

Looking Into Our Tea Cups to Read the Pin Stripes

The Needle's Eye



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The leaders of the world's two biggest economies have come to New Delhi to pay court. That is great strategic balance. Now for the balance sheets

Long, long ago, before they invented news in 140 characters and we could remember our lives only through social media timelines, some of us believed it was possible to have our leaders display lofty politics and selfless diplomacy.

That is not true, of course. Politics and diplomacy both involve winning people over; in the end, both are self-serving, self-aggrandising and cynical. If the goal of successful diplomacy is to ring-fence your country's interests and keep your foes off balance, then Prime Minister Narendra Modi has achieved it. China and Pakistan are both nettled by Modi's clear strategic tilt towards Washington. The day after Modi and President Barack Obama rattled their sabres over peace in the South China Sea, where China has made its territorial ambitions clear, the Chinese Foreign Ministry implied that neither India nor the United States had locus standi in its backyard, huffing: "We hope that countries out of the region can respect efforts made by countries in the region to uphold peace and stability of the South China Sea and keep the serenity of the South China Sea." Pakistan complained that growing nuclear collaboration between India

and the US would upset the "already fragile strategic stability environment" on the subcontinent, and China told the visiting Pakistani army chief that Islamabad was a trustworthy "all-weather friend".

All this is to the good for India, but it is not going to deter the nastiness on our borders. Chinese soldiers were on Indian soil while Modi was romancing Xi in Ahmedabad, and Pakistani trained militants were battling Indian soldiers in Kashmir while Obama was speaking in New Delhi. I turned to the memoirs of George F. Kennan, one of the Cold War's coolest strategists, the architect of the policy of Soviet contain-

ment and indirectly of the companion Truman Doctrine after World War Two. Kennan writes that in July 1950 India had in fact championed Communist China's membership of the United Nations, as a means to halt the bloody fighting on the Korean peninsula.

Elsewhere in his memoirs Kennan quotes from his diary: "Only the very strong can take high and mighty moral positions and ignore the possibilities of balance among the opposing forces. The weak must accept realities and exploit those realities to their advantage as best they can."

How true this is of Obama's dealings with Modi. Notice I said

Obama's and not America's. The United States is certainly not preoccupied with India, and Obama, who faces a recalcitrant Congress and badly needs one or two foreign-policy attention grabbers in his waning days of power, certainly did not depart with earth-shaking deals in his bag. The so-called nuclear liability breakthrough, despite an apparent Indian offer of setting up a \$244 million insurance pool, may still not see companies like GE and Westinghouse rushing in to build reactors. Nine years ago I met a huge delegation of American businessmen salivating over the \$75 billion of sales to India they saw from the deal that George W. Bush and Manmohan Singh had struck. That number is still a chimera.

But to go back to Kennan's point about dealing from strength: India cannot expect big things either unless it does something dramatic, and soon, to boost its economic strength, from which should also flow military strength. With Obama's visit we have just about run out of atmospherics. Within eight months of taking power Modi has held two summits with Obama and met China's President Xi Jinping twice. The leaders of the world's two biggest

economies have come to New Delhi to pay court. That is great strategic balance. Now for the balance sheets.

Reality bit on the final day of his visit, after innumerable and sometimes cloying displays of fraternity with Modi, when Obama used a townhall meeting with a largely young audience to lecture his hosts on human and women's rights, the freedom for India's poor to dream big and to achieve their dreams, and our Constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion and expression. After that eloquent speech, Obama flew to Saudi Arabia to meet new King Salman, commenting along the way in a TV interview that America had to be realistic and could not really press the Saudis too hard on human rights because he had to balance those imperatives with terrorism and regional stability. Or, as Kennan would have put it, because he had to defer to the Saudis' oil and strategic power.

With the pageantry of Republic Day and high-sounding diplomacy out of the way, Modi will have to plunge into the Delhi election campaign, where the BJP faces a stiff fight with Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party. There is just a week left for rival parties to convince vot-

ers jaded by nearly a year of President's Rule. With the Congress party behaving like an also-ran, don't expect too many surprises. But the prize is not pivotal. The capital runs itself; what BJP president Amit Shah and his troops will focus on is Bihar, where elections are due by this November and the stakes are far higher. No better time than now for some serious economics.

A postscript: Modi the protocol-breaker threw all of us off-guard when he referred familiarly to his guest as 'Barack' a couple of times during their joint appearances. But the familiarity became quite grating when he addressed Obama by his first name no fewer than 23 times in their half-hour radio 'Mann ki Baat' talk on Tuesday night. The visitor was careful always to refer to his host as Prime Minister Modi. If Modi was paying the Americans back in a subliminal way for having shunned him in his visa-less days, so be it. I only wish his handlers had briefed him better on protocol with the world's most powerful politician. But as Modi demonstrated with his bespoke suit, he wears a different kind of stripe.

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