K. SUBRAHMANYAM AND INDIA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE

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Dr. Sanjaya Baru, Mrs Subrahmanyam (whose birthday it is today), Air Marshal Kapil Kak, Cmde Uday Bhaskar, Ladies, Gentlemen and Friends

I thank the Subbu Forum and the India International Centre (IIC) for doing me the honour of asking me to deliver the first memorial lecture in memory of the late K. Subrahmanyam (KS), a towering figure, a teacher to many of us, and someone who was central to debates on India's national security for over half a century.

This lecture is also a responsibility because of the very high standards of intellectual rigour and analysis that KS set in his lectures and writings. Many of you present here knew KS well. His intellectual sharpness was awe inspiring until you understood that it was an expression of his dedication to his craft and to the power of reason, and hid a sensitive appreciation of others beneath that forbidding exterior. Today, every think-tank in India which concerns itself with strategic affairs, has people who worked with KS and whom he mentored. He combined those qualities of mind with personal courage, which became evident when he was on an Indian Airlines aircraft which was hijacked.

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But I am not here to recount KS' life or his intellectual struggles with orthodoxy and political correctness in matters of national security.

Instead, I would like to consider what K. Subrahmanyam stood for in his professional life and the areas where he enriched our strategic culture. Let us first look at the Indian strategic culture itself. Thereafter, we might look at how KS changed the way that we in India look at some major security issues. And, finally, I will speculate on what would concern KS if he were looking at the world today.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE

We often hear statements alleging that India lacks a strategic culture. Sadly, this is more often heard from Indians than foreigners. One sometimes wonders whether the idea that India lacks a strategic culture was not useful in the past to those who did not wish to see India's weight translate into the effective exercise of power on the international stage. While one can understand foreigners spreading this idea, it is incomprehensible to me that some Indians should also believe this and still propagate this idea.

The most cogent expression of this idea was by George Tanham, a senior defence analyst at the RAND Corporation in the early Nineties. Frankly speaking, for a civilisation and state like India not to have a strategic culture is impossible. It is like someone claiming to be apolitical, which itself is a political choice. Many others see in India a strategic culture that is "more distinct and coherent than that of most contemporary nation states", according to Rodney W. Jones.

What is strategic culture and how can foreigners and Indians draw such diametrically opposite conclusions about India's strategic culture? As I have said before, the most comprehensive (but incomprehensible) definition I have seen is: strategic culture is that set of shared beliefs, assumptions and modes of behaviour, derived from common experience and accepted narratives (both oral and written) that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives. Or, to put it more intelligibly without the academic jargon, strategic culture is an identifiable set of basic

assumptions about the nature of international and military issues. This would involve both a central strategic paradigm (about the role of war in human affairs, the efficacy of force, the nature of the adversary, and so on), and a grand strategy or secondary assumptions about operational policy that flow from the assumptions.

By this definition, of course, we in India have a strategic culture. It is an indigenous construct over millennia, modified considerably by our experience in the last two centuries. For instance, war and peace are continuing themes in the Indian strategic culture. While not celebrating war, the culture treats it as acceptable when good fights evil. The Indian strategic culture has been comfortable with this contradiction. Both major Indian epics deal with wars, and treat rivalries as natural and normal. Kautilya addressed the use of force in detail. While Gandhiji shunned the use of force and opposed violence in politics, he was politically steely and unyielding, and accepted appropriate violence as unavoidable in certain circumstances. As a result of this acceptance of contradictions, Indian strategic culture supports ethical views that dovetail easily with international norms of conduct whether legal or on human rights, as long as they respect India's status. The traditional culture also has a strong pedagogical bias which is reflected in the way India chooses to negotiate, and in the attendant risk that any external compromise is seen domestically as surrender.

One of the best descriptions of India's contemporary strategic culture is by Kanti Bajpai who has pointed out differences between 'Nehruvians', neo-liberals and hyper-realists, stressed what is common to all three streams of Indian strategic thought, and described how they might differ on the best means but not on India's external goals. To summarise Bajpai, all three streams agree on the centrality of the sovereign state in international relations and recognise no higher authority; see interests, power and violence as the staples of international relations that states cannot ignore; and think that power comprises both military and economic capabilities at a minimum. Beyond this, they differ on the best strategy and the means to be adopted.

For 'Nehruvians', the natural state of anarchy can be mitigated by understandings between states, and to make preparations for war and a

balance of power central to security and foreign policy is both ruinous and futile. For neo-liberals, mutual gain is a conditioning factor for the natural state of anarchy between states, particularly as they become interdependent. They, therefore, see economic power as a vital goal for states, to be achieved by free markets at home and free trade abroad. The hyper-realists are, however, pessimistic and do not believe in transformation, only endless cycles of inter-state threat, counter-threat, rivalry and conflict, where the risk of war is only managed by the threat and use of violence. For them, the surest way to peace and stability is the accumulation of military power and the willingness to use force.

For Bajpai, relations with the USA provide an example of how this works in practice. All three streams recognise the USA as the only superpower and of real significance to India, and agree that there is no military threat to India but there is a diplomatic threat at times, with US policies affecting India collaterally, particularly in the region. Nehruvians see the USA as an imperial power that must be contained and cannot countenance any rivals, and they, therefore, seek multilateral answers to the preponderance of US power. On the other hand, neo-liberals take the opposite view, stressing how essential the USA is for India's own development, and believing that the US can be supportive of India's views and aspirations. Hyper-realists differ from both, arguing that the only way to build India into a military power of the first rank is to work with all those who might help, like the USA, but to realise the limits of that cooperation and its limited utility for India's security.

The elements of Indian strategic culture are evident in what is common to all three streams, Nehruvians, neo-liberals and hyper-realists. The same elements are also evident in earlier Indian writings on statecraft, whether in Kautilya, the Mahabharata's Bhishmaparva, or even in Ashoka's edicts. All regard the international system as anarchic, and see international relations as fundamentally power relations. In the practical application of that culture, therefore, all three of today's Indian schools believe that nuclear weapons are essential for India's security in a world that shows no signs of moving

toward their abolition and elimination, and which is inhabited by threats to India's security.

It is this common strategic culture that we inherited, first clearly expressed and adapted for modern times by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, which explains the substantial agreement on values, on goals and even on means in our foreign policy, despite marked and rapid changes in the external environment in which we have operated. That is why the core traits of our foreign policies have persisted since independence, irrespective of the parties in power. Our goals have stayed constant even as the means available to us have increased and as the world around us has become more complex and more linked to our own development.

For instance, our actions in 1971 should have been no surprise to anyone who had bothered to study our strategic culture. Both our major epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, are about wars and treat them as natural and normal, not celebrating them but as necessary instruments of statecraft, justified when good fights evil. This says something about war and peace as themes in our strategic culture.

We are sometimes asked how the non-violent land of Gandhi could do what we did in 1971. As Gandhiji himself said in *The Gita* and *Satyagraha*,

> I do believe that when there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. Thus, when my eldest son asked what he should have done, had he been present when I was almost fatally assaulted in 1908, whether he should have run away and seen me killed or whether he should have used his physical force which he could have wanted to use, and defend me, I told him that it was his duty to defend me even by using violence…… I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should, in a cowardly manner, become or remain a helpless witness to her dishonour.

In saying so, Gandhiji was expressing ideas and a political rationalism whose roots one can trace back to India's ancient history, to Kautilya or Ashoka, whichever you prefer.

KS' CONTRIBUTIONS

It would be clear from this brief description of the Indian strategic culture that KS stood squarely in a long tradition of thought and attitudes, but applied it creatively to the vastly changed circumstances of the second half of the 20th century and the last decade. That his ideas faced resistance because they were new was natural. But so was their ultimate acceptance as orthodoxy, since they implicitly were a development of a long tradition of Indian strategic thought.

Let me try to list some of the more significant contributions that he made to Indian strategic thinking and culture. Five aspects in particular struck me as significant and relevant even today.

Our Nuclear Doctrine

When KS began speaking of the need for India to build a nuclear weapon as the most cost-effective solution to our unique situation, his was a lonely voice in India. It took years of steady and unrelenting argument and persuasion, (and, quite frankly, the actions of the Nulcear Weapon States—NWS) for his ideas to be widely accepted. He persuaded us of the idea of nuclear weapons as political rather than war-fighting weapons. And when we did conduct nuclear weapon tests in 1998, it was natural that it was to KS as Chairperson of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) that we turned to articulate the doctrine that governs the use and control of India's nuclear weapons. (Pakistan, which tested soon thereafter, has yet to articulate its doctrine, which says something about the different strategic cultures at play in the subcontinent.)

It is easy to underestimate the significance of what KS did to teach us how to think about nuclear weapons in a democracy. The ideas that Indian nuclear weapons would only be used in retaliation, that they would remain firmly under civilian control, that deterrence required massive retaliation and, therefore, assured survivability creating a second strike capability, were all first articulated by KS. Today, we take them for granted.

He also maintained the link with our traditional emphasis on disarmament, making it clear that it was because our security was threatened and the

other NWS had not responded to our calls for general and complete nuclear disarmament that we were compelled to weaponise, and that we remained willing to disarm under legally binding commitments and timeframes accepted by all the NWS along with matching commitments from the Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS).

We also owe to KS the very vocabulary that we now use in discussing India's nuclear weapons programme. When KS began writing in public on the subject, the vocabulary of nuclear weapons policy was that created and developed in the context of the nuclear arms race between the US and the Soviet Union. Its relevance to the Indian, or for that matter the Chinese, situation has always been limited. (In 2006, Chinese and US arms control experts realised after decades of talks that they needed a mutually agreed bilingual glossary to minimise misunderstanding. It took eighteen months to reach agreement on 1,000 terms relating to nuclear security. But there was still no consensus on key concepts like "limited deterrence" and "minimal deterrence" or "deterrence" itself!!) In our case, we are still in the process of developing our own vocabulary and concepts, building on the work of the pioneers.

Defence and Development

When KS first began to write on defence issues in the Sixties, the conventional wisdom was that every rupee spent on defence was a rupee snatched from development or feeding our people. The 'guns vs. butter' argument was natural in a country where government and individuals were poor and hunger was rampant. KS was one of the few after Sardar Patel to argue that economic development needed a sound defence as a prerequisite. He also went on to argue that the economic spin-offs from defence spending were not inconsiderable in terms of growth and technological independence. He had a vision which was rare for that time of what defence as a sector could mean to the national economy, driving technological modernisation and growth by providing non-inflationary consumption. That we have not yet realised that vision in practice, despite exponential growth in resources available for defence, is not because his ideas were faulty but because they

were never implemented. This debate on defence and development is one that still continues and is unsettled to this day.

National Security Structures—The Kargil Review Committee and the GOM

If India was the first parliamentary democracy to attempt to harness the advantages of a National Security Council system, and has constructed structures for this purpose in the last ten years, many of the initial conceptions and ideas can be traced back to KS' writings and those of his generation. A lifetime worth of thought was compressed into the Kargil Review Committee's report and many of those recommendations were later adopted by the Group of Ministers (GOM).

Strategic Autonomy in Thought and Deed

The one thread that ran through all of KS' writings was the need to increase India's real strategic autonomy. By this, he never meant cutting ourselves off from the world. He realised that this would doom us to eternal technological mediocrity and leave us vulnerable to even minor threats. Instead, he envisaged India working with other countries as equal partners, as an active participant in the shaping of international outcomes and, ultimately, the international system itself. For him, non-alignment was a strategy, not an ideology. As a flexible realist, he responded to changes in the international situation facing India. In the Sixties, he advocated India reaching out to the US; post-1971, he was a strong advocate of the Indo-Soviet relationship; after 1991, and particularly after 2005, he was impatient with our tardiness in grasping the strategic opportunities that he thought had opened up for India.

This was not mere opportunism. He was a strong nationalist, rejecting US conditionalities for military assistance after 1962; driving hard bargains with the USSR as Secretary Defence Production in 1979; and, resisting policy choices that would have constrained our nuclear options in the Seventies.

Values in National Security Strategy; Realism-plus

What made KS' realism different from the common or garden variety of

Western realism was his ability to combine a strong commitment to the basic values of the Indian Republic (of secularism, democracy and pluralism), with his realist pursuit of national interest. I suppose one could call this the "realist-plus" approach. He was an advocate of value-based relationships: with the US and others on democracy, with Russia on secularism, and with Europe on liberalism. He often argued that there was no real contradiction between the promotion of democracy and the pursuit of India's interests in our neighbourhood. I remember heated discussions in the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) when KS was chair in 1977-78. The example used by both sides of the argument was Pakistan, where democratic governments had been well-meaning but ineffective while military regimes had promised delivery but presided over a basically unsatisfactory relationship with India. It is an argument that still resonates in India today. But there was no question of where KS stood on this defining issue.

KS argued that the values in the Indian Constitution—secularism, pluralism, democracy and quasi-federalism—were imperative to hold India together in the 20th century. India is alone, along with the USA in an earlier age, in seeking to industrialise and accumulate power as a democracy. All the other major nations of the world industrialised and gathered power before they became democratic. KS felt that this was why the rise of India, like the 19th century rise of the US, would not arouse the concerns, conflicts and reactions that the rise of other powers throughout history had provoked. For him, it was, and remains, a matter of India's self-interest to help to build a democratic, pluralistic and secular world order.

To my mind, perhaps the greatest contribution that KS made to intellectual discourse in India was to bring us back to the Indian realist tradition, one of the few realist traditions in the world that has a place of pride for values. KS' writings and work re-taught us how to think strategically. He taught us that strategy is not just about outdoing an adversary who is trying to do the same to you. It is also about finding cooperative solutions and creating outcomes in non-zero-sum situations, (which are most of our lives), even when others are motivated by self-interest and not benevolence. Strategy is the art of creating outcomes that further your national interest and values,

and includes putting yourself in others' shoes so as to predict and influence what they do.

The measure of his success is the extent to which these ideas are now commonly accepted and no longer strike us as extreme. Not very long ago, in the living memory of my generation, this was not so.

KS' CONCERNS TODAY

What would have concerned KS today?

Shortly before he died, KS sent me four papers that he was working on. One was unfinished and the others were unpolished. The papers were nothing if not ambitious and magisterial, as one would expect from him. They were on an Indian Grand Strategy for the first half of the 21st Century, Indian Defence Policy, Nuclear Deterrent in the Indian Context, and India in the 21st Century. I do hope the KS Forum and the Subrahmanyam family will see their way to publishing these papers.

Reading these papers today, when uncertainty in the international system is at unprecedented levels and as we seem to be entering a new phase of the world economy, one is struck by how his "realist-plus" perspective seems best suited to describe what we see around us, and to chart a course forward. We are in a world where there are few certainties, where coalitions form around issues, and alliances are permeable, where power is increasingly shared but unevenly among several major powers, and where conflicts are asymmetric. This is a world with which the Indian state system was familiar for most of our pre-modern history, a world where Krishna, Bhishma and Kautilya would all feel equally at home. So it seems logical that we should return to our strategic culture as made modern by thinkers like KS to seek answers to the questions we face.

CONCLUSION

If India is to deal with the issues of the new 21st century world, it is essential that we further elaborate our own culture and tradition of strategic thought. So long as India's situation and needs are unique, we must encourage our own ways of looking at developments, and develop

our own strategic culture, vocabulary and doctrine. To do so would be an appropriate tribute to KS. Fortunately for us, there is no isolationist streak in our strategic thought so far, and we have a rich tradition to draw on. Ironically, the greater our capabilities, the more we need the world and are integrated into it. So, if anything, the need for, and the rewards of, studying our strategic culture will grow with time.