

Business Standard

Celebrating the man who had no private agenda

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Late K Subrahmanyam

I was late coming into his life but, very quickly, he became my Guru, teaching me what strategic issues are, what foreign policy can achieve, what building India in its totality meant, what partnerships could bring to the table for India and others, and so on.

His last calls to me, last week, on the same morning and evening, were about President Obama's State of the Union address, his reference to the 'Sputnik' moment and the relevance of India and USA working together to achieve this. Mr Subrahmanyam's direction to me was to work for this, in the US and in India.

My first engagement with 'Subbu, Sir', was in a defence ministry committee, on the proposal for a National Defence University (NDU). He took our group through the process of understanding its role and importance with reference to other similar institutions in USA and China. And, as his health problems started, leading to General Satish Nambiar standing in for him, the report made a clear case for setting up the NDU. Ironically, the Government has taken years and years to take the NDU forward but a couple of days ago, there was a news item that land in Haryana has been identified for the proposed NDU. It should be dedicated to Subrahmanyam.

A far more intense relationship evolved in 2005/2006 when he led the PM's Task Force on 'US global strategy: Emerging trends and long-term implications'. Subrahmanyam chaired and led. I was part of his seven-member team. His leadership was just amazing. He went into history to help each of us understand US strategy over decades and, then, to discuss and determine what India's strategy should be on each key issue — defence, economy and trade, energy and technology.

The chairman set a tough time deadline, which called for two-day meetings every two weeks. It was an incredible experience. And, the process included meeting everyone from whom we could learn and understand on issues relating to our scope of work. When the report was done, with a great deal of personal dictation by him, we had the privilege to make a presentation to the PM and his team of senior officials for nearly two hours. Much of what has happened in Indo-US relations flows from the thoughts and ideas of Mr Subrahmanyam.

Another area he influenced enormously was the whole process of Track-2 Dialogue, even though he, personally, could only personally participate once in Jaipur. He taught us the value of Track-2, the ability to speak freely, to listen to equally frank views on India from our counterparts, and the impact of all of this on building mutual, shared, understanding.

In discussing Indo-US defence cooperation, which he felt was extremely important now and in the future, he once famously referred to the inglorious past when “the Americans would not give India even a screw”! This shook up everyone at the Dialogue, as he delved into his phenomenal memory to share anecdotes and true stories of past experiences.

Over the years, Mr Subrahmanyam came to teach us, more and more, of the vital importance of India being strong, based on two pillars. Economic strength and military/defence strength. And, this strength was crucial to earn global respect and credibility. A weak India was not good for India or the world. But, a strong, balanced, mature, centrist India, a non-threatening India, was critical. A simple message, yet to be implemented with the seriousness it deserves.

He believed, as I understood him, that India must not be isolated. India must work in partnership. And, a key partnership in his view was with the US, because of India’s own national interest. Defence, economy, energy and technology agendas of India always led to the USA. This message is being followed, slowly but steadily.

A man with a towering mind. A deep sense of history, as well as of the future. A meticulous person. A ‘national’ as well as ‘international’ man. Of high integrity and strong purpose. He is living proof that you can contribute from outside government to shaping a nation’s thinking, policies and action. I salute Mr K Subrahmanyam, a man with a national agenda and no private agenda.

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