

The difficult triangle

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The Chinese way is to do something rather mild at first; then to wait a bit, and if it passes without objection, to say or do something stronger. But if we take objection to the first statement or action, they urge that it has been a misunderstanding, and cease, for a time at any rate, from troubling us further."

This innocuous remark, made in 1920 by the 13th Dalai Lama to Sir Charles Bell, the British Envoy to Tibet, came to my mind on January 18 when the US Government disclosed that the Chinese military had conducted an anti-satellite missile test. A Chinese weather satellite, launched in 1999, was destroyed on January 11 by a medium-range ballistic missile at an altitude of 537 miles above the earth.

The test obviously worried the US military circles which strongly deplored it. On its part, Russia made its position known during the press conference jointly held by Mr Manmohan Singh and Mr Valdimir Putin. The Russian President reiterated that his country was against the weaponisation of outer space. He said that Russia wanted a space totally free of weapons, though he added that China was not the first country to conduct such a test.

Mr Putin was undoubtedly pointing his finger at the US Kinetic Kill Vehicle (KKV) which, in 1985, destroyed a satellite (trackable debris took 17 years to completely deorbit). Mr Putin added: "Military circles in the United States were talking about weaponisation of outer space." He was, however, categorical: The "genie" should not be let out of the bottle, meaning outer space. Mr Manmohan Singh just concurred with his Russian counterpart.

Here one sees the mastery of Chinese policy strategists. On one side they say something 'rather mild' and on the other they set off the strongest action. In June 2006, Mr Cheng Jingye, China's Ambassador for Disarmament Affairs, had made a statement on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) during the UN Conference on Disarmament: "The deployment of weapons in outer space would bring unimaginable consequences. The outer space assets of all countries would be endangered, mankind's peaceful use of outer space threatened, and international peace and security undermined. It is in the interest of all countries to protect the humanity from the threat of outer space weapons."

Eight months later, they initiate an action in complete contradiction to their earlier statement.

Last year, when a US satellite was "painted" by a Chinese ground-based laser a few months back, Washington did not put a loud protest; as a result, a next experiment was conducted. This time the US reacted swiftly: The new test undoubtedly triggers important questions about China's commitment to arms control and the use of space for military purpose.

Following the worldwide noise created by the destruction of the weather satellite, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao clarified the 'misunderstanding' and further stated that he had not "heard of plans for a second test". This old Chinese way of moving pawns should worry South Block, especially when a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of India, Russia and China is scheduled to take place on February 14.

Mr Manmohan Singh is believes in the tripartite alliance: "We are all neighbours and all three countries want to play a major role in the global economy. As Russia, China and India move ahead of their respective growth curves, a great challenge today is to find means to draw on the vast geo-economic potential that remains unexploited in our common neighbourhood. So we welcome this tripartite cooperation."

He added that divisive policies and actions driven by the 'outmoded' mindset of 'balance of power' should be avoided and "instead strive for a more meaningful and inclusive cooperative framework in the region across a range of issues from security to trade and investment, disaster relief, coordination of development aid, disease and so on".

Though the move might antagonise the US, analysts believed that this time the trilateral talks might be more substantive than previous meetings. An earlier trilateral summit that took place at St Petersburg in July 2006, on the sidelines of the G-8 summit, had concluded by emphasising a 'common approach' in global development. But the main question remains: Is China a dependable ally either for India or Russia? Let us look at Russia.

While the world's attention was focused on the US reaction to the Chinese test, Russia expressed its concern. Though President Putin may not have said it in so many words, Russia today considers China as a potential menace.

Most of Russia's military, intelligence and communication satellites put into orbit toward the end of the Soviet Union are stationed in low earth orbit, within the reach of China's new capability. Russia relies on these "eyes and ears" in the sky for communications and intelligence. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia inherited a huge arsenal of state-of-the-art weaponry on par with the US. China was then an infant in this domain depending on Moscow for most of its supplies. Since then, the overall state of the Russian military has not progressed much while Beijing has massively invested in defence capability.

Kremlin feels not only apprehensive of China's growing economic miracle, but also its military expansion. On its part, India does not seem too bothered by Beijing's technological progress. National Security Adviser MK Narayanan recently observed: "I think President Hu Jintao's visit was in some ways an extraordinary event. There was stability, maturity, assurance. Somebody who is normally taciturn is saying India and China are partners in progress."

The real problem mostly ignored in Indian security circles is that Beijing is going ahead full swing with its doctrine of asymmetric warfare, through which even a David can neutralise a Goliath (for example by destroying its transmission and intelligence capabilities). This new doctrine blends a 'soft' cultural and friendly diplomacy with swift acquisition of 'hard power'. For decades, Beijing was obsessed with the concept of Comprehensive National Power, (a quantitative indicator based upon military, economic and social factors). However, since a few years, Beijing has become conscious of the importance of soft power which mixes an increasingly hard component. This could soon make China the main competitor of the US.

This is definitely a factor that New Delhi should keep in mind while attempting to develop a new strategic triangle with Beijing and Moscow. President Hu might publicly declare that India and China are partners in progress, but this is only one side of China's asymmetric policy. The train to Lhasa or the KKV are the other side.

Cooperation is good and necessary, but 'balance of power' is unfortunately not an 'outmoded' concept.