

Richard Holbrooke — a personal remembrance

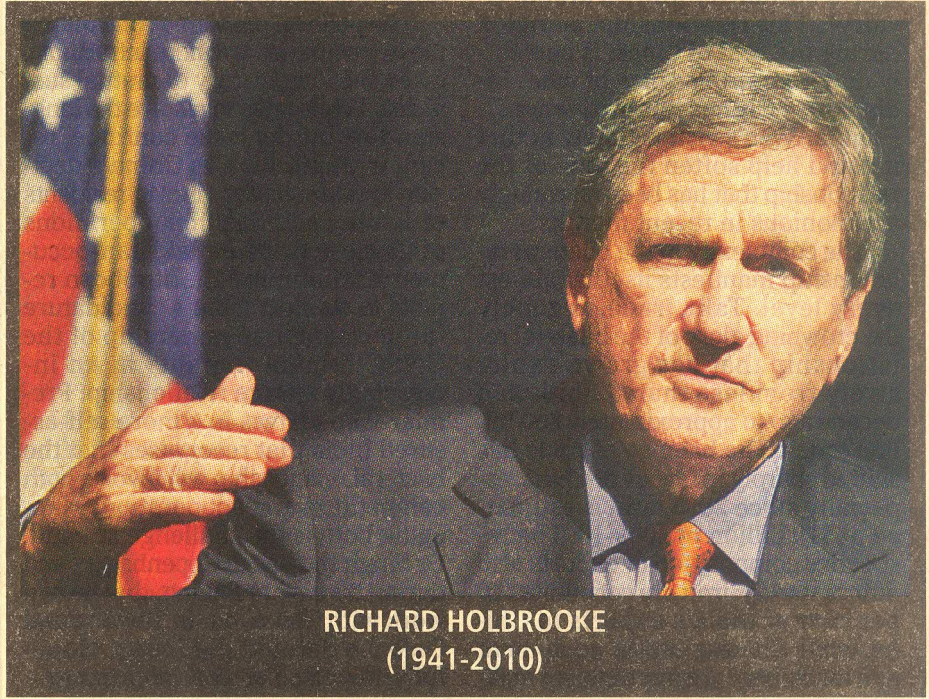
TARUN DAS

A 10-year relationship of quality, content, warmth and mutual respect which spanned both agreement and differing perceptions sums up our friendship.

It's May 13, 2004, Tokyo. Holbrooke is chairing a meeting of an international group. The election results are coming in from India and it is clear the Congress Party will form the new government. He tells the group that Mrs Sonia Gandhi will be the next Prime Minister of India. Seeing my silence, he asks me to confirm his views. I do not. He cannot believe this. Then, who? Based on gut feel and not much else, I say 'Dr Manmohan Singh'. Ten days later, this came true. Holbrooke never tired of sharing this anecdote in speaking about India's culture and complexity and our difference from the US.

It's December 2008. Washington DC. A session on Indo-US relations. President-designate Obama will be sworn in January 2009. The Capital is agog with talk of Holbrooke becoming the Special Envoy for India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. He talks about this informally. Consults. Our response is that he will be given an Indian visa and not much else. 'India' just cannot figure in his title. It's unacceptable. He listens, he notes, he gets back to the leadership and the rest is known. He was initially excited by the title to include India but, when we pushed back, he understood and he accepted.

Over the last two years, he would always make time for a quality conversation in DC about the region, the challenges, his efforts and his experiences. He observed the concerns of



RICHARD HOLBROOKE
(1941-2010)

India and took seriously the suggestions we made, at official and non-official levels. He was always available on email but, even more so, on his cell-phone (was anyone tapping?) to discuss updates and issues. He was open and deeply concerned when "accused" by us of being partial or "biased".

Indians were somewhat apprehensive of this big and strong man, in 2009, but that time passed as he reached out and connected, giving respect to Indian interlocutors. He was very pleased to be seated with our foreign secretary at the US Vice President/Secretary of State lunch for the PM in November 2009. It gave him quality time with her: "I like her," he said, with affection and warmth.

In the dialogue with Delhi, he reached out beyond Government, constantly, to get a

'feel' of India. He built friendships in the process, over breakfast, lunch, dinner sessions. On the last occasion, he was having health issues and, at dinner, needed to keep his leg up to reduce pain. But refused to cut on travel and work: 24x7 was his usual style. He also went out of his way to connect Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman, US Joint Chiefs of Staff, to people in India so that he could have wider exposure.

When the Obama Administration took office, Richard Holbrooke was emphatic on the need for a strong South and Central Asia Bureau in the State Department. He was constantly consulting and, today, State has an outstanding team in this area, led by Bob Blake.

As a child, he lived in Delhi, briefly. His father worked here. He used to say that, giv-

en the opportunity, he would love to be the US Ambassador to India one day, to come back and live here.

We had many flights and car drives together and a shared interest in dealing with HIV/AIDS, he as the then president of the Global Business Coalition for HIV/AIDS and, I, as the managing trustee of the Indian Business Trust for HIV/AIDS. We worked together in this very difficult area for several years.

Finally, a very personal note. Richard and my wife, Ranjana, shared the same birthday, both Taurans, both strong and independent. Both to be 70 in 2011. We called them 'twins' and planned to celebrate together. Sadly, this is not to be.

The writer is former chief mentor, CII