

Business Standard

Business Standard

Kishan S Rana, November 07, 2013

Non-alignment after the Cold War

NON-ALIGNMENT 2.0 A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the 21st Century

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Penguin Viking, New Delhi

India does not have an official document on its foreign policy objectives or defence strategy. The Indian system fights shy of open expression of a strategic doctrine. In this vacuum, the eight distinguished co-authors of this book have joined together - which, in itself, is unusual - in singular public service, presenting their cogent take on what ought to be India's doctrine. This follow-up to the February 2012 monograph, "Non-Alignment 2.0", takes into account the discussion that the paper had generated. This is a sound method for open debate and building consensus on the nation's foreign policy priorities. The fact that the 2012 monograph involved participation by senior national security secretariat officials adds to the value of this new publication.

This is a short work, not a scholarly tome. Consider some of its strong points: a clear distinction between the Non-Aligned Movement ("a pale legacy from the past") and non-alignment ("a strategic doctrine underpinning India's foreign policy"); and a dispassionate survey of the neighbouring and world environment, examining relations with individual countries and regions. Some of the home truths that the volume offers: China now considers India not so much a threat as a "swing state", and this gives us better options; we should devote more attention to Myanmar, with which we share a 1,400-kilometre border, as well as to Indonesia; Europe is "undervalued and neglected", and is a fit target for engagement; we have given "inordinate" attention to South Africa, neglecting relationships with other African countries. On defence, it urges a build-up of military capability - especially in the border regions - and an expansion of our naval forces.

The central thesis is: India's foreign policy objective is "to secure the maximum space possible for its own economic growth... The window of opportunity for India to become a relatively prosperous nation is relatively small ... the next ten to fifteen years ... once certain institutional choices and development pathways are adopted, it will be very hard to change them... If we do not seize the opportunities provided by a relatively benign environment, we will not get a second chance to correct our mistakes." The current openness and fluidity of the international system provide us opportunities for "coalition management" and "complex interest negotiations". But a question persists: are we doing this, or do we remain fixated on just a few issues, ignoring wider options?

In foreign affairs, as in other areas of activity, the singular failing of Indian governance is implementation. Alas, that element hobbles the analysis presented in this work, honest and thorough as it is. Consider some of the observations: "India cannot hope to arrive as a great power if it is unable to manage relationships within the subcontinent"; we need to "invest intellectual capital in Asia"; we need to work for "regional economic integration", giving more unilateral concessions to neighbours on trade, investment and aid; lateral communication between the ministry of external affairs and the economic ministries is "too often blocked and insufficient". But how is the change to take place? What are the missing elements, or roadblocks, towards achieving these worthy objectives?

Some of the issues not examined in this book are: how should we address what clearly is a glaring lack of "diplomatic capacity", which limits the implementation of external policy actions? What are the structural difficulties that confront the external affairs ministry, requiring bold actions, such as the recent creation of a "Development Partnership Administration" that has provided holistic direction to India's expanded aid programme? How can India move decisively towards a "whole-of-government" foreign policy, and a diplomacy that is more inclusive and sustained by coherent inter-ministry actions? What was needed from this book was a set of clear prescriptions, a road map for action. One looks in vain for suggestions on to how the narrow window of external opportunity identified in the book might be addressed.

The book loses focus when it shifts attention away from its stated foreign and strategic policy aim, holding forth on subjects as varied as the management of megacities, the struggle against Naxalism, and a national cyber policy. Even as the book urges better links with non-officials, it has an old-fashioned view on outside experts advising on official policy ("there is little that they can contribute"). Consider how China operates: between 2002 and 2010, President Hu Jintao chaired 66 tightly scripted presentations on different subjects to the Politburo Standing Committee by Chinese and foreign experts, and one-third related to foreign affairs; leading think tanks hold a monthly meeting with this apex body (2010 report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute on foreign policy decision-making, and other sources). Apart from these caveats,

the book can achieve its purpose if it provokes genuine, holistic debate on India's foreign policy objectives, taking us beyond what has now become our fixation with China and Pakistan.

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