

India and the World

Krishna Menon Memorial Lecture
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S.Menon

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Professor Jambholkar, Dr. R.K. Dixit, Shri Narinder Singh,
Members of the Indian Society of International Law,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for the extraordinary privilege of speaking to your Society in memory of V.K.Krishna Menon.

I remember going to Krishna Menon in 1968 to invite him to speak in Delhi University at the Department of Chinese Studies (as it then was). Despite all that I had heard, he treated a young student, which is what I was then, with great courtesy and kindness, even taking the trouble to hear out and discuss my strongly held but immature opinions on China. He thought the Cultural Revolution was a passing madness. I was not so certain. He was proved right.

The reason I had gone to him with some trepidation involves a story. Both Krishna Menon and my grandfather, KPS Menon, were members of the Indian delegation to the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco. Diplomacy was much more leisurely then. The conference lasted several months, in the course of which KPS wrote home to his wife complaining about Krishna Menon's attitudes on some issue or the other. My grandmother replied with a litany of strongly uncomplimentary views of what she saw as Krishna Menon's extreme opinions, expression and behaviour. That letter was delivered to the wrong Menon, to Krishna Menon. He read it carefully and gave it my grandfather in an open envelope, without comment. That there was subsequent coolness between them is an understatement. Knowing full well who I was, Krishna Menon, the lion in winter, chose dignity and courtesy over revenge when he met me. We need more of that spirit in our public life today.

Unfortunately, Krishna Menon's image in the public mind is now overlaid by memories of his sharp tongue and his role in China policy, to the exclusion of his great contributions to India's freedom movement abroad, to our multilateral diplomacy, and to the implementation of Nehru's foreign policy. The sharp tongue, too, was a weapon that he used in India's cause and not his own. Since we live in an age of snap judgements and monochromatic public persona, we seldom hear of his contributions to India's freedom when he fought the good but lonely, long and

difficult fight in England for decades before independence. Nor do we hear of his great contributions after independence to decolonization, disarmament, international human rights law and covenants, the spectacular defence in the UN of our stand on J&K, and his attempt to build an indigenous defence industry.

It sometimes seems in retrospect that life was simpler in Krishna Menon's time, though a closer examination of his life and the multiple controversies that he was embroiled in shows how untrue that impression is. It is probably more true that those were times of more ideological certitude, when defining India's interests was easier.

This suggests that it may be worth looking at India and the world in the last sixty years, considering India's interests, at the circumstances in which we have to secure them, and the strategy required to do so.

Interests

India's primary task remains what it was when Jawaharlal Nehru guided our foreign policy. So long as our country has an unacceptable number of poor, hungry, illiterate and sick citizens, our primary task has to be to transform India into a modern, secure and prosperous country. The task of our foreign policy is to make that possible, and, to the extent that we are able, to create an enabling external environment for the transformation of India. This was so in the fifties and is true now, despite all that we have done since independence to improve the lives of our people and to develop our national capabilities and power.

The transformation of India is and will remain our goal for the foreseeable future. But life is not always so simple as to offer you a binary and obvious choice. We often have to choose between our interests, creating, in effect, a hierarchy of interests.

Take Sri Lanka, for instance, It is clearly in India's interest that Sri Lanka solve its ethnic problem in a manner which makes each community, particularly the SL Tamils, confident that they are masters of their own destiny and free to enjoy their rights within the framework of a united Sri Lanka. Equally it is in our interest that Sri Lanka remain a close friend, and does not affect our security adversely. But the demands of these two interests are not always perfectly aligned. When we have to choose between them we will choose according to the democratic values and rule of law that we have built our society upon.

When we consider our interests and create a hierarchy of interests, clearly the first must be the over-riding interest in peace and security. Without security no other interests can be sought or achieved. Peace and prosperity require physical survival.

Safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity and repelling aggression, and the security of its citizens, are the primary duty of the state.

But while security is paramount, it can not be absolute or separate and unique, for absolute security for one state would mean absolute insecurity for others. Hence the need in one's own interest to also consider other states' security and global peace and security. This explains India's persistent interest and activism in seeking multilateral solutions to disarmament, to security issues, and negotiated political (not military) solutions to crises from Korea in 1950, to Suez and Hungary in 1956, and up to Syria and Libya recently.

Secondly, for legitimacy a state which assures the physical security of its territory and citizens also today has a responsibility to ensure their economic well being, working for a conducive international environment and using all its levers of power, soft or hard, towards this goal. Our definition of security has expanded over time to include economic security, food security, energy security, and other aspects of human security in addition to the traditional aspects of hard security such as military defence and law and order.

If our priority is to transform the lives of our people, we must try to shape and utilise the external economic environment to our advantage. This explains our consistent role internationally in adding a development dimension to the work of international financial and economic institutions like the World Bank, UNCTAD and WTO and elsewhere. These interests have been persistent and consistently recognized by successive governments of India, irrespective of their political complexion, since they arise from India's condition.

Circumstances

If interests are permanent, circumstances are in continuous flux. The certainties and predictabilities of the bipolar Cold War world of the fifties have now been replaced with a world in transition, with multipolarity in some respects like the economy, and unipolarity in others such as the conventional military domain. In shared domains like space, air, sea, and cyber, the situation is much less clear and is in flux.

The distribution of power within and among states in the world, the uses of power, even the nature of power are changing when compared to the fifties. New domains of security, like outer space and cyber space have emerged. And our definition of security and of the responsibilities of state and government have broadened. Let us consider these aspects which define the circumstances in which we seek to advance our national interest.

We are in a world where technology is changing the nature of power. The ICT revolution has made instant communication and other powers which were earlier only with the strongest states now available to individuals and small groups, to be used for such purposes as they wish, whether for humanitarian purposes or terrorism or espionage or sabotage. We are still to come to terms with the potential of cyber attacks, and have already witnessed the kinetic effects of such actions.

Today power is much more evenly distributed in the world than it was in the fifties when two superpowers exercised global predominance. And yet if power is more distributed it is also “lumpy”, in the sense that not all domains are the same. Some developing countries are now called emerging countries in acknowledgement of their rapid economic development, but that has yet to be matched by their military, social, S&T, innovation, and human development.

In political terms, the fifties were dominated by a principal contradiction between the US and the USSR. Today we see multiple balances of power being changed rapidly as several powers are developing simultaneously. The rise of China is the major geopolitical fact that is changing the situation in our periphery, in Asia, and the global economy. There are fundamental differences from the situation in the fifties since the major powers are today interdependent for their economic prosperity, even though their strategic interests may seem to be in competition. Take the US-China relationship, for instance, where they are economically each other's largest trading and economic partner despite their differences on Asian security issues. This in itself makes it unlikely that US-China relations of the future will mirror US-USSR relations of the fifties.

The North-South polarity that was such a feature of the second half of the last century is also being redefined by the rapid development of several economies around the world. India's interests now straddle this divide. China and others are now worrying about the middle income trap, about their rapid growth slowing down as demographic and other factors change. The traditional North-South coalitions in multilateral fora are no longer as evident. Thus while it is a welcome recognition of the economic significance of new actors that the G-20, and not just the G-7, was mobilized to deal with the immediate aftermath of the 2008 world economic crisis, convergence among the emerging economies in the the G-20 itself is not spontaneous.

We are also in a world where Asia's rise and the redistribution of power is not matched by changes in the the systems and institutions of global governance. In the fifties, the balance of power and governance in global institutions were aligned. Today they are clearly not. This has diminished the effectiveness of the multilateral institutions that Krishna Menon's generation of Indians attached so much importance to. Take for instance the UNSC's limited role in the major crises and wars of the day, or the diminishing role of the UN in the global economy. This is in

contrast to what the UN was able to achieve in decolonization, disarmament and UNCTAD in the fifties and sixties.

In these circumstances where the institutions of global governance no longer reflect current realities of power, to expect the emerging countries to be “responsible” and to take part in providing global public goods, without having a say in the shaping of the global order, is premature, to say the least.

All in all, this is a world of fluidity, uncertainty and opportunity, a world of great and rapid change. And as we in India seek to change our condition, this very fluidity and fundamental change offers us greater opportunity than the rigidities of the twentieth century.

Strategy

Since interests are permanent but circumstances change, it is logical that the strategy to safeguard or achieve those interests must be adjusted over time and place. It must evolve and be flexible, as the times demand. At the same time the strategy to pursue our interests will not just be conditioned by external circumstances but also by the means available to us, which have grown considerably when compared to the fifties.

The grand strategy that we chose from the early days of the freedom movement was non-alignment. In effect non-alignment between the two blocs in a Cold War world was a difficult but necessary choice, preserving our strategic autonomy of decision making. In effect non-alignment was a strategy to decide our stand on each issue on its merits bearing in mind India’s interests, and not on the basis of alliance considerations. In essence non-alignment was the pursuit, where possible, of strategic autonomy.

The utility of strategic autonomy is actually even higher today. One simple reason is that there is no other country like India in terms of its scale, problems, level and pattern of development, and needs. It follows as a consequence that no other country’s interests can be identical to India’s. Therefore, it would be unreasonable to expect other countries to promote our interests except where that suits their purposes and interests. India is unique and must therefore retain her strategic autonomy.

But how does strategic autonomy or non-alignment serve our interests in the new circumstances that I have described -- a world of multiple great powers and one super-power, of economic interdependence and political independence, and a world where the balance of power and the very constituents of power are changing rapidly?

In terms of coping or hedging strategies this is a world of shifting coalitions and changing alignments, as a listing of crises in the last two decades from the Balkans onwards shows. In each crisis the role, attitude and alignment of major powers has varied. An era of coalitions of the willing also leaves it open for countries to be unwilling. And, as Pakistan has proved in the Afghan case since 2001, it is even possible for some to be both willing and unwilling partners at the same time.

In such an uncertain world in flux, it is best to retain one's strategic freedom to pursue one's own interests. This does not preclude working with others in a coalition. Given the nature of our domestic politics, such work should come naturally to us.

It is impossible for India to achieve all her development and security goals entirely on her own in the complex interdependent international environment that we inhabit. It is therefore natural that we work with other partners in the international system, with those who share our values, goals and interests on particular issues. It has therefore been possible for India to build strategic partnerships with the USA and other major powers, without one affecting or excluding the other.

Hence also our emphasis throughout on international law and value based multilateralism to build international coalitions of the like-minded, whether to promote development and a more just international economic order, or for disarmament and on peace and security issues.

Criticism

We are today sometimes accused of not having a strategy or grand strategy, and of lacking strategic thinking in India. We are simultaneously accused of opportunism and of not fulfilling our international responsibilities, of abandoning non-alignment or of being too non-aligned when such a foreign policy is no longer relevant. Clearly not all these accusations can be true at the same time.

The problem is that all states claim to be eternally consistent and virtuous, always right and well motivated, and we are no exception. But the fact is that we do adjust our policies and strategies to meet changing circumstances.

As strategy is adjusted to circumstance, it is naturally open to criticism. This is healthy and ensures that policy formulation is rigorous and produces the best possible result. But since it follows from a hierarchy of interests, there is not always a choice between right or wrong policy in given circumstances, only the best possible policy.

Take our relations with China for instance, where the complex boundary issue remains unresolved. But the leaders of both countries have decided to maintain peace and tranquility in the border areas, and we have been successful in doing so for several decades. And without waiting for a settlement of the boundary we have developed the rest of the relationship, to the point where China is our largest trading partner in goods, and we make common cause on several issues of global significance. This may not be ideal, but it is certainly better than where we were before, and, most important, we have displayed the will and ability to manage differences and build on commonalities to mutual benefit.

Results

The only true test of policy is the result that it produces.

How have we in India done by this test?

Not badly at all in terms of protecting our major interests.

It is clear that our economic well being has improved at a pace that is better than that of most of the rest of the world and faster than it ever has in our history. India has had thirty years of 6.5% growth, 8.5% in the last decade. It became the world's fourth largest economy in 2012 (in PPP terms) after the US, China and Japan. It is likely that this 4.7 trillion dollar economy will double every 7-10 years. Our issues today are with how inclusive this growth can be, how to continue along the path that has made these results possible, and how to meet our social welfare needs adequately.

India's economic progress has been made possible by the intensification of our economic engagement with the rest of the world. Over time India's economy has become ever more linked to the rest of the world. If the external sector accounted for around 14% of our GDP in 1990, it now accounts for over 40% of our economy. India's trade in goods and services is about a trillion dollars a year. Our economy will need trillions of dollars worth of infrastructure, energy and natural gas, resources, and services to meet its growth needs and this requires working with the rest of the world.

As for security, terrorism related deaths and casualties have declined each year over the last eight years. Terrorism induced deaths have declined from 3259 in 2005 to 804 last year, most of them from LWE and North-East insurgents. The trend of communal incidents was also declining until 2012. We are fortunate to live in a society that is fundamentally inclusive, secular and tolerant, and it is this side of India that we must work with and encourage, if we are to build on our achievements and deny the negativity that is so easily spread for reasons of sensationalism or

narrow political gain. As our society evolves, urbanizes and changes rapidly, with new mobility in all respects, we will have to learn new ways of maintaining harmony and community policing. I actually find it heartening that we are now engaged in a debate, sparked off by horrendous incidents, on how to combat sexual crimes like rape.

Our conventional defence is stronger than it has ever been before, and since 1998 our explicit deterrence extends to the nuclear part of the spectrum of conflict. We have also learnt how to deal with and neutralise sub-conventional and asymmetric threats like cross-border terrorism.

And most significantly, as a result of sixty years of effort and development, the means available to us to create a conducive external environment have grown considerably. This is true in terms of the quality of our manpower, the economic and other tools available to us and the weapons we can deploy. Our standing in the world is today higher than it has been in several centuries and we find willing international partners to work with us on counter-terrorism, maritime security, energy security and other issues critical to our future.

It can be argued that we have done less well in achieving some other goals such as a peaceful periphery and good-neighborly relations with all our neighbours. To some extent these are works in progress that reveal the limits of power available to us. As I said before, the policy choice, especially in complex relations such as those between neighbours, is often not between right and wrong policies but between good and less good policy choices. This is a hard furrow to plough, especially when the media and others treat foreign policy as a T-20 match when every ball must result in a six or a wicket, and there are instant winners and losers declared on TV each evening.

Conclusion

I have tried to suggest that despite changing circumstances strategic autonomy remains the best way to pursue our permanent and lasting interests. In essence this is a truth that was grasped early by Jawaharlal Nehru and those who worked closely with him like Krishna Menon. For that we and successive generations of Indians owe them a debt of gratitude.