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**A vague policy**

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Buddhist monks march during a protest against the military government in Yangon, Myanmar — AP Photo

## *Has India Forgotten her Traditional Principles in the Process of Economic Upgradation?*

ANYWHERE 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 vary from one country to another, from one epoch to another, but it is nevertheless a rather clear notion, with more or less same the parameters everywhere. A couple of years ago, I purchased a textbook on "Indian Foreign Policy" out of curiosity. The 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' kept recurring; basically it was something that one cannot define.

I was quite flabbergasted, though I realised later that it was due to the confusion introduced soon after Independence by policy makers who were split between great principles (many more than the five famous ones) and India's more down to earth interests. To give a notorious example: when India was offered a permanent seat in the Security Council, Nehru declined it.

On June 29, 1955, the Soviet leader Bulganin had informed him: "...We propose suggesting at a later stage India's inclusion as the sixth member of the Security Council."

A month later, after a visit to the Soviet Union, Nehru made his stand clear: "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." He admitted that "at this stage, even though as a great country she (India) ought to be there...the first step to be taken is for China to take her rightful place and then the question might be considered separately." It was a peculiar way to look at 'national interests'! Unfortunately, 52 years later India is still desperately running after the seat which was then offered on a platter by the two superpowers of the time.

Nehru's principle that India should not be in the Security Council if Communist China was not, resulted in Beijing getting it, while Delhi is still in waiting room.

Another example where 'principles' primed on other interests is the decision to refer the Kashmir issue to the UN in January 1948.

Here again, India still suffers for that decision today. During the first decades after Independence, 'principles' were the main engine of the Indian foreign policy, priming above everything else. The so-called non-alignment, which in practical terms meant an alignment with Moscow, was the off shoot of these great principles. It led nowhere.

One of the reasons was that while India spoke at length at every forum about her principles, she did not stand by them. Take the case of Tibet! When this small nation was invaded by a bully neighbour, Delhi chose to remain silent. Everything has changed with the economic liberalisation heralded by Narasimha Rao and his Finance Minister. To the pride of all, India has become a power to reckon with and slowly 'national interest' has shifted from principles to economics.

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

There is nothing wrong with this, though it is difficult to comprehend why 'principles' have been totally forgotten in the process! It appears that Delhi only tries to walk in China's footsteps. Is Beijing really such a great example?

The question of the national interest has come again recently with the repression in Burma against non-violent monks and nuns demonstrating against rising price. The increase in the price of petroleum products announced on August 15 by the generals drastically aggravated the precarious life of the ordinary folks in this 53 million predominantly Buddhist nation. One can understand the

common man's anger when the fuel rates were, in one go, multiplied by five.

Symptomatically, Beijing and Delhi said more or less the same thing. Delhi stated: "As a close and friendly neighbour, India hopes to see a peaceful, stable and prosperous Myanmar, where all sections of people will be included in a broadbased process of national reconciliation and political reform."

A Chinese minister told the junta leader Gen. Than Shwe: "China, as a friendly neighbor of Myanmar, sincerely hoped Myanmar would restore internal stability as soon as possible, properly handle issues and actively promote national reconciliation." In both cases, it is clear that no follow-up action will be taken.

It is not healthy for Delhi to always react at the same level as Beijing. India is a true democracy while China is one of the most totalitarian regimes in the world.

To give an example, it has been reported that in anticipation of the Olympic Games, the Wen Jiabao government has earmarked 1.3 billion \$ to boost the nation's existing formidable internet police squads.

Scores of China's outspoken websites and blogs have already been closed down.

India is different, but she seems to have forgotten the principles which made her pole apart from China. In the present case, her 'national interests' seem only determined by Burma's ample reserves of gas. But till now the Chinese have been faster and more determined.

The generals have recently allowed the Chinese to construct a gas pipeline from Arakan in Burma to China's Yunnan Province which is crucial to Beijing's development plan. The Indian Express recently reported that when some concessions were lost to China: "it prompted MEA to allege that the loss could have been avoided had the Petroleum

Ministry not been lethargic and given Myanmar the impression that India did not have 'serious interest' in its energy sector."

Can you believe that seven on September 17, the Indian Ambassador to Burma strongly recommended a visit of the Indian petroleum minister to the embattled nation? For him, India's interest lay in strengthening cooperation in all sectors, particularly energy.

What South Block does not realise is that the people of Burma have a memory. One day or another, they will regain their freedom.

No totalitarian regime, whether it is Hitler's, Stalin's or Pol Pot's has lasted forever. The day that Burmese tyrants will fall, the people will remember which side India was. Has the Indian Ambassador thought about it?

I wish that a balance could be found between lofty principles dear to India's tradition and earthly economic interests. It is the only way to build a truly Indian foreign policy. In the meantime, Aung San Suu Kyi and her countrymen need India's help.