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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Indian Grand Strategy: Nonalignment Redux?**

By Rajesh Basrur

### **Synopsis**

*Widely viewed as a major power in the making, India has yet to articulate a grand strategy. A recent policy paper entitled Nonalignment 2.0 makes a good start, but its ambiguities, contradictions and gaps need to be addressed.*

### **Commentary**

THOUGH India is widely regarded as a “rising power,” the government has not publicly set out its grand strategy or the direction it is taking. There is still much debate on critical issues such as the viability of its liberal economic model and its relationship with the United States.

Now a group of intellectuals, including former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and information technology leader Nandan Nilekani, has sought to fill the gap through a January 2012 policy paper entitled Nonalignment 2.0. The paper’s central thrust is its call for a “re-working” of the “fundamental principle” of nonalignment. This is broadly defined as strategic autonomy, hitched to both the exercise of power and India’s commitment to universal values. In effect, it subtly criticises the notion that Indian foreign policy reflects a radical shift from the ideological moorings of the past to a new pragmatism embedded in the hard-headed pursuit of interests.

### **Ideology vs Pragmatism?**

The paper ranges over a broad spectrum of issues from military preparedness to energy to the nature of Indian democracy. Much of its advocacy is really strategy already at work. The advice to cooperate as well as compete with China and Pakistan is a reflection rather than a correction of policy. The same may be said of the preference for “strategic partnerships” over alliances; “deep and wide engagement” with multiple powers; increasing economic engagement with India’s subcontinental neighbours; commitment to an “open” (read liberal) economic order; building power in the maritime domain; focusing on energy security; and developing a knowledge “ecosystem”.

While none of these may be new, their enunciation in an integrated framework is valuable in building a comprehensive understanding among policy makers, directly interested participants, and the general public. Besides, there are some significant departures. These include the advice to pressurise China to reconcile with Tibetan nationalism; indirect criticism of the Army’s “Cold Start” doctrine, which envisages the occupation of Pakistani territory for bargaining purposes; a call to “dominate” the Indian Ocean; and the proposal to “manage”

rather than prevent migration from neighbouring countries.

The ideology/pragmatism divide is exaggerated on both sides. Indian strategy was always interest-driven. As a relatively weak state emerging from colonial domination, India was naturally pre-disposed to seek economic and political autonomy by crafting a strategy of autarky and nonalignment. In South Asia, where its position was relatively strong, it sought precisely the opposite: to encourage closer economic relations and to disregard the autonomy claims of its neighbours through periodic interventions in their affairs.

What has changed is not only the relative growth in its power since the 1990s, but the definition of India's interests. Globally, as a newly emergent power, it is now comfortable with economic integration as well as with building closer relationships with major powers, especially the United States. In South Asia, its new confidence has enabled it to drop its old penchant for intervention, though it does seek to counter the growth of China's influence in the region. The essence of the shift, then, is from the anxiety of the first decades after independence to a new self-assurance that rests on accelerated economic growth and the successful working of its democracy.

### **Ambiguity and contradictions**

However the broad strategic design of Nonalignment 2.0 carries considerable ambiguity. The advice to adhere to principle may be laudable, but is problematic in practice. India's 1971 war over Bangladesh was not a conflict between universal human rights and Indian interests. It is hard to discover examples where India has sought to act (rather than speak) in the pursuit of rights at the cost of its interests.

While the authors favour the invigoration of economic diplomacy and hint Indian economic interests might necessitate foreign intervention, they say nothing about the hard choices involved. Again, what is meant by a "strategic partnership" when India has proclaimed dozens of them, including one with its principal strategic rival, China? Nor is it clear what the authors expect when they ask that India pursue a strategy to "dominate" the Indian Ocean.

Three major contradictions are evident. Firstly, the paper says China should not be needlessly alienated, yet advocates that India "pressurise" China to reconcile with Tibet. If the pressure is to be meaningful, the result will be exactly what the authors worry about – the sharp exacerbation of relations with China (with possible repercussions on the border dispute as well as Kashmir). Secondly, the strategy of capturing even limited territory from Pakistan is rejected and, instead, "conducting effective stand-off punitive operations" is preferred. Whether this will risk escalation by means of a like response from Pakistan is not considered even as the authors admit that "concerns about escalation cannot be wished away."

Nor is it clear that "shallow thrusts" (how are they different from capturing limited territory?) will be less likely to invite retaliation and escalation. And fourthly, the paper leans on outmoded American notions of "survivability" and "assured second-strike capability" as the first principles of nuclear doctrine, whereas the historical evidence is clear that these concepts have invariably been jettisoned in nuclear crises.

### **Valuable start to debate**

While a report of this nature can hardly be all-inclusive, some issues critical to an effective strategy ought to receive attention. States are increasingly insisting on a role in national security policy, be it on river water sharing, nuclear plant construction, or the creation of a national counter-terrorism agency. Institutional as well as informal processes need to be in place to meet this need.

Corruption should be treated as central to security, for it has innumerable negative effects such as distorting arms purchases, eroding military morale and efficiency, making borders porous, and diffusing weapons among criminals, insurgents and terrorists. Finally, the civil-military balance needs to be reconfigured. For civilian control to be effective, policy makers need to understand military strategy and tactics to prevent the kind of counter-productive militarised responses that occurred in Punjab (Operation Bluestar, 1984) and the India-Pakistan border (Operation Parakram, 2001-02).

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the paper makes a valuable start: it sets the ground for an extensive public debate on an Indian grand strategy that can best be described as a work in progress.

*Rajesh Basrur is a Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the South Asia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.*