

Can India revive nonalignment?

ASHLEY J. TELLIS

INDIA'S foreign-policy establishment is in the process of disinterring a long-dead grand strategy from its Cold War grave. "Nonalignment" the doctrine that calls upon India to refuse staunchly any strategic alliances with other actors has re-entered the broader foreign policy discourse, with the center-left championing such policies in the guise of promoting "strategic autonomy." The credo was touted in an independent report titled Nonalignment 2.0, which offers the vision of "allying with none" as a grand strategy for India in the coming years.

At first glance, nonalignment presents an attractive option for a rising India. It promises freedom from entangling alliances as well as the chance to advance Indian exceptionalism against the Machiavellian imperatives of traditional international politics. Most importantly, it holds out the prospect that India can chart its own path free from machinations of external actors, an understandable objective for a country scarred by its colonial past.

But in light of India's growing strategic vulnerabilities, a return to nonalignment is misguided and potentially dangerous. The doctrine has three major weaknesses that would leave India perilously vulnerable:

First, nonalignment struggles to reconcile competing strands of realism and idealism. On the one hand, Indian policymakers acknowledge the nation inhabits a Hobbesian world characterized by troublesome neighbors and endemic geopolitical competition. Despite avowed recognition of the dangerous environment, the doctrine counsels India to rise above conventional international politics, to avoid behaving like other great powers as it becomes one and instead blaze new paths for the conduct of powerful nations.

Advocacy of moralpolitik in an amoral world is grounded in nonalignment's fervent but suspect belief in the power of example. According to its proponents, India's developmental and democratic successes within would help inspire a following abroad, thus bequeathing an exemplary power allowing India to gain in global stature and influence. This coruscating idealism, however, is at odds with the reality that great-power competition will be alive and well in the future global system. If power politics is in no danger of extinction, then the critical task facing India is maximization of national power through smart choices at home and abroad. Expansion of India's material power in the realms of economic growth, technological advancement, and institutional capacity could make all the difference with the benefits of example accruing thereafter for free.

It's clear that consolidating material success cannot be subordinated to the chimerical pursuit of an ideal international order, in which India's exceptionalism has room to flourish, so long as the tyranny of great-power competition remains untamed. In this respect, India's new advocates of nonalignment are akin to an older generation of idealists in the United States. From the moment of its founding, the American nation, too, entangled by the Enlightenment and republican ideals,

sought to promote a novus ordo seclorum, an ongoing quest for new order for the ages, permitting the country to preserve exceptionalism in the face of all international pressures toward conformity. While many Americans would like to believe that the United States is unique in its global behavior, the truth is that the country behaves more or less like the great powers that preceded it.

Constraints of international competition would ensure that India suffers the same fate.

Although states differ in details of how they conduct themselves, with history, domestic politics and strategic culture accounting for much of the variance there's little doubt that India, too, would eventually succumb to protecting its own interests, if it doesn't do so already. If the demands of national power came into conflict with the obligations of principle, New Delhi would unlikely sacrifice tangible gains to meet certain ideational aspirations. India's switching to a more accommodating posture towards Burma's mili-



VALEGLOBAL

tary rulers to curb Chinese influence is just a recent example. Nor should India be enjoined to do so, as the nonalignment advocates might suggest, because such actions could be devastating for a still-weak country struggling to thrive in the cutthroat world of international politics.

A second and more problematic flaw in nonalignment as a grand strategy is its conviction that refusing to align with other great powers remains the best organizing principle for India's foreign relations because it preserves the nation's "strategic autonomy." This attempt to equate nonalignment with preventing loss of sovereign agency confuses ends and means. If nonalignment were primarily about the end, states seeking to avoid strategic policies that were defined elsewhere from their own capitals, then all states would necessarily be nonaligned.

But when nonalignment is defined as a means "the avoidance of sharp choices," as Nonalignment 2.0 aptly puts it then it becomes more dangerous, thanks to India's strategic circumstances. In the north, China is a rising geopolitical competitor whose potential threat to Indian security interests is only complicated by two countries' burgeoning bilateral economic relationship. In the west, Pakistan continues to pose

dangers to India because of a peculiar combination of increasing state weakness married to a propensity for perilous risk-taking.

Together, these threats to Indian security suggest that New Delhi should invest in preferential strategic partnerships with the enemies of its enemies because such affiliations could help mitigate the perils posed by India's immediate adversaries. Oddly, however, nonalignment supporters take the opposite tact, running away from preferential partnerships in a quest for strategic autonomy. Accordingly, they fundamentally misread what success requires, especially when political competition coexists with economic interdependence and containing adversaries is not a realistic option.

The strategy of nonalignment might make sense if India could muster the necessary resources to cope with its strategic challenges independently. Yet the doctrine's third weakness consists of its failure to assess whether the transformative reforms necessary to build India's comprehensive national power can in fact be consummated, considering the current circumstances of India's domestic politics. The realities of Indian politics suggest that the successful "internal balancing" required for the realization of genuine strategic autonomy could fall on hard times. India's capacity for resource mobilization is undermined by the disarray of its two national parties, the continuing ebb of power away from the national center and towards the states, the rise of powerful regional parties, and the advent of populist politics focusing on economic redistribution rather than growth. Accordingly, India's national security managers ought to treat the doctrine's exhortation to eschew preferential strategic partnerships with a friendly power like the United States with skepticism.

Ultimately, nonalignment fails to recognize that when internal balancing is impeded, external balancing becomes imperative. At a time when the growth of Chinese power continues unabated and different threats posed by China and Pakistan continue to grow, New Delhi must give serious consideration to accelerating the growth in its own national capacities through tightened affiliations with a small number of friends and allies. Instead of avoiding coalitions, New Delhi should thus enter into preferential strategic partnerships taking the form of high-quality trading ties, robust defense cooperation and strong diplomatic collaboration. To be successful, India needs these ties with key friendly powers throughout the world especially the United States because neither its example as a successful democracy nor its efforts at internal balancing are likely to produce the security necessary to its well-being. India's strategic challenges are grave and increasing. New Delhi must recognize that the strategic solution to the country's predicament cannot consist of simply resurrecting nonalignment in a new guise.

The writer is a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
© YaleGlobal. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Arrangement.

Japan-China stand-off over Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

R. S. Kalha

The dispute between Japan and China over the barren rocky islands known as Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea owes its origins to the unfinished business of the Second World War. At the end of the war, the United States dispossessed Japan of most of its overseas island territories such as Taiwan, but curiously left untouched the territorial issue of some of the smaller islands. A reading of US intentions at that time would indicate that Japanese sovereignty would continue only over the four main Japanese islands, with the others being assigned to erstwhile owners. But US intentions were never given practical shape. At the end of the war, the Soviet Union marched in and captured the four northern islands in the Kuriles chain north of Hokkaido, the northern most main Japanese island. Left unclear and untouched were the Senkaku/Diaoyu group of islets that often submerge at high tide.

What is different now is the rising tide of nationalism in both Japan and China. Both vociferously lay claim to the islets and the hidden message is the sense of rivalry, strategic concern and future prospects. The present phase of the dispute erupted in April 2012 when the Mayor of Tokyo, facing a difficult political outcome, decided to up the ante by pledging to 'buy' the islands. He thereby hoped to refurbish his nationalist credentials. The feelings and attitude of the Japanese people towards China began to change sometime from 2010 onwards when they realised that China had eclipsed Japan to become the world's second-largest economy. Confident of its newly acquired status, China also began to adopt a more hard line approach to maritime disputes. This became evident when Japan arrested a Chinese fishing boat and its crew near the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, but was forced to back down and release them when China threatened to cut the export to Japan of 'rare earths' a vital mineral in the manufacture of hi-tech items. On a strategic level, concerns about China's rising military and economic power have prompted Japan to broaden its foreign policy options by engaging other Asia-Pacific countries and even India, while strengthening its own defence capabilities and stepping up security co-operation with the US. In forums such as ASEAN, Japan has tried to encourage other countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei to move in tandem to oppose Chinese claims in the South China Sea.

On the other hand, Chinese nationalists see such Japanese moves as willingness to second US efforts to contain China's rise and expand US presence and influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan is seen as the fulcrum or the pivot on which the US hopes to reorient its policy of engaging once again with the region. China has also not taken kindly to Japanese efforts to bolster the anti-China sentiments of some ASEAN countries. Japan fully supports their intentions of dealing with China collectively rather than on an individual basis as China desires. And China is watching very carefully the evolving Indo-Japanese strategic relationship.

The rise of nationalism in both Japan and China and the sovereignty issue over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea is a highly explosive mix, perhaps even more so than the South China Sea island and territorial disputes. Chinese nationalists often link present Japanese policies with atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers during the Japanese invasion of China in the Second World War. This is because the Chinese psyche is easily aroused and anti-Japanese feelings, though dormant, are never too far below the surface. Thus incidents surrounding these islands easily revive historical wounds, stir national pride and restrict diplomatic space for an equitable solution. On 16 August 2012 the Chinese newspaper Global Times, an affiliate of the People's Daily, even went to the extent of publishing a photograph of a demonstrator on the disputed islands proudly holding the KMT Taiwanese flag! It would have been unthinkable and blasphemous just a few years ago.

It is obvious that neither China nor Japan desire a large-scale conflict, since both have nothing substantial to gain from such a conflict. Nevertheless, there is deepening pessimism on both sides over the prospects of a peaceful settlement to the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, primarily because of the harsh public sentiments that it has unleashed in both countries. Both governments are aware of the deep strategic mistrust that exists between the two countries. What is also adding fuel to this mistrust is the current domestic political turmoil in both countries. While the Japanese leadership is facing a fragmented and shifting political landscape, the Chinese leadership is in the midst of a once in a decade delicate power transfer. Neither country at this stage can be seen to be 'soft,' for it would adversely affect their political prospects. It is for this reason that both prefer to let the dispute simmer for the present, for it suits their respective political purposes. If Prime Minister Noda calls for early elections in Japan and manages to retain power against all odds and the Chinese leadership manages to successfully conclude their 18th Party Congress, there might be some hope that this dispute can be safely put aside. To find a resolution of the dispute at the present juncture when feelings are running high on both sides is indeed very problematical.

The writer is a former Indian Ambassador to Iraq.
© IDSA. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Arrangement.

Vietnam's Sino-US dilemma

WILLIAM CHOONG

IN Hugh White's latest book, "The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power", the Australian professor argues that, for the sake of regional peace, the United States and China should carve up Asia between them. In particular, the US should consider ceding Indochina to China, the former defence official added.

That suggestion has caused apoplexy throughout the region, not least from Vietnam, given its chequered history with China.

But if one takes the hard-headed realist's perspective, one can argue that Vietnam being subsumed into a Chinese sphere of influence is nothing untoward. After all, China dominated Vietnam in four instances between the first and 15th centuries.

During the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, communist China poured military and economic aid into North Vietnam as it fought the US, leading both parties to describe their relationship as one between "lips and teeth".

That said, however, "lips and teeth" became a severe case of gingivitis and decay. In 1971, Beijing's rapprochement with Washington was a prelude to a border clash between China and Vietnam in 1979.

In 1988, the two countries fought over the Johnson South Reef in the Spratlys. The bad blood continues today, as Hanoi and Beijing clash over territory in the South China Sea.

No wonder, then, that Sino-Vietnam ties are today nothing short of complicated. As Dr Tim Huxley, the director of the Asia branch of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, puts it, Vietnam spent a millennium resisting China's influence. Putting Vietnam in China's orbit would be tantamount to "starting a war", he added.

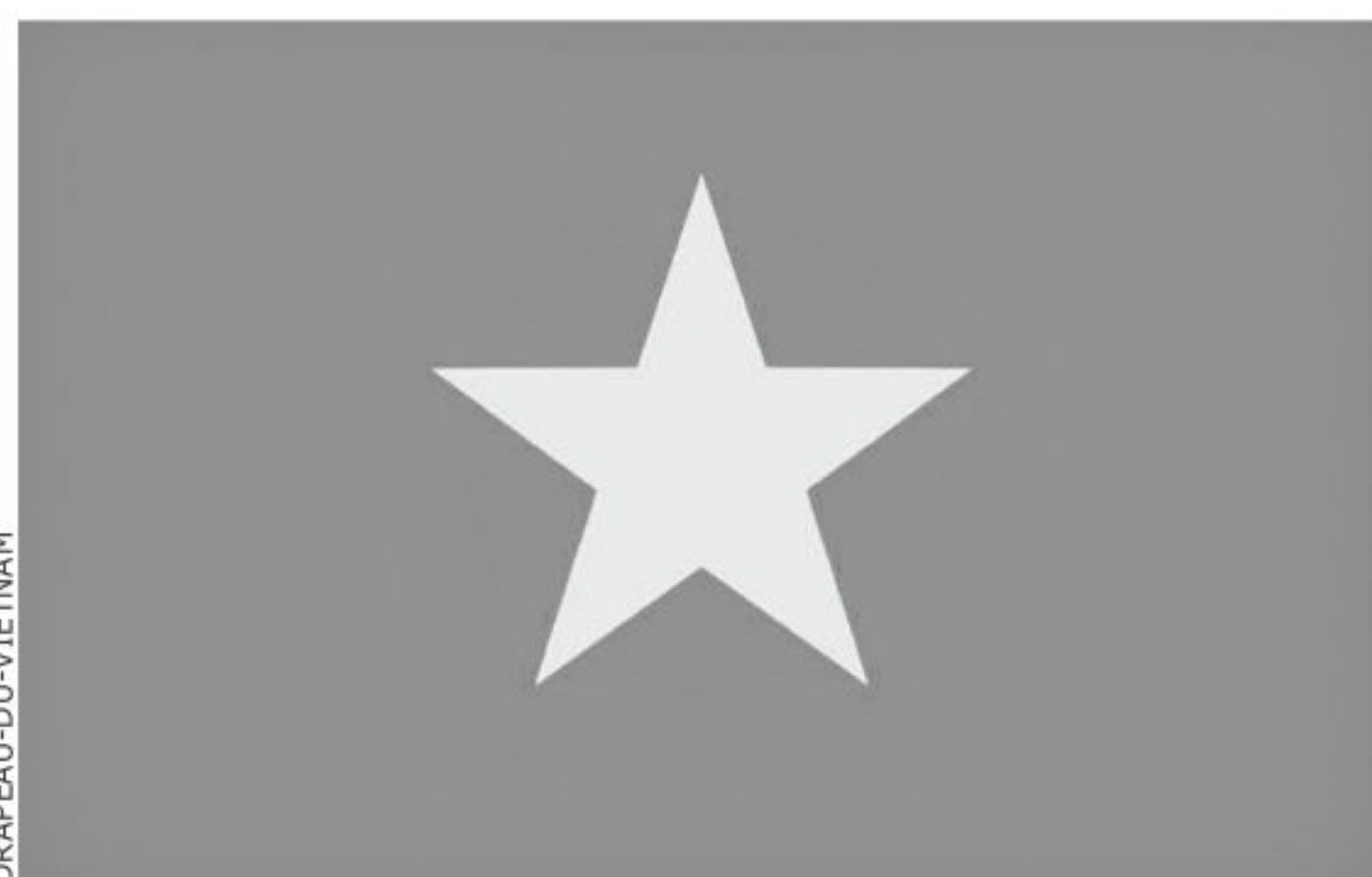
Former Agence France-Presse journalist Robert Temple, in his 1999 book "Shadows And Wind", thought so too, saying the "overwhelming emphasis" of official Vietnam history has always been one of resistance to China.

He cites the example of Ho Chi Minh, the Sinophile leader of Vietnam who spent his holidays in China. Asked whether it would be better in 1945 to be under Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist army or to have the French back in Vietnam, Ho's famous reply was that he "would rather sniff a little French s**t for a few years than eat Chinese s**t for the next thousand years".

But faced with the looming threat of growing Chinese power, Vietnam has not been bereft of geopolitical ideas.

Like many Asian countries, Vietnam has adopted the prevailing diplomatic strategy of engagement and "not choosing" between China and the US. Hanoi has displayed some semblance of solidarity with Beijing. Since the normalisation of relations in 1991, both sides have robust mechanisms to manage their relationship, with more than 100 delegations exchanged annually. China is also Vietnam's biggest trading partner.

Vietnam has also sought to repair and build relations with the US as strategic insurance against China. It has permitted visits by US naval ships to its ports. In



June, Vietnam hosted US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta's visit to the country, signalling that relations had reached a new level.

But engaging both China and the US has its limits. After all, the Vietnamese harbour a visceral distrust of the Chinese, from a millennium of history, and of the Americans after the bruising Vietnam War.

This is where the second plank of Hanoi's strategy comes in - enmeshment.

By locking China into a network of regional bodies - such as the East Asia Summit and the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) - Vietnam hopes the norms embodied by such entities would tie down China's Gulliver with a lattice of Lilliputian ropes.

Enmeshment is not new. Writing in The Business Times in 1992, Vietnamese Foreign Ministry official Nguyen Hong Thach said Sino-Vietnamese relations

should be meshed within the "much larger network of economic and political interests".

In 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton riled the Chinese no end when she declared at an ARF meeting in Hanoi that Washington was ready to play a role in multilateral talks for a settlement to the South China Sea dispute.

Some analysts suspect that Clinton's declaration was partly aided by Hanoi's position as Asean chair that year. Getting China involved in multilateral talks would have strengthened the position of smaller countries like Vietnam and the Philippines.

At recent Asean meetings in Phnom Penh, Vietnam tasted some of its own medicine. China used its influence on Cambodia - the Asean chair - to stop the issuing of a communique that would mention the South China Sea.

That was a diplomatic coup for China. But the victory stoked regional fears of overweening Chinese ambition, and Beijing's foreign minister had to go on a quick tour of the region to control the damage.

In the long run, Hanoi's dual strategy of engagement and enmeshment will reap dividends. But the dual strategy can last only if Hanoi does not need to choose between Beijing and Washington.

Recent tensions in the South China Sea suggest Vietnam might soon be forced to make a choice.

The Philippines, already embroiled in a diplomatic tussle with China over the South China Sea, is clearly trying to cash in on its military alliance with the US.

Vietnam's increased interaction with the US military might predispose it to call for Uncle Sam's aid if there is conflict with China.

Professor White alluded to this in his recent book. In one scenario, Vietnam and China trade blows over another South China Sea incident, and Hanoi calls for America's help. This ratchets up tensions rapidly, risking nuclear war between China and the US.

Therein lies the dilemma for Hanoi if it fights Beijing over the South China Sea again. It will find itself in a Catch-22 situation - call on the US and risk an escalation in hostilities, or give in to China and risk being sucked into its orbit - yet again.

© The Straits Times. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Arrangement with Asia News Network.