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Reflections on India's Foreign Policy: Today and Tomorrow

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The canvas of Indian foreign policy rests on the strong foundation of Indian democracy. This large country, of almost continental proportions, with a huge and diverse population has enjoyed political stability, relative social harmony and order, a fast rate of economic growth, peaceful civil-military relations and is steadily meeting its goals of development. While it has not been an easy journey, it is a widely held view in the world that India is well on the way to becoming a leading global power. In the future, the definition of great or leading power must also incorporate beside strategic and economic strength, the recognition of India as a great democracy.

Today, the world is changing faster than it spins along its axis. We are experiencing the full tide of populism in an Age of Anger, of entitlement, of ambition, of impatience about the lack of fulfilment of ambition. Foreign policy is impacted by these trends. It is said we operate in the virtual public square. Diplomacy is conducted in an amphitheatre. Democratic politics is a game of survival, as Walter Lippmann once said, and the public exercises a massive veto on any change of course. The adversary cannot be appeased, crusading righteousness cannot be compromised, no peace with accommodation can be negotiated. Ours is the age of nationalism. Patriotism is worn on the sleeve, liberal is a frowned-upon adjective, and national sovereignty and autonomy are the guiding lights. The execution of foreign policy in India is no exception to this trend. Our Pakistan and China policies are examples of this. There is little scope for adjustment or accommodation.

The other aspect is that our foreign policy, like the Indian ethos itself, tends to evolve glacially. Tradition, habit and the hesitations of history, are not jettisoned easily. We are as a nation, risk averse which can also be interpreted as being that India can never act imprudently or rashly. The important question is how to realign or reset our policy approaches in the face of stiff strategic competition from China in various sectors of strategic and economic development, in terms of political influence in our neighbourhood, her muscular assertiveness on territorial issues, and her providing all the strategic props that our incubus, Pakistan needs.

China is not averse to restricting the space for India's rise on the world stage than treating it as a co-equal partner representative of the aspirations of a large cross-section of humanity.

India has tried to hedge national weight and power by leveraging various relationships now called partnerships of varying grades of special importance. With the United States, she has what is a strong and indispensable partnership built on shared values, strong defence and maritime security cooperation, and a multi-faceted, people-centred trade, economic, business, innovation and energy partnership. With Russia, for what is a relationship considerably diluted from the Soviet heydays, it is a "special and privileged partnership" but still crucially important in the defence sphere, while with Japan, a strong and steadfast friend, and a clear favourite with all shades of Indian opinion, it is a "strategic and global partnership".

The term partnership therefore has many avatars. Even with China, a long-term adversary, India has a "strategic partnership for peace and prosperity". One cannot also discount the new conclaves of important economies like the G-20, the BRICS, the democratization of global economic and financial power with the inception of the New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank – all of which speak the new grammar of distribution of global influence in a metaphorically flatter world.

All foreign policy is about self-interest. While the term non-alignment appears to be more archival than current, it provides the muscle memory for what operates as strategic autonomy today, and the strong adherence among policy-making elite hierarchies in India to shun total dependence on any country, and to avoid any impression of subordination to a foreign power, a legacy closely held since the days of our founding fathers. India seeks recognition as a leading power, and such status has to be achieved on her own worth and merits, demonstrating that she has ingested a history that contains many hard lessons learnt from the experience of subordinating her interests in centuries past to foreign domination at great and often unredeemable cost.



Regardless of the party in power, there is, therefore, a broad continuum in Indian foreign policy. The last four years have not seen any deviation from the norm, except for much greater and energetic leadership-level visibility and the declared intention to make India a “vishwaguru” or leading power. The fundamental aims of strategic autonomy, independence of action, non-interventionism overseas except for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, being a democratic, responsible stakeholder, continue from the previous Congress-led government although the Hindu nationalist tradition is to reject Nehruvian thought. There is, as has been observed, no new ‘normative agenda’ for Indian foreign policy.

Geography as has been said, is relentless. That, with historical memory, shapes India’s foreign policy. The control of the rim-land, to use Mackinder’s term, surrounding India is now dominated by China, both as a result of her presence in and occupation of Tibet, and in the 21st century her leveraging of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia, through Kashmir into Pakistan and the development of Gwadar port at the apex of the Arabian Sea. In many ways, Gwadar has the potential to be China’s Nicobar given its position near the Straits of Hormuz.

Here, the strategic space is restricted for India in a noose-like manner; China has made similar inroads into Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The unresolved boundary question between India and China concerning their 3488 km. long border is only one part of the problem. The larger one is of two newly risen powers colliding with each other in their quest for global weight and influence.

One substantive Indian move has been not to buy into China’s Belt and Road Initiative which is purely self-interest-propelled Chinese grand strategy to seek vantage positions both on the Asian rim-land and in the oceanic space that surrounds us. India’s reticence on the issue is paying off since the need for open consultation, financial transparency, following prescribed international procedures for funding such projects, avoiding unviable debt burdens, respect for sovereignty are all being recognized by countries like Japan, the United States and Australia.

The Chinese world view and methods of operation are definitely not tailored to meet global requirements and procedures in undertaking development and infrastructure projects. And Chinese spokesmen have also articulated this poorly, hardly reassuring their Asian neighbours. There is a propagandist feel to their statements.

The future that lies ahead will also see a militarily strong and economically powerful China increasingly supporting authoritarian regimes, corrupt leaders known for their violation of human rights, and turning a blind eye to bad governance. The only human right that China has long recognised is the right to development. The relationship with China is therefore at the heart of Indian foreign policy. India’s tryst with destiny is also India’s race against China. This also makes the canvas of India’s foreign policy operation so much more complex and challenging. A key strategic challenge is how the clash of Chinese and Indian ambitions in the Indo-Pacific will play out.

To deal with this emerging scenario would require that India wear much larger shoes than it does at present. The defence partnership with the United States, and the cooperation and coordination with Japan, the strengthening of the Quad with Australia, will all need to be tackled with much more assertiveness and less hesitation than before. It is in our interest to seek such coalitions even if they are not alliances. The Act East policy needs to be implemented through moves that ensure much more visibility for India in Southeast Asia, leveraging strengths in democratic governance, historical and cultural ties, the Indian diaspora, technology, military and naval expertise and outreach, sales of defence equipment, trade and economic ties and speedily executed development assistance to some of the member countries of ASEAN.

In terms of strategic dialogue, outreach and cooperation, countries like Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam need special focus. The proper leveraging of these relationships will enable the acceptance of India as more than just a South Asian nation, and acknowledgement of its Southeast Asian identity as our Northeast so clearly expresses, and the fact that the orientation of our Andaman and Nicobar island chain is both South and Southeast Asian.



This focus and energetic overtures on the Act East policy are vitally important for Indian diplomacy today for otherwise, there is the risk that the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative by China will steadily erode the relevance of the former.

The Asian context is a fluctuating and fluid one. All conditions and no rules seem to apply. In our own neighbourhood, the collapse of SAARC has only exposed the static nature of regional politics and intergovernmental relations. Terrorism of the cross-border variety has paralysed the prospects of dialogue between India and Pakistan, and relations with our other neighbours, barring Bhutan, are beset with their own contradictions. India is a natural partner for all her South Asian neighbours, barring Pakistan, by the logic of geography, history, economy, mutual security, culture, ethnicity, traditions and soft power. China cannot take her place.

Our profile in the region needs to be consolidated on these natural strengths. We must understand well the Kautilyan advice that a great power loses stature if it is bogged down in neighbourhood entanglements. In the same breath, there is little way out of our problems with Pakistan but to ceaselessly advocate an open channel of diplomatic communication and dialogue with simultaneous effort to ensure the international isolation of the supporters of terror within its state system.

India's foreign policy must possess the inherent flexibility to juggle various interests, goals, and relationships. Dialogue with a country like China is as important as working on other fronts to create a balance of interests with like-minded partners to build the muscle, the interdependence, the strength and the smart diplomacy that Asia is our shared space. Dialogue need not mean supplicating to China. Weakness is always exploited by the Chinese. Strategic ambiguity about Tibet, for instance, need not spell disaster. The Dalai Lama is India's true friend. And in Indian tradition, loyalty to our friends, is a fundamental truth. One of the declared aims Indian foreign policy today is that with leading power status the country's legitimate right to be a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council must be recognized and granted.

This quest is an ongoing one. While the international system has yet to yield on this front, we must continue the fight. Fundamental principles of international law and justice have been ignored in Iraq, Libya and Syria. But the work of the U.N in the fields of development, gender rights, human rights, poverty alleviation, human health vindicates its continued relevance. A larger and leading role for countries like India can help sustain that relevance and meaning.

When India's foreign service was created in the late forties of the last century, the world was a vastly different place. A newly independent India, led by a cosmopolitan cohort of men and women who were equally comfortable in east and west, exerted an influence far beyond the weight of a poor and nascent democracy. Until the debacle of 1962, India was an active mediator and bridge builder between the two blocs in the Cold War, on issues like the Korean Peninsula conflict and Indo-China. Today, our aspirations to be a leading power do not encompass the ambition to articulate voice and agency in mitigating the causes of conflict in the world. More national introspection is required in this regard. We need to define what a leading power or vishwaguru means. It cannot just mean leading by the power of example, the example of one's culture and civilization, and attachment to peace and responsible international behaviour.

Our goodness is taken for granted, but not our ability to make a difference for the good of the world. The power of soft power is one thing, but there is much more to the definition of a comprehensively imagined and structured nation, and the foreign policy process that will make any country a force to reckon on the world stage. That, is the challenge for India.

There is of course, need for more 'hands on deck'. Our foreign service is an extremely small one, in terms of numbers. If we are to transact all our growing responsibilities efficiently on the world stage, we need a far larger cohort of diplomats who are drawn from the best institutions, with a solid training in international law and international relations, skills in articulation and presentation, and who are specialists in various fields of foreign policy.



It was Jawaharlal Nehru who said in one of his celebrated Constituent Assembly speeches, "What does independence consist of? It consists fundamentally and basically of foreign relations. That is the test of independence. All else is local autonomy." The logic and import of those words should provide enough reason for us to reflect on why a country's foreign policy and its drivers and executors should be its best and brightest because the stakes involved are so high, and so much depends on their ability to ensure India's rightful place among the leading powers of the world.

Today, diplomacy is being redefined by so many voices and threats. Rapid fire communication, false news, bots and memes, require laser-like accuracy in response so that the policy maker is the one who calls the shots and has the credibility that ensures popular acceptance. Cyber security has also emerged as a new equation that demands not only technical skills but also interaction by our diplomats and area specialists with cyber-specialists so that necessary synchronization in dealing with threats is ensured.

Foreign policy today plays out in a world where a single tweet storm replaces years of carefully conceived policy or covenants of peace, as the signals from Washington on the North Korean issue, and the rescinding by the U.S of the JCPOA on Iran, indicate. Today, the challenge for India is to execute a foreign policy that is aligned towards ensuring that we do not abandon old friends, while at the same time exhibiting strategic boldness and vision in expanding relations with new partners, especially the United States, based on clear assessments, balancing relations with adversaries like China in South and Southeast Asia, energizing our Act East policy much more, and concentrating on facilitating a South Asian Commons through better inter-regional cooperation in development and security, with the exception of Pakistan. With the latter, we need recognition of the fact that we must move away from public histrionics to sober dialogue and measured communication and consolidating the support of all our partners and collaborators for this policy.

Our path to leading power status (and being a great democracy) cannot avoid the responsibilities of dealing with Pakistan without the protracted contest and conflict that has marked the last seventy years.

Ultimately, the test of India's greatness will be won on the basis of how we solve the challenges of growth, energy security (this is particularly important in the context of the collapse of the Iran Deal), human security, development, longstanding disputes with our neighbours, and the creation of equality and wealth within. The story of China's rise as far as the grasp of wealth and power, proves this.

Our policy of strategic autonomy and independence of action, must now be made more effective by smart diplomacy that consolidates partnerships that are critical to our future power and influence, that balances and checks our adversaries, that enables the flow of new ideas, innovation, investment and technology, and provides the strategic space in which to grow stronger and more resilient internally. And, we should be less reticent about sharing our experience of constitutional democracy globally as an international public good.

Beyond this, we should be able to leverage our position in the heart of Asia and the Indian Ocean to safeguard our security, trading and maritime interests in ensuring the safety of sea lanes of communication. Diplomacy and foreign policy are intrinsically linked to strong defence and security and accelerated economic growth. Strength in these last three areas reinforces diplomacy and raises the prestige and profile of the country.

Changing global equations cannot alter the primal importance of these factors. Foreign policy obviously has to calibrate itself to deal with these changes, but its strength and efficacy comes from internal societal equilibrium, rapid and inclusive economic progress and wise leadership within the country.

