

The Mandala Theory Of Smart Foreign Policy

The Bangladesh crisis has brought out the complex nature of Indo-US relationship. But this is of a piece with India's age-old norms of statecraft, codified by Chanakya

Ashwin Sanghi



Chanakya, the master of statecraft, provided an ancient framework for foreign policy in his *Arthashastra*. He suggested that states pursue foreign policies that protect their interests and security on some issues while recognising that other states will do the same. He perceptively wrote, "There is some self-interest behind every friendship. There is no friendship without self-interest. This is the bitter truth." Known as the *Mandala* construct, Chanakya postulated that one's foreign relations would span four types of states: *ari*—or enemies, *mitra*—or allies, *madhyama*—or mediators, and *udasina*—or neutrals.

He then outlined six possible foreign policy strategies—the *shadguna*. First, *sandhi*—a treaty for both parties to maintain stability. Second, *asana*—strategic neutrality or status quo. Third, *yana*—war preparation to signal readiness to attack or defend. Fourth, *vigraha*—or active conflict. Fifth, *sansraya*—seeking an alliance with others to counter a threat. Finally, there is *dvaidhibhava*—or employing multiple strategies in parallel with one or more states. Nothing exemplifies *dvaidhibhava* better than Indo-US relationship. The proof of that is Bangladesh.

For those who believe that Indo-US relationship is that of *mitras*—or allies—there is enough to back that claim. Both countries are democracies and understand the necessity of countering China. US is one of India's top three arms suppliers, with a rapidly increasing share. Substantial investments by American companies are flowing into India. With massive purchases, India supports many business sectors in US. Both countries have worked towards strengthening Quad and G20. America is India's biggest trading partner and one of the countries with which India has a substantial trade

surplus. The joint Indo-US statement in 2022 affirms "a vision of the US and India as among the closest partners in the world."

But for those who believe that the relationship is that of *aris*—or enemies—there is enough proof, too. For example, it is common practice for USCIRF to make statements about perceived state of religious minorities in India. US state department routinely expresses "concern" about India's internal matters, such as CAA. US applies pressure on India over an alleged plot to assassinate a Khalistani militant while confabulating in Five Eyes with its Anglosphere allies like Canada. On its part, India rangles America by buying Russian oil and arms and refusing to ditch Putin. It maintains a relationship with Iran that US has problematic ties with. Historically, it has walked a tough, independent line on nuclear weapons. It even works within BRICS to find alternatives to American dollar.

So, which view should we believe? Is Indo-US relationship one of allies or enemies? The American novelist T Scott Fitzgerald wrote that the test of intelligence is "the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." In Quantum Theory, Schrödinger's Cat can simultaneously be alive and dead. And in foreign policy, the Indo-US equation can simultaneously be one of *mitra* and *ari*.

Nothing symbolises this better than present crisis in Bangladesh. On Bangladesh situation, US is telling India that if it wishes to be a friend to US yet remain

unaligned with it, then US is free to use regime change playbook in India's neighbourhood to advance its interests in Indian Ocean. If refugees destabilise India's eastern borders, so be it. If it results in India's defence spending shooting up, wonderful. If Islamist forces are unleashed, cool. But hey, we can still be friends!

But geopolitics can be visualised as interaction of multiple forces, much like tugs and pulls of various vectors in physics. Each player exerts a force or vector that represents its interests, and these can vary in magnitude and direction. The combined effect of all these individual vectors results in a net vector that can often be unexpected.

The truth is that US values India's democracy, economic rise, and geographical position. But it would like India's unwavering commitment to US while keeping its options open. In recent years, India has been playing the same game—testing the boundaries to see what it can get US to overlook. It's easy to get swayed into euphoria or despair by news events of a given day, but truth is both countries want marriage while scouring for affairs on the side.

China's military strategist Sun Tzu wrote that all warfare is based on deception. He says, "When able, we should seem unable. When we are in action, we must seem inactive. When near, we should seem far. When far, the enemy should think we are near." We forget that deception is needed not only in rivalries but also in alliances. Both countries are indulging in it, bringing a sense of unpredictability to their moves. What needs to be understood is the predictability of such unpredictability.

The writer is an author of several works of fiction

