



Out-of-the-box diplomacy

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Today the term 'out-of-the-box diplomacy' is fashionable. China, the proponent of 'a peaceful rise' has masterfully demonstrated this new tactic. Japan was threatened for having printed 'revisionist' textbooks, Beijing insisted on apologies and even allowed demonstrations to be organised all over China to denounce its 'bad' neighbours. Obviously, one cannot expect the MEA to immediately jump so far 'out-of-the-box' and ask for apologies from Beijing for the 1962 war, it may take some more time. In any case South Block uses more sophisticated tactics with its bhais, friends and foes (today they are all 'strategic partners').

Take the month of April 2005, rarely has India seen so many dignitaries lining up to meet the Indian leadership. First, it was Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier who came to inaugurate a new Bhai-Bhai era, then the General came from Pakistan to watch cricket (and of course discuss his favourite topic), a week later the Indian Prime Minister tried to re-enact the great tamasha of Asia-Africa solidarity in Jakarta.

On the Prime Minister's return, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan and his wife spent three days in Delhi to inform the Government of India that even if promoted to the Security Council, Delhi had no chance to get veto power. And finally, Junichiro Koizumi, Prime Minister of Japan paid a two-day visit to India. This last visit witnessed much less fanfare and excitement, but the future might show the Japanese partnership more reliable than ones with India's two neighbours.

Being an ignoramus in the subtle field of diplomacy, I once asked a friend who had served in the prestigious service to explain to me how it worked. "It is very simple", he said. "You should know what is good for your country, then you should make your interlocutor accept your proposition without stating it. In fact your thoughts should come out of his mouth. In practice, it is not as simple as it seems; it requires rare subtlety and cleverness. But it is here that you can recognise a really seasoned diplomat."

A few years later while researching about the Panchsheel Agreement, I understood the technique. India's Ambassador to China KM Panikkar was himself a Grand Master. After China occupied Tibet in 1950, India woke up with a new neighbour. The question was how to reconfirm with the new masters in Beijing a boundary which had never been the object of a dispute.

It is here that Panikkar used the classic technique. As India had no border problem, he thought, "Let China (and Zhou Enlai) broach the topic first." Nehru was doubtful, but Panikkar was clear: "Let Zhou move his pawn first, we will then have the advantage." Indeed, the clever tactic was practiced from September 1951 to April 1954. But Zhou never spoke.

The smart Indian conclusion was: "China agrees with us on the border delineation, and if China tacitly accepts the common border, it is fair to offer them some compensation." India therefore decided to compromise with Beijing on several issues (particularly on the status of Tibet). Unfortunately, at the time of signing the Panchsheel, Zhou declared enigmatically, "All problems ripe for settlement have been solved." The well-thought technique had not worked! Now the Indian Foreign Secretary has experimented with a new tactic which could be likened to Couéism or autosuggestion. The mere repetition of a slogan produces enough strength to make it materialise.

It was used on Premier Wen Jiabao who had said: "China understands and supports India's aspirations to play an active role in the UN and international affairs. The two sides reaffirmed their readiness to conduct close consultations

and cooperation in the process of UN reforms." The Foreign Secretary started saying, "Beijing supports us for a seat." Though Wen had never said it, South Block continued its japa for several days: "Beijing supports us for a seat." When Wen left, he agreed that his visit had produced 'rich results' and only reiterated that "his country supported India's aspirations to play a 'bigger role' in the world body". The Indian mandarins will have to practice their japa for some more time since Beijing prefers a consensus approach, which will make it impossible for India to succeed.

The above 'diplomatic' practices do not explain why on August 1, 1955, Nehru declared that India was not anxious to enter the Security Council "at this stage, even though as a great country India ought to be there".

The then Indian Prime Minister added: "Informally, suggestions have been made by the US that China should be taken into the UN but not in the Security Council and that India should take her place in the Council. We cannot, of course, accept this as it means falling out with China and it would be very unfair for a great country like China not to be in the Council."

Mr Wen could have said: "Thank you for your past support."

Another hallmark of Indian diplomacy has been that it always stands by its principles. Rightly one of them is democracy. Since 1950, India is a Republic and except for a short time, she has remained faithful to the democratic system of governance. It is therefore logical that in all fora, this great principle which has vigorously been practiced in India since the time of the Buddha, is defended and encouraged. It explains why the MEA spokesman often spends his briefing time lecturing about democracy and its absence in Nepal. The only strange aspect is that the same rule does not seem to apply to the eastern neighbour. We do not see the MEA bothering about the fate Ms Benazir Bhutto or Mr Nawaz Sharif, two elected prime ministers who had dared to oppose the military regime.

Anyway, a sign of the success of South Block's policies is that Beijing has decided to emulate its policies. Witnessing the positive effects of the bus on the Indo-Pakistan relations, they have started selling tickets "for the new regular bus service between Kathmandu and Lhasa". The bus has gone into operation on April 29, and according to a Chinese spokesman, the journey of over 955 kilometers will take two days only and cost just US \$70. The 35-seat South Korean Hyundai luxury bus will have "an airplane standard of service... Each bus will be staffed by two drivers and one conductor, all of whom will be able to speak Mandarin, Tibetan, Nepalese and English."

The bus to Lhasa and the recent visit of the Chinese Foreign Minister to Kathmandu probably forced the MEA to use yet another technique: The 'U-turn'. It had already been practiced in June 2004, when there was a question of sending troops to Iraq.

It was again applied in Jakarta when it was announced: "India has decided to reverse its decision to suspend the supply of lethal weapons to the Royal Nepal Army."

But thank God, there are small mercies! Mr Manmohan Singh in his wisdom has decided that "boundaries cannot be altered". It is not clear if this statement is valid for the boundary with Pakistan only, or the frontiers with China are also included. In any case, if a constitutional amendment is necessary for an alteration of India's borders, the Government would have to use all its diplomatic skills to convince the Opposition of the appropriateness of the scheme; and politicians are not subtle diplomats.

As I finished writing this article, the news flashed that the Emergency had been lifted in Nepal. Can one now hope that the successful application of the technique 'democracy-first' will be applied to some other members of the SAARC and even later to China?