From Cairo to Bokaro

Romesh Thapar

Over the past few months we appear to have developed an unhealthy obsession about the 'impression' Lal Bahadur Shastri makes every time he steps out of office or house. This became very clear during the Cairo conference. Indian reporters covering the proceedings, who have developed the unhappy habit of acting and reacting like press attaches, regaled us with stories of Shastri's 'success' as if the success of the Indian Prime Minister is measured by the respect he is shown, the applause he receives and the number of autograph-hunters he collects. This kind of puerile reportage, together with the equally pathetic attempt to present the conference as a battleground between a visible India and an invisible China, makes us rather ridiculous even to ourselves.

What Creates an Impression?

It seems absurd that in the seventeenth year of our freedom it is necessary to stress that an 'impression' is created not by the superficiality of physical appearance or oratorical skill but by the sustained hard work we put into the formulation and explanation of the policies we seek to project. Asia and Africa are literally bursting with the energy released by charismatic leaders, but there is not nearly enough coordinated, clear-headed thinking being done. This is why the performances of the leading elements, India dwells on China's reported attempt to explode a nuclear device, but fails to follow through because the logical demand for a nuclear-free Asia and Africa would bring her into collision with the US insistence on the freedom of the seas for the Seventh Fleet. The so-called Colombo Powers, including stalwarts like the UAR and Ghana, are inhibited about pursuing their vitally necessary initiatives on the question of the India-China border for fear of offending Peking. Indonesia, with many fairly sensible things to say, acts like an unthinking bully and blackmailer because there is no one to tell her to behave herself in the interests of the region. The serious Arab-Israeli confrontation is conveniently ignored as a result of pressures from certain African States. Despite the presence of Yugoslavia no real notice is taken of the crucial divisions developing in the western alliance and the communist world because such an assessment would require certain commitments by individual non-aligned nations.

Small wonder, then, that there is an air of unreality about these gatherings. Where is the effort to insulate the non-aligned against the pressures of the blocs? Where is the effort to guarantee the borders of member States against adventurers and new-type colonisers? Where is the effort to build positive ties in the field of economics and politics? And where is the effort to defend the long-neglected interests of the under-developed?

The failure to act on these several fronts, and the refusal to work out even minimum institutional support for such steps, makes it possible for 'invisible' influences to operate among the non-aligned. Tsushima, too, is able to stage a fairly damaging demonstration because there is no yardstick by which non-aligned positions are judged.

Keeping in mind the situation now prevailing in the non-aligned world, it is for India to take the initiative in projecting new concepts for this assembly of uncommitted nations. The desire to take a back seat, because of the political-military embarrassments caused by the Chinese in Ladakh and NEFA, is most unfortunate. The fact remains that we will regain our dignity and sense of purpose only when we realise that: we cannot satisfy everyone, that we are still powerful enough to assert these interests because the concept of a non-aligned world is meaningless without India.

Bokaro without Indians

Can the men who make the policy today understand these simple truths? Confidence in their capacities seems at the moment to be confined to the managements of certain national daily lies who see 'break-throughs' and 'follow-ups' registered every day. For the most part, we can only record a dismal, depressing drift — even in the handling of questions over which we are supposedly sovereign.

The strange story of our negotiations with the Soviet Union on the Bokaro steel project is typical of our flabbiness. The double-talk by Union Minister Sanjeeva Reddy is now at last exposed for what it is. An official announcement declares that 'the design and engineering' of the Bokaro plant will be the responsibility of the Russians, that 'the management of construction and operation (sic!) will, however, be entirely Indian.' Remove the verbiage, and this means that we Indians are still at a level of technical competence similar to that which existed at the time of Bhilai's construction some ten years ago. If Jawaharlal Nehru had been alive, he would probably have dailed Khrushchov and told him to think again, but now we make polite noises.

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The recent story of Bokaro is strange because both the Indian and Soviet bureaucrats involved in the negotiations appear to be cooperating in the attempt to reduce our contribution to that of contractors and consultants. The Indian negotiators maintain that their Soviet counterparts do not want any 'interference', while the Soviet negotiators reveal somewhat gently that it is their Indian counterparts who have encouraged them to insist on 'non-interference'. Where the truth lies, no one will ever know.

This much is clear — that the Soviet steel delegation, which was here for several weeks, refused even to meet the experts of Dasturco, steel consultants to the GOI and the men who have been working on the Bokaro project since its inception, and nobody in the GOI insisted that they do so. It is a performance which will have to be explained, for even courtesy demanded that this meeting take place. Obviously, the Soviet delegation was confident that its inexplicable attitudes would be understood in the right places.

The silence which prevails over this deliberate, crude wrecking of the coordinated attempt to establish an independent Indian firm of steel consultants — so vital to the growth of our planning and implementation machinery — is a pointer to our present opportunistic attitudes. The so-called friends of the USSR are silent because they foolishly believe that criticism damages relations. The West-oriented industrialist collaborators are silent because they can now insist on similar 'non-interference' which ensures larger profit for their collaborators and for themselves. The politicians are silent because they have lulled themselves into the fantastic belief that the Russians do not compromise. The 'theoreticians' are silent because mechanically they see Dasturco as 'private sector', forgetting that an offer to make it an autonomous corporation has been made. An unprincipled consensus — and in the process a vital national interest is sacrificed.

Whether we discuss the results of the Cairo Conference or strange developments like the Bokaro compact or the handling of the food famine and the price spiral or even the release of the men who were part of the conspiracy to kill Gandhi, the conclusion is inescapable; we lack dynamic organisations to create sanctions for policies which are being surrendered by a bureaucratic-political apparatus out of touch with the perspectives we had sketched for ourselves. All the subtleties of the present political set-up cannot hide this vacuum in our democratic system.

From the London End

ONE of the most striking features of the British economy in recent years has been the very poor performance in the field of exports; Britain's position in the world export league continues to drop. While little progress has been made in effecting the structural reorganisation of British industry, which is essential if the country is to move out of the slow-growing industries with a small demand abroad, and move into the science-based automated industries whose products are required all over the world, in the field of export credit Britain is now able to offer terms which are comparable, or nearly comparable, to those provided by other industrialised countries.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that in order to capture markets for their exports, the industrialised countries must be prepared to offer export credits. This applies particularly to markets in the developing world, where shortage of foreign exchange and the reluctance of the industrialised countries to accept manufactured imports from them means that, apart from financial aid, export credits are the only means by which these countries can pay for their imports. A recent example of how important export credits are was provided at the Third Atomic Energy Conference in Geneva when the United Arab Repub-