

NEWS

Renew the French connection

Claude Arpi on the need for India to look beyond the US for allies, for example France

Last week saw the first significant Cabinet reshuffle since the UPA formed the Union Government. Many commentators thought that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh would replace External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh by seasoned statesman and diplomat Karan Singh. This was not to be, although the latter had already been anointed head of the foreign affairs cell of the Congress party in place of the minister caught in the Oil-for-Food scam.

Mr Singh, in a Nehruvian vein, declared: "Ultimately, the Prime Minister has to get involved in foreign policy. So it's no extra work for me." He added that the foreign portfolio was not a burden. He nevertheless hinted that after the Budget session, a full-time minister might be appointed, though he would officiate in South Block "at least until the visit of US President George Bush to India in March".

This is not being fair to the job. It is true that his illustrious predecessor, the first Prime Minister of India, kept the External Affairs portfolio for 17 years (till his death). However, Nehru neglected the functioning of the Ministry so much that India is still paying for it. The 1962 China war in particular was the direct consequence of Nehru's macro-management. A ministry such as Foreign Affairs also needs minute management to be able to satisfactorily tackle the nitty-gritty of Indian foreign relations. There is no short cut!

The recent relations with France have suffered a great deal because of the absence of a full-time Foreign Minister. President Jacques Chirac will be visiting Delhi at the end of the month, barely 10 days before the arrival of the US President, and the outcome of the visit seems uncertain. The French presidential visit could have marked an important milestone if Delhi had been serious about building a multi-polar world. However, there is nobody today who can sort out small details while keeping in mind the larger vision of India's interest.

The job of a Foreign Minister is not merely to go to airports to receive foreign dignitaries or give a banquet in honour of the visiting head of state. To make a visit a success, it has to be prepared in a detailed manner. The banquet comes only at the end. It is a matter of regret that for months South Block has had no minister to provide proper direction to the bureaucrats. Further, more energy is obviously being invested in US President's visit, even though Ambassador David C Mulford misbehaved by declaring that the Indo-US nuclear deal would "die" unless Delhi voted against Iran at the forthcoming IAEA meeting.

In the case of the French President, it is unfortunate that after the very successful touchdown by Mr Manmohan Singh in Paris in September last, Franco-Indian ties seem to have been relegated to the backburner. At that time, President Chirac was not physically fit to receive the Indian Prime Minister, but against his doctor's advice he made the effort to meet him. The encounter ended up with a joint statement opening new vistas for the two nations.

Paris's determination to help Delhi was reflected in the joint statement: "France acknowledges the need for full international civilian nuclear cooperation with India and will work towards this objective... In this context, both countries will work towards conclusion of a bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement". Mr Manmohan Singh was undoubtedly aware that France was the only Western nation that refused to condemn the nuclear test in Pokhran in 1998.

It is true that the Clemenceau affair has cast a shadow on the presidential visit. In India, the press went 'overboard' in making the aircraft carrier seem like the worst environmental catastrophe ever. Commentators are silent on the fact that lakhs of workers in India are regularly exposed to asbestos dust. It is surprising that the Marxists, who have been the most vociferous in this affair, have not come to the rescue of the toilers. It was reported that Ms Brinda Karat called on the Prime Minister to brief him on the nefarious actions of the French imperialists, but nothing was said on the toxic material extensively used in India. The Marxists (vociferously against a factory of Ayurveda) are obviously not ready to tackle the real problem. In India, asbestos is not listed as a toxic product though mesothelioma (the carcinogenic tumour of the epithelium lining the lung associated with exposure to asbestos dust) is well documented the world over.



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The main reason for the absence of asbestos ban in India is the presence of powerful industrial lobbies. It was reported that a new factory which will produce 10,000 tonnes of asbestos roofing sheets has just been commissioned in Ms Sonia Gandhi's constituency, Rae Bareilly. This factory belongs to a Hyderabad group also closely linked with the party.

With the Government choosing "rozgar badhao" as the slogan for 2006, it is a question whether it should ban, virtually, employment opportunities. Meanwhile, the media continues to scream at the French Government which has given an undertaking to train engineers and workers in Alang and provide the adequate equipment to remove the asbestos from the ship and even repatriate the toxic material. It is unfortunate that the French Ambassador had to struggle with the Clemenceau issue for the past couple of months instead spending his time more productively to prepare for Mr Chirac's visit. The absence of a Foreign Minister and the lack of political will has not helped.

Another issue, even more trivial, annihilated the positive results of Mr Manmohan Singh's September visit to Paris. A visa row between the two nations started after the Indian Embassy in Paris refused the visas of some French journalists. I have first-hand knowledge of how French journalists have been treated by some officials responsible for the press in the Embassy. It is awful.

Regrettably, the French retaliated and did not grant diplomatic visas to Indian officials accompanying Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee during an official visit in October. The dispute escalated further when on October 19, Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran asked all secretaries in Government departments to not even plan for transit stops in France. Indian officials were asked not to attend social functions hosted by the French Embassy.

The matter was eventually solved a few days later. India and France patched up with Paris expressing regret over the inconvenience caused to senior Indian officials accompanying Mr Somnath Chatterjee and the embassy promised to expedite the clearance of official and diplomatic visas. India withdrew its advisory note to the ministries. The fact remains that journalists are still very badly treated in Paris. Some embassy officials seem to be under the impression that each and every television crew or journalist is a DGSE (French intelligence) agent. It is tragic that this petty attitude constantly obscures relations which should reach new zeniths.

After all, with French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Maurice Gourdault-Montagne, the Diplomatic Counsellor of President Chirac on the centre stage of French policy, India has two friends, both having been spent many years in Delhi. A 15th round of the Indo-French strategic dialogue was held in New Delhi on January 27 between Indian National Security Advisor and Mr Gourdault-Montagne. Hopefully, many misunderstandings would have been cleared.

Delhi should not forget that Paris has never tried to dictate what India should do or think. It has consistently argued that India, as a responsible nuclear power, must be treated as a special case and for this the restrictions against atomic commerce with Delhi need to be changed. Hopefully, India will be wise enough not to put all its eggs in US basket.

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