

Impolitic policies

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Foreign policy has always been incomprehensible to the common man. So think the "experts". Some cables from India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to his Ambassador to China in October 1950, explaining how the "poor Tibetans" (who had just been invaded and thrashed by Communist China) could not grasp the "larger issues" involved, always come back to my mind. Nevertheless at that time, with a bit of education, one could grasp the broad lines and contours of the foreign policy and eventually comprehend the next moves on the great or small games' chessboard.

Today, things have changed drastically; it is no longer as simple as a Bollywood script. Even for active watchers of India's foreign policy, it has become increasingly difficult to follow what is going on. South Block's (or the other Block's) way of thinking has become so sophisticated that a normally educated observer cannot make sense of all the intricacies.

Take the recent visit of Maulana Fazal-ur Rehman, the head of Pakistan's Jamiat Ulema-i-Islami, to India. We were told for many years that the Taliban was an evil creation of Pakistan and, therefore, they were the worst enemy of India. Did not an Indian Union Minister have to kow -tow to the cruel regime in Kabul for the release of hijacked passengers on an Indian Airlines plane? Now, the person who is credited with the creation of the Taliban comes to India and is received like India's best friend. The same Maulana is said to control most of the madarsas in Pakistan spreading jihad not only in Afghanistan, but also in Kashmir. But never mind!

All sorts of speculations and explanations are circulated to explain the warm reception given to the Maulana by India: His closeness to Benazir Bhutto (an exfriend of India?); his adherence to the "spirit of Shimla"; his opposition to a "machiavellian" Musharraf or his violent anti -American stance. Whatever be the Maulana's hidden agenda (or that of his Indian interlocutors), it is clear that the man in the street will not get to know the ins and outs of the affair. And it seems the Maulana is still preaching for the return to power of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. Understand this if you can!

Now let us look at another front: India's relations with China. We were told that Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee made a very successful trip to China and that his stay in Beijing opened new vistas in the bilateral relations between the two countries. We were informed by the Government that the Sikkim issue had been solved with the opening of a border at Nathu-la, the pass commanding the entrance to the Chumbi Valley in Tibet. Unfortunately, the very next day, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman stated that Sikkim was "an enduring issue left over from history and cannot be resolved overnight". He added: "We have to respect history. We have to take into consideration realistic factors." Another of those enigmatic statements which nobody can understand!

Anyway, Prime Minister Vajpayee used his visit to Beijing to make a great leap forward in finding a solution to the border issue between India and China. National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra was appointed on the spot as Special Representative from the Indian side to settle the vexed issue. A news report said: "This exercise is expected to be completed shortly and the two special representatives are likely to meet within the next few weeks." Unfortunately once again, while we were being given to understand that the 50-year-old issue would finally be behind us, we hear that Chinese soldiers were trespassing on Indian soil in Arunachal Pradesh. To make things worse, Beijing's spokesperson declared that China did not acknowledge that the State of Arunachal Pradesh was a part of India. Had not India just established a new friendship with China?

And then, while the Indian media went crazy about the beautiful story of a small Pakistani girl with a heart ailment who was saved by Indian surgeons (thanks to the Lahore-Delhi bus), the militants struck again at Akhnoor near Jammu. One can only rejoice at the good fortune of small Noor, but utterly fail to understand the Indian Government's reaction to the other event: "Nothing will derail the peace process." Never has an attack been so ghastly: Not only were six jawans and a JCO killed, but a few hours later, after the "all clear" signal was given for the spot visit by the top Army brass, a hidden militant struck again. One brigadier lost his life and a few generals were wounded. It sounds like a Railway Minister who would repeat after every train accident: "Nothing can derail Indian trains" and do nothing to prevent the derailments!

As a Frenchman, there is something else which I do not understand. Having closely followed the relations between my countries of birth and adoption, I had been rejoicing at the new closeness between France and India, especially after Mr Vajpayee's visit to France last year and French Premier Raffarin's trip to Delhi in February. With ten rounds of "strategic dialogue" already held between Mr Brajesh Mishra and President Chirac's

Special Representative, we could have presumed that all was fine between the two nations, more so after France agreed to supply six Scorpene submarines to India. But it is not so.

The Union Cabinet has decided to grant dual citizenship to Indians living in eight countries including the United States and the United Kingdom, but France, despite being on a preliminary list, was later ostracised, while nations like Finland (which have hardly any contact with India) have been selected. The funniest, if not the saddest, thing is that if you enquire with officers of the concerned ministries, you are told: "I cannot understand how France has been removed. It is certainly not by our Ministry." So who did it?!

That is the main problem with foreign policy today. Nobody seems to know who is taking the decisions. Fresh energy needs to be breathed into India's foreign policy to make it steady, logical, understandable and supportable by all. And, certainly, better PR work is required!