

Does the elephant dance?

Or, in its effort to cut a global dash, will India's feet always be hobbled by problems closer to home?



Illustration by M. Morgenstern

The news in May that the Congress party had won India's elections by a big margin electrified the political establishment and sent shares soaring. Manmohan Singh, back as prime minister, still needs coalition partners, but no longer relies on Communists for his majority, and needs not pay so much heed to small, venal regional parties. At home, he pledges to forge ahead with liberal reforms. Abroad, too, says Shyam Saran, a special envoy for Mr Singh on climate change, his government "will enjoy greater room for manoeuvre than in its earlier incarnation".

If this freedom produces a robust, coherent foreign policy, it will be a post-cold-war first. "Does the elephant dance?" is the title of a forthcoming book on India's foreign policy, by a former Canadian envoy, David Malone. Until now the country has been a wallflower and it is about time it put on its pumps. India enjoys huge global respect as a successful democracy. In marked contrast to China's, its rise raises few hackles in the West. And its formidable intellectuals, entrepreneurs, Bollywood stars and diaspora give tremendous "soft" power. But in comparison with its stature, its influence remains pitiful, despite its recognition by America as a member of the nuclear club—the main (perhaps only) foreign-policy achievement of Mr Singh's first term.

Indian governments' main preoccupations are domestic—unsurprisingly, given a riotous Bartholomew Fair of a political system, and huge economic problems. India's immediate region has also frustrated its great-power ambitions, with Pakistan chiefly to blame. Much of Pakistan's elite continues to view India as a threat to their country's existence. This is misguided, and in the case of the army, self-serving. Pakistan's own jihadists remain a bigger danger. But Pakistan's morbid obsessions tie India down, too. In Mr Singh's second term, say his advisers, India will attempt to vault beyond concerns in its near-abroad. And, having appointed, in S.M. Krishna, a foreign minister expected to be grateful and ineffectual, he will be unfettered either by carping Communists or ambitious colleagues. He will be able to toe his own foreign-policy line. Top of his agenda will be trade, climate change and responding to China's rise.

Don't hold your breath on the first two. Mr Singh has liberal views on trade, and his cabinet shuffle notably got rid of the commerce minister, who was widely blamed for scuppering trade talks under the Doha round in Geneva last July. An early signing of a free-trade agreement between India and the ten-country Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is expected. Yet such agreements offer more political than economic advantage. And the old domestic constraints remain. Mr Singh campaigned on what he calls "inclusive growth". This implies protection for farmers and more. Even if Mr Singh now favours the pursuit of freer trade, Sonia Gandhi, boss of the Congress family firm, with its roots in the countryside, may well overrule him.

As for climate change, Mr Saran points out that India, like other poor countries, will be among the worst-hit by a warming globe and has an overriding interest in a successful international regime emerging from the climate-change conference in Copenhagen in December. It is true that a first casualty of the melting of Himalayan glaciers would be the waters of the north-Indian plain. But Mr Saran also stresses that agreement cannot be reached at the expense of India's development. Many Indians feel that tackling climate change, like free trade, is something pushed on India by outsiders to bring it down. For the moment, India can hide behind America and China, which are barely inching towards a common approach.

That leaves China. To those paid to worry about such things the threat is clear and present. "He is coming over the passes from Sinkiang [Xinjiang]," says a senior Indian military man. "He is building the road to Burma [Myanmar]; he is seeking ports from all those around us; and he is selling arms to all and sundry." This, to Indian strategists, is the "string of pearls" strategy designed to encircle their country. Now China is trying to block the Asian Development Bank from financing a project in the north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, territory claimed by China. Hawks say Indian politicians' judgment about China is clouded by economic ties. China is now India's biggest trading partner.

A whole lotta hedging going on

Yet China's trade with India, and others, counts for something besides commercial expedience. It helps explain China's push into India's backyard, with roads, ports and pipelines, chiefly via Myanmar and Pakistan. So does the perceived need to secure energy lines. China's oil use is doubling every 15 or so years. Nearly nine-tenths of its oil imports cross the Indian Ocean and pass through the Malacca Strait. India has almost identical energy concerns, though its potential chokepoint is not Malacca but the Strait of Hormuz. Its navy, like China's, has been rushing to secure friendly staging-posts around the Indian Ocean. As a hedge, it has also been forging links farther east with China's own maritime neighbours, including Vietnam, South Korea and Japan.

China's trade with India also counts by reaffirming a growing interdependence in a part of the world that still defends brittle notions of sovereignty. Properly handled, interdependence could smooth the rougher edges of rivalry. But that must depend in part on how much domestic populations have got at stake. Here, India scores poorly. This week a Unicef report warned that, despite several years of breakneck growth, India falls far short in protecting its own people from poverty. Some 230m Indians suffer from chronic hunger, a number that has grown thanks to the global downturn and sharp swings in the price of food and fuel. China's record, with malnourishment largely banished, is far better. Mr Singh's foreign policy begins at home.

DOES the elephant dance? **The Economist**, New York, June 4th, 2009. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 15 jun. 2009.