

Flexible Response

K Subrahmanyam shaped India's contemporary strategic culture

The demise of K Subrahmanyam, India's premier strategic guru and a frequent contributor to these pages, should be an occasion to reflect on what he frequently bemoaned – the absence of a strategic culture in the country, which often held it back from achieving its goals. If that situation has been somewhat remedied today, that is due in no small measure to Subrahmanyam's own intellectual and institutional contribution. India set up a National Security Council, for example, as late as 1999 – and that was partly in response to Subrahmanyam's tireless advocacy.

A strategic culture fosters an objective assessment of national capabilities in the context of the geopolitical environment in which it operates, and lays out policy options guided by a long-term view of national interest – rather than being simply ad hoc or reactive, or dictated by sentimental or ideological considerations. Among Subrahmanyam's contributions to a pragmatic reorientation of India's foreign policy were three major initiatives which he championed: Indian help to the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, India's development of an independent but limited nuclear deterrent in a context where its neighbours were weaponising, and the India-US civil nuclear agreement.

Mistakenly characterised as a 'hawk', Subrahmanyam was aware that greater economic interdependence among countries was the best guarantee of peace. And he was one of the first to recognise that India's economic liberalisation in the 1990s would pose new strategic challenges. That India has negotiated the transition to a post-Cold War world creditably is testimony that the country is indeed in the process of developing a strategic culture, accounting for significant initiatives in recent times such as the 'Look East' policy. One of the major strategic shifts has been moving from non-alignment – with its concomitant fear of being 'entrapped' by the world – to what may be described as 'omni-alignment', or engagement with all the power centres that are shaping the world. This has led to the emergence of a confident India and is a creative response to a post-Cold War, globalised era.

If an Indian strategic culture is to be nurtured in order to secure its long-term growth and security, we need to replace ad hoc responses with well thought out, flexible planning that takes into account India's rise at the international arena as well as the constraints facing it. This can be done through promotion of independent think tanks, greater interaction between policy makers and strategic experts, strengthening the National Security Council as well as promotion of strategic expertise within the external affairs and defence bureaucracies. Successfully navigating the frosty world of geopolitics requires more than intuition or sticking to procedure.