



Dust is settling down in Burma. The Generals and Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, have agreed to talk. A media report has noted that the two fiercely opposed sides are taking cautious, conciliatory steps to end the two-decade long deadlock. Suu Kyi's party is ready to make some adjustments while the junta is prepared to nominate a mild general to hold talks with the pro-democracy leader.

The Army Generals' mentors in Beijing probably need some breathing space at a time when international pressure is mounting on Rangoon. The Security Council deplored the crushing of prodemocracy demonstrations and the Olympics are in sight.

Burma is one issue where the Government of India has not done a somersault, its stand remains steady and vague. Several years back, out of curiosity I bought an Indian book called Indian Foreign Policy. The low priced book was meant to teach international relations to Indian students through sets of questions and answers. The first question was: 'What is the meaning of national interest?' To my surprise, the answer was that it was something extremely vague. I don't remember the exact words now, but the term 'vague' keeps recurring; basically, it was something that one cannot define.

Elsewhere in the world, the first thing that a student of international relations is supposed to learn is the definition of 'national interest'. Of course, the concept can slightly vary from one country to another, from one epoch to another, but it is a rather clear concept with more or less the same parameters.

While the world (except Communist China) took a strong view against the suppression in Burma and the arrests of peaceful monks and nuns, New Delhi remained vague. Even the new Chief of Army Staff said, 'The Indian armed forces have good relations with the armed forces of that country; we are for maintaining these close relationships.' Does it mean that the Indian Army is siding with the Burmese generals?

It would be wrong to presume that the Government of India has no clear goals in Burma. Seasoned diplomats will explain to you that 'vagueness' is part of a well-oiled diplomatic methodology whose objective is to achieve essential interests! This is nothing new. In November 1949, rumours of the People's Liberation Army threatening to invade Tibet had spread across Asia.

During a Press conference, then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was asked about his Government's position on Tibet. The Tibetan Cabinet had just sent a letter asking New Delhi for help to safeguard the integrity of their country. The Prime Minister replied, 'As regards China's position in Tibet, a vague kind of suzerainty was recognised. All these things were never clearly defined as to what the position was; matters remained vague and they have remained vague in that way. We have a representative in Lhasa. We trade with them directly but in a vague sense we have accepted the fact of China's suzerainty. How far it goes, one does not know.'

The word 'vague' was used five times in as many sentences! But once again do not believe that it was because New Delhi was unable to answer the Tibetan SOS. A few days later, in a discussion with an American Embassy official, MEA's Secretary General GS Bajpai explained that Nehru's remarks 'were purposely vague': it was the best way for the Government to maintain the status quo.

'Vagueness' continued to prevail for the sake of 'national interest'. Somehow, New Delhi has always had a peculiar way to look at these famous 'interests'.

Without delving into the Kashmir issue or the hasty recognition of China during the first decade after independence, 'principles' have been the main motor of Indian foreign policy, priming above everything else. The so-called non-alignment, which practically meant alignment with Moscow, was the offshoot of these great 'principles'. It led India nowhere.

Everything changed with the economic liberalisation heralded by PV Narasimha Rao and his Finance Minister (today's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh). To the pride of all, India has become a power to reckon with and slowly 'national interest' has shifted from principles to economics. Today, whether South Block looks at Africa, South America or Central Asia, it is with 'energy' in mind, the economy needs 'energy'.

Though the External Affairs Minister cursorily still mentions the NAM or the Panchsheel in his speeches, the effective objective of foreign policy is to diversify its supply in oil, gas or other raw materials to allow the growth to continue at the rate of 9 per cent or 10 per cent.

There is nothing wrong with this, though it is difficult to comprehend why ?principles? have been totally forgotten in the process. India seems to have forgotten the principles which made her poles apart from China. In Burma?s case, its ?national interest? seems determined solely by Burma?s ample reserves of gas.

Today it appears that Delhi is only trying to follow in China?s footsteps.

Why should New Delhi always react like Beijing? India is a true democracy while China is one of the most totalitarian regimes in the world. To give an example, in anticipation of the Olympics, the Wen Jiabao Government has earmarked \$ 1.3 billion to strengthen that country?s already formidable internet police. Scores of outspoken websites and blogs in China have already been shut down.

Whether in Burma or on the other side of the Himalayas, the Chinese have clear ideas about their interests; nothing is vague.

Take the case of Arunachal Pradesh. Recently the Army and Air Force denied any incursion by China in the North-Eastern State.

Senior officials brushed aside the ?border problems? as minor hiccups.

The Eastern Command?s Air Commander-in-Chief, Air Marshal PK Barborra explained that people in the border areas do move into the neighbouring nation?s territory at times. He said it was a common phenomenon on the borders. For him, border firing between troops was a ?regular phenomenon? taking place at almost all international borders and there was no ?war threat? along the border with China.

To avoid border skirmishes, India and China agreed to a few kilometres of no-man?s land on each side of the LoAC.

While this is faithfully respected by India, the Chinese often push local grazers to their side of the no-man?s land and even to the Indian side. During the periodic Border Personnel Meetings, the Chinese pretend that the grazers are not aware of the agreement. If India does not protest, the grazing ground would soon be Chinese territory.

Another fact demonstrates the way the Chinese function: When you make an ISD call from Tawang, the person who receives the call at the other end can see Lhasa?s code, and not India?s (91), followed by the STD code of the Tawang district as the caller ID. Is the Government even aware of this blatant violation of India?s sovereignty? Beijing clearly knows where its interests lie.

To come back to Burma, does South Block realise that the people of Burma have a memory. Some day they will regain their freedom. No totalitarian regime, whether it is Hitler?s, Stalin?s or Pol Pot?s, has lasted forever.

When the Burmese tyrants fall, the people will remember which side India was.

I wish a balance could be struck between lofty principles dear to India?s tradition and earthly economic interests. In the meantime, Aung San Suu Kyi and her countrymen need India?s firm commitment on the ground of human values.



Suu Kyi has been leading a resilient struggle against the junta without much international support