



Principles or interests?

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The need to find a successor to JN Dixit, coming soon after the recent controversy about India's nuclearisation, will undoubtedly raise a fresh debate in the Capital's political and bureaucratic circles. The initial difficulty to name a new NSA is symptomatic of the Government's quandary. Generally, interest in Foreign Affairs has always been low in India; this being said, a recent statement by the Prime Minister in both Houses on foreign policy-related issues is worth noting. Mr Manmohan Singh explained his Government's approach: "Our objective is to focus on the centrality of national interests in the conduct of our external relations and the pursuit of our economic interests."

This departs from the traditional Indian diplomacy's stand which, since Independence, has had a tendency to see the larger interests of "humanity" and the "world" before advancing India's "local" interests. Too often, "principles" have primed on "interests". Is the Government's approach now changing? One can hope so. An example: Contradicting his own Foreign Affairs Minister, the Prime Minister stated: "India is a nuclear weapon state and is a responsible nuclear power. That sums up our view."

To prove this point, it is interesting to study the recognition of the communist regime in China by India, the US and France. In December 1949, less than three months after Mao had entered Beijing, India was the first nation (with Burma) to recognise the new Chinese Government. This was a "question of principles" for Nehru. The move was done in a hurry and 10 months later, sensing India's weakness, China invaded Tibet.

Important American archival documents revealing how US President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger acted have just been declassified. In "principle", the US had no love for communist China, but at the end of the 1960s the US needed to undermine the power of the Soviet Union. The Nixon-Kissinger duo thought that bringing China into the diplomatic picture could "soften" the Soviets and bring an earlier solution to the imbroglio in Vietnam. They decided to establish a secret contact with Mao. The first feeler was sent during Nixon's inaugural address in January 1969: "Let all nations know that during this administration our lines of communication will be open. We seek an open world in which no people, great or small, will live in angry isolation."

Mao got the message and returned the compliment by publishing Nixon's speech in the People's Daily. It was indeed a strong signal. The next step was taken in August 1969 when Nixon met the then Pakistan President. The US President asked Yahya Khan to "convey his feelings to the Chinese at the highest level... Asia cannot move forward if a nation as large as China remains isolated..." However, the move was to be kept absolutely secret and in no hurry.

Mao was also looking after China's "interests" and was ready to drop its "principles". Sino-Soviet border clashes had just broken out. Was Moscow planning to start a war against China? A special study group with the four marshals discussed the matter. After Lin Biao had violently attacked the US and Soviet imperialism, Mao bluntly said: "For US and Soviet policy, try to think outside the box." A few weeks later, marshals Chen Yi and Ye Jianying proposed that Mao play the "United States card". Mao had thus the green light to contact the Americans: The imperialists par excellence.

A few months later, Edgar Snow, Mao's American friend wrote: "The foreign ministry was studying the matter of admitting Americans from the left, middle, and right to visit China. Should rightists like Nixon, who represented the

monopoly capitalists, be permitted to come? He should be welcomed... Mao would be happy to talk with him, either as a tourist or as President."

Pragmatic policies and not principles prevailed, in Beijing as in Washington. The dice was thrown. The main problem was the US policy vis-a-vis Taiwan. What would the US stand be? Beijing had always insisted that the Americans should first agree to "one China" policy. Nixon knew that the US had somehow to let Taiwan down. The US President's reaction was "it better take place when they've got a friend here rather than when they've got an enemy here."

Kissinger added: "We have to be cold about it."

A few days after this telephonic conversation, Zhou Enlai sent a message to Nixon (through Yahya Khan) to confirm the Chinese Government's "willingness to receive publicly... a special envoy of the President of the US... President Yahya Khan can make the arrangements". The US still remain grateful to Pakistan for this timely help. Finally, after an incredible odyssey during which Kissinger disappeared from the world scene for few days (he was picked up by a Chinese plane from POK), the NSA spent two days in discussion with Zhou Enlai. A former Pakistani Foreign Secretary, Sultan Khan, recounted in his memoirs the Hindi movie-type subterfuge used to hide the true destination of the NSA.

If Kissinger's trip was to be a success, the US had to agree to the "one China" formula. At the crucial moment in his talks with Zhou, Kissinger refused to say that "Taiwan was a part of China", but cleverly said "as a student of history, one's prediction would have to be that the political evolution is likely to be in the direction which Premier Zhou Enlai indicated to me." The trick worked, the rest is history. Retrospectively, if both parties had stuck to their principles, the US and China would not have had diplomatic relations for many more years. Seven years earlier, the recognition of China by the French Government was also done keeping in view the French interests. In 1963, General de Gaulle, the French President, called Edgar Faure, a former Prime Minister who had

visited China in 1957 to seek his advise. Faure said he believed that the time had come to recognise China. He gave three Reasons: one, the Algerian war had ended; two, the Chinese were in a difficult position after their split with the Soviet Union; and, finally, France has already shown so many signs of independence vis-a-vis the US, that one more or less would not be a big deal. The General told Faure: "You will go to China; you will be my special Envoy." A month later, France was the first Western power to recognise China. Faure had astutely crossed the Taiwanese pitfall: "France will not take a stand on Formosa (Taiwan) but will implement the international law." Beijing knew that it meant the two nations cannot be recognised as sovereign over the same territory at the same time.

Forty years later, one can see that de Gaulle made the correct bet, although from archival documents it appears to have been done more to prove France's spirit of independence vis-a-vis the Johnson Administration than for great principles. India has too often forgotten this point: The foreign relations of a nation cannot be dictated by principles alone, national interests have to be taken into account. We could take hundreds of other examples to illustrate that a policy based on "principles" alone has ultimately always failed.

All this does not mean that India's policy should be unprincipled. We can hope that India's policy will always keep this distinction: To be based on high principles, but neglecting India's interests is certainly not healthy. When I recently visited France, I could see that the fact that India has become a nuclear power makes a difference, a big difference. The choice of a strong National Security Advisor is all the more important in these circumstances.