Barack Obama, and the Chinese President, Mr Xi Jinping, in the sunshine state of California in the US in early-June this year. Their public statements during and after the summit, as also the Chinese version of the in-camera discussions between these two leaders, have helped

¹ This paper is a thematic report on India's External Affairs Minister, Mr Salman Khurshid's Public Lecture and dialogue session that was held in Singapore under the auspices of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, on 3 July 2013. ISAS Chairman, Ambassador Gopinath Pillai, presided over the lecture and the dialogue session.

² Mr P S Suryanarayana is Editor (Current Affairs) at ISAS. He can be contacted at isasps@nus.edu.sg. The trend-line of views in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

raise the possibility of a new global scenario. In this scenario, Mr Xi and Mr Obama have begun to explore the option of working together to create at least an informal Group of Two (G2), consisting of China and the United States, to trace a new global order in the political and economic domains. The early signs – not irreversible, though – are that of an informal G2 of partnership rather than power-sharing. Nonetheless, it is arguable that India must try and trim its sails to the changing winds, given the recent realities of New Delhi's roller-coaster relations with China and a generally-positive engagement with the US.

Conceivably, India has four or five options in this emerging global context. New Delhi could choose (1) neo-nonalignment as between the US and China; or (2) a tilt towards the US to balance against China; or (3) strategic autonomy as India's overall foreign policy; or (4) the status as a constrained regional power in the confines of South Asia; or (5) an altogether new option of being a partner – perhaps, a junior partner – of China, if only Beijing could redress the long-standing Indian concerns over the perceived Chinese policy of propping up Pakistan as an anti-India force.

Quite illuminating was Mr Khurshid's answer, in response to a question from this author about four of these options, other than the one regarding India seeing itself as a partner, perhaps a junior partner, of China. His response reveals that New Delhi does not see the latest China-US summit as a wake-up call for changing the course of India's current foreign policy trajectory which is often described as "strategic autonomy".

In the fundamental tenets of international relations, strategic autonomy is indeed the inherent attribute, and the very essence, of sovereignty of any state which seeks to pursue freedom of thought and action. Viewed in this perspective, strategic autonomy, as the terminology for a truly independent state's foreign policy, is no policy at all. It is arguable, therefore, that a truly sovereign state like India needs to express, or at least think through (without necessarily spelling out) its choice to meet a changing external situation.

By this litmus test of foreign policy, Mr Khurshid's answer can be seen to reflect a sense of satisfaction, or perhaps even a note of confidence, that India can afford to stay its course. In a new-age idiom, India does not seem to think that the leaders of China and the US are poised to dock in the outer space above the heads of other world leaders to decide a future global order.

India Sees China, US as 'Partners'

Emphasising strategic autonomy as the core principle of India's current foreign policy, Mr Khurshid said: "As far as China and the US are concerned, we treat both of them on merit as strategic partners. We don't, we have never been known to subscribe to a view that was projected [that] the United States of America will be interested in encircling China". Noting that he did not know whether the perceived intention of Washington towards Beijing was true

or not, he said “we didn’t in any way think [that] that was a great idea to which India would want to subscribe”.

Striking a note of even-handedness, Mr Khurshid said: “Similarly, we have never given China any reason to believe that we treat our relationship with China to be conditional upon and based on our relationship with somebody else or their relationship with somebody else. We have engaged with China despite our difficulties with Pakistan and their compulsion or historical alliance, close alliance, with Pakistan. But we haven’t allowed that to come in the way of a progressive engagement with China that, as you have seen, has grown rapidly”. In this emerging Sino-Indian context, he said, India held eight highest-level talks with the previous Chinese leadership. And, he described the new Chinese Premier, Mr Li Keqiang’s visit to India in May this year, in the wake of a bloodless military standoff between the two armies at a place along their disputed Himalayan border, as “a very, very important and significant gesture”.

To dispel the impression of India being a constrained South Asian regional power, as distinct from being a rising power with a global profile, Mr Khurshid said: “India has no reason, has certainly not any inclination to remain confined to any part of the world. Of course, there are issues about [India’s] human resources and financial capacity and physical ability etc. [to be a global player]. [However,] it is our intention not to remain away from any part of the globe”.

Noting that his visit to Singapore from 3 July – 5 July 2013 was to preside over, among other tasks, a meeting of the heads of India’s diplomatic missions in East Asia, he said he had already travelled to Latin America and to the Arctic among other places since he assumed office several months ago.

Moreover, India was now “looking at a 10-year plan” for enlarging its regional and global presence. And, with India seeking wider horizons at present, “we would deal with every country, big or small, on merits”, he said. He annotated this to mean that “we deal with Maldives and Russia, and China, Japan and everyone”.

Seeking to drive home a point that India had not kow-towed to the US in any manner at any time, despite the rapid rise of China as a factor to reckon with, he said “we have dealt with Iran, as a friend, to the full knowledge of the United States of America”. While it was “a good thing” that US had not also asked India to stop its dialogue with Iran, New Delhi was now engaging North Korea as well in some plain-speak diplomacy over Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons programme, it was emphasised.

‘India will not be boxed in’

The political punch-line in Mr Khurshid’s portrayal of India’s current foreign policy is: “We don’t like putting ourselves in a box anywhere. Frankly, the language that we used during the

heyday of the NAM [nonaligned] movement is today translated into a modern-day phrase that we use, which is strategic autonomy. We remain strategically autonomous. Remaining strategically autonomous is, we believe, the right moral thing to do. It may have specific advantages and disadvantages, given the situation in the world, but we do believe that our foreign policy has a huge element of moral principles built into it, and it is consistent with those moral principles that we don't place ourselves in any group or any alliance that would be inimical to anybody else".

As for India's Look-East Policy in this wider framework, New Delhi had now begun to "look beyond ASEAN [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations] to APEC [the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum]". As a premier forum of economies as distinct from sovereign states, APEC consists of the US, China, Japan and other significant players in this vast sub-region but does not include India as of now. In Mr Khurshid's view, India's admission to APEC, as and when possible, would enhance, for India, the "connectivity between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific" and raise the geopolitical and geo-economic profile of the Indo-Pacific theatre.

It was evident from his remarks that New Delhi's incremental connectivity with ASEAN, based on India's "emotional commitment" to Southeast Asia and other factors, should also be seen as contributing to the process of conceptualising the Indo-Pacific zone.

Another intended message is that New Delhi, accustomed to the interactive pluralism of India's languages and political parties (for instance), finds it "easy" to deal with the diversity of Southeast Asia.

An Extraordinary Offer

Emphasising the importance of a tension-free Southeast Asia which must not also be "a victim of disagreements or disputes", Mr Khurshid made an extraordinary offer of India's willingness to help in any way possible. It is evident from his remarks in this context that his offer, not elucidated by him for a greater clarity of purpose, flows from India's own experience and expertise in facing a variety of security challenges.

On Pakistan, which has remained in prime focus on India's radar screen in South Asia for decades, Mr Khurshid's comments show that New Delhi is beginning to be optimistic of an upturn in this bilateral equation if the current signs of "good economic sense" hold firm. A recent cause of optimism is said to be Islamabad's willingness to seek India's cooperation for energy security in Pakistan.

Speaking at a different dialogue session in Singapore, Mr Khurshid said New Delhi's perception of a difficult neighbourhood in South Asia should not be interpreted to mean that India sees its neighbours as being difficult to deal with.

.....