

Hallmarks of Current Indian Foreign Policy

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Identifying the factors that cause changes in the foreign policy of a country is rather contentious for they will invariably be linked with both systemic factors as well as international and domestic politics. The end of the Cold War meant that India needed to strengthen existing partnerships as well as look for new strategic partners; at the same time, it had to take measures to overcome its financial difficulties. The change of the political regime in India in 2014 has not drastically altered India's position on various issues, but strategic commentators and analysts suggest that the commencement of the present regime in 2014 has led to a new found 'robustness' in Indian foreign policy wherein 'pragmatism, not principle, and delivery, not doctrine'¹ are the hallmarks - both lacking in the last two decades. However, the bigger issue is whether this is strong enough to overcome the challenges emanating from India's neighbourhood, as well as withstand pressures from the 'super' as well as other global powers.

Legacy and Lost Opportunities

The contribution of Jawaharlal Nehru in shaping India's foreign policy has been well documented. The circumstances under which India formulated its foreign policy then were largely shaped by both international and domestic forces. Indeed, the decade of the 1950s was that of a 'unified idealism'.² During this period, as a 'normative power', India sought to delegitimise imperialism as well as make its presence felt in the anti-apartheid movement; it also sought to be the voice of the developing world.³ T. Zinkin's article 'Indian Foreign Policy: An Interpretation of Attitudes' (1955) highlights the role of Nehru for having 'the rare gift of saying what the average Indian feels', and seldom faced any opposition from the Socialists or the Communists or from his partymen.⁴ Nehru's personality was overpowering and, as such, his ideas and power had 'no real competitor'. He 'sought and received advice

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from an inner circle'.⁵ V. K. Krishna Menon once remarked: 'so far as the public was concerned, the presentation and handling (of foreign policy) was his.'⁶ There might not be unanimity regarding what constitutes 'Nehruvian idealism'; but it did stress upon the 'notions of morality in international relations, and a strong belief in India's moral leadership.'⁷

Indeed, immediately after Independence, the country's foreign and strategic outlook was shaped by four factors: 'India is only recently free. India is coloured. India is in Asia. India is desperately poor.'⁸ The policy of being non-aligned was a 'strategic as well as a principled choice, calculated to advance the cause of peace in a divided world.'⁹ For Nehru, the Cold War's bipolar distribution of power left little room for national autonomy.¹⁰ The policy of being non-aligned 'gave India pre-eminence among developing countries', and this was well reflected in the 'success of the 1955 Bandung Conference, which laid the groundwork for the Non-Aligned Movement and exhibited a spirit of cooperation between China and India.'¹¹ The 'Panchsheel' principles might have laid the foundation for an 'idealist world order', but the Sino-India border conflict in 1962 firmly shattered such aspirations. Indeed, the Nehru era was characterised by 'high prestige and little achievement.'¹² Post the 1971 war, India did emerge as the undisputed leader of the Subcontinent; but its prowess continued to remain rather muted, partly because of the sluggish economy and 'Hindu rate of growth'.¹³ The 1970s and the 1980s were a period of 'intermittent realism'¹⁴ as it witnessed the growing dominance of India in the Subcontinent, and also witnessed the disastrous IPKF mission to Sri Lanka. But, importantly, the Indo-Soviet nexus became the cornerstone of Indian foreign policy during this period.¹⁵

Changes in the international environment and the emergence of transnational challenges have ensured that the foreign policies of states, processes, as well as goals continue to remain dynamic. During the 1990s, India became more of a 'reluctant power' than a normative power.¹⁶ Economic reforms were initiated, and attempts were made to reach out to Southeast Asia nations through the Look East Policy. The tightening of the 'encirclement' of India by China and the Sino-Pak nexus ensured that India had to be ready for the next phase of foreign policy where it had to be more pragmatic as well as 'defensive'.

The changed international environment and new pressures ensured that India had to charter a new course in its foreign policy. As such, the advent of a post-Nehruvian phase of foreign policy-making was most conspicuously signalled by India's 1998 nuclear tests, marking a break from its long and

principled adherence to global nuclear disarmament.¹⁷ The Vajpayee administration, however, also ensured commitment to a 'no first use policy', which reassured the global community that India was a peaceful and responsible nuclear power. In an anarchical world order, the concept of 'defensive realism' can be attributed to explaining this nuclear posture of India which believes that 'states generally pursue moderate strategies as the best route to security'.¹⁸ Clearly, 'Operation Shakti' was aimed to counter the threats emanating from China.¹⁹ Though sanctions were imposed by the Clinton administration, post 9/11, strategic and economic factors ensured that India and the US warm up to each other's concerns. The rapid expansion of Indo-Israel military ties also reflected that foreign policy under the Vajpayee government had moved from the 'age of strategic autonomy' to the 'age of multi-alignment'.²⁰

The 2008 India-US civil nuclear deal was the highpoint of the Singh-Bush era, and it signalled the rise of powerful India which the USA could not afford to ignore anymore. However, this relation hit a roadblock when the Obama administration came to power. This period also saw issues of corruption being highlighted by the opposition, and the weakening of the office of the Prime Minister as the Congress Chairperson became more intrusive in everyday administration. The nuclear liability issue led to further complications between the two largest democracies. The arrest of Devyani Khobragade in the USA led to a diplomatic impasse. However, with the ushering in of the new administration in 2014, things have changed, and the process of derailment which had set in during the latter part of the UPA government seems to have been rectified.

The Current Period

Over the years, the nature of Indian foreign policy has evolved to meet the needs of its times. Kanti Bajpai argues that Indian foreign policy can be understood from three schools of thought: 'Nehruvianism; neoliberalism; and hyper-realism'. Each of these has focused on certain key areas. The Nehruvian school was about 'non-alignment as the key to India's security'; the neoliberal school was about 'Prime Minister Narasimha Rao (1991–1996) and his pragmatism in building closer relations with the USA, and putting economics at the centre of Indian strategy'; the hyper-realists emphasise the need for 'India to be more attentive to a balance-of-power approach in international affairs', and 'China as the biggest threat'.²¹

The 2014 BJP manifesto stated very little about India's foreign policy goals and relations with other states. This left considerable scope for interpretation as to what kind of policy would be pursued by the NDA once it comes to power. Pledging the 'Nation First Universal Brotherhood', the manifesto states:

BJP believes a resurgent India must get its rightful place in the comity of nations and international institutions. The vision is to fundamentally reboot and reorient the foreign policy goals, content and process, in a manner that locates India's global strategic engagement in a new paradigm and on a wider canvass, that is not just limited to political diplomacy, but also includes our economic, scientific, cultural, political and security interests, both regional and global, on the principles of equality and mutuality, so that it leads to an economically stronger India, and its voice is heard in the international fora.²²

Since becoming the Prime Minister in 2014, Narendra Modi has visited more than 84 countries in the last four years, with the objective of enhancing mutual understanding and strengthening India's relations with countries across a wide range of sectors, including trade, investment, technology, development partnership, and people-to-people ties.²³ It is quite clear that the Modi administration has become more visible and vocal. At the very least, observers have noted that 'the difference between Modi and his predecessors is a matter of energy and style', which will produce clear changes in how India's ruling party would approach, perform, and delineate governance.²⁴ It is important to highlight that the nature of response to a complex international as well as domestic problem by the ruling establishment will depend upon numerous factors - psychological, societal, ideational, political, institutional, and material.²⁵ Importantly, the position of the leaders in the party and the party's strength in the parliament will have long term repercussions on how a government responds to complex issues and challenges. What has helped strengthen Prime Minister Modi's position amidst the public and in the Lok Sabha is the fact that the BJP obtained an unprecedented mandate from the electorate, and Prime Minister Modi's own position remains unchallenged from all quarters. Indeed, 'Modi can be counted among the few Indian prime ministers, including Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, who have enjoyed absolute command over foreign policy matters in India'.²⁶

The Modi government's initiatives since 2014 seem to represent a more 'energized version of earlier foreign policy changes.'²⁷ Under the Modi regime, Indian foreign policy has changed substantially from 'cautious prudence' and 'non-alignment' by 'toughen[ing] its public posture towards Islamabad and

Beijing in both substance and style'.²⁸ The 2016 'surgical strikes' reflect a tougher stance towards Pakistan and terrorism. However, while it was a tactical success as it achieved its very immediate goals, it was criticised by the Opposition since India continues to be exposed to multiple terrorist strikes from across the border.²⁹ It must be highlighted that surgical strikes have taken place before too. Operation All Clear in 2005 was aimed at eliminating militant groups of Northeast India in Bhutan. Likewise, a surgical strike was also conducted on the Naga militants hiding in Myanmar in 2015.³⁰ However, unlike in Bhutan and Myanmar, the importance of the surgical strike in Pakistan is that it was done in a territory where the government in power had always been the 'trouble maker' for Indian security forces.

While India has supported the cause of Palestine in numerous UN resolutions, 'strategic hyphenation between India and Israel' seems to be the key.³¹ Prime Minister Modi has reached out to the USA in spite of India-US relations having a complicated past, and he himself being barred from travelling to the USA. In 2015, a New Framework for Defence Cooperation was renewed. The signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016 was a major boost for the relations between the two countries. This 'gives access, to both countries, to designated military facilities on either side for the purpose of refuelling and replenishment'.³² President Trump has supported 'India's early membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Wassenaar Arrangement, and the Australia Group, and a permanent membership on a reformed United Nations Security Council'.³³ However, tough negotiations are in store. While a strategic convergence between the two largest democracies continues to grow, the landmark agreement to acquire S-400 Triumph surface-to-air missile squadrons from Russia has not gone down well with the Trump administration, and now there are threats of sanctions being imposed on India. The big boost under the Modi administration has been the visit of Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to India, which marked the strengthening of bilateral cooperation between India and Japan in key areas, and stressed the need for close cooperation between the Indian Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF).³⁴ Prime Minister Modi's visit to Israel was the first ever by an Indian Prime Minister, and the two countries signed nine agreements in various sectors, including cyber-security, oil and gas, solar energy, space science, air transport, medicines, and film production.³⁵ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) arms database, India is by far the largest client for the Israeli defence industry.³⁶ Essentially, a multi-alignment policy seems to have been heralded under the Modi regime. Therefore, recent changes in India's

position on Israel, China, and the Middle East reflect that 'Indian foreign policy [i]s now finally pragmatic, in that it [i]s realist in orientation, and shorn of the morality and ideational constraints of Nehruvianism'.³⁷

The key departure from the past is that this new policy is more visible. Prime Minister Modi has been given rock star receptions in the USA, Canada, and Sydney. His charisma and ability to woo the Indian Diaspora has been a remarkable asset. The use of social media for public outreach and making the process of application and issuing of passports and visas easier have been big positives for the Indian traveller and for foreigners. The promotion of International Yoga Day has been very well received globally. However, beyond the issues of soft power, several challenges remain: a troubled neighbourhood, an uncertain world hegemon, as well as transnational challenges like terrorism and global warming.

Some critics argue that 'Modi's China and Pakistan policies ... have failed to deliver'.³⁸ The Doklam episode reveals that tackling China will be a difficult obstacle. China continues to claim its lost territories, and India seems to be rather under-equipped - 'politically' rather than militarily - to deal with this challenge. Modi's policy on China, Pakistan, and Kashmir continues to be targeted by the opposition. The key problem is that India is not accepted as South Asia's natural leader or spokesperson, and while it may have 'regional weight and influence', it does not have the capacity to change the policies of its neighbours that it would like to see changed'.³⁹ The Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh was a major diplomatic coup for the Modi regime; but the Teesta water sharing agreement with Bangladesh continues to be a sticking point because regional leader Mamta Banerjee continues to oppose any kind of activity that will compromise the interests of the state of West Bengal. Bhutan is strategically important for India; but relations between India and Bhutan have been marred by China's intrusive policies in the recent past, even as China is becoming more assertive vis-à-vis the Himalayan kingdom. Meanwhile, the other Himalayan country, Nepal, was incidentally one of the first countries to welcome China's Border and Road Initiative (BRI). And, as strategic analysts have pointed out, this was the most critical step by Nepal in going out of the Indian sphere of influence. China continues to invest heavily in Nepal. The Nepalese Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's decision to not let the country's army participate in the joint military drill of the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation)⁴⁰ is a major sign that all is not well between the two Hindu dominated countries of South Asia.

India's maritime neighbour Sri Lanka is a new source of trouble for

Indian foreign policy makers. China has invested heavily in building infrastructure in this island nation. China's projects in Sri Lanka continue to be a 'strategic threat to India, with analysts calling the Hambantota port a part of China's 'string of pearls', beginning at the Straits of Malacca and dotting the Indian Ocean that circles India's coastline'.⁴¹ India's ties with another oceanic country, Mauritius (one of the key nodes to India's maritime security), have also been strained at times. However, a bigger problem in store is the nose dive in India-Maldives relations. Maldives has been gripped by political uncertainty and religious fundamentalism; as by growing Chinese presence in the archipelago which could have serious security implications for India.⁴²

India's Act East Policy continues to remain ambitious. India-ASEAN ties have been strengthened over the years but benefits for Northeast India from this policy continue to be 'peripheral'. A muscular foreign policy can only be possible when economic strength can be translated into political and military muscle.⁴³ India's Neighbourhood First policy has come under scrutiny from different quarters. Geographically, being at the centre of South Asia, India is the key to any kind of development or trade initiative. Multilateral projects that seek to bypass India will never be a success; however, the presence of India alone cannot ensure the success of any multilateral project. There needs to be continued economic growth and investment in its neighbourhood, or else there are other global powers that are waiting to replace India's position in multilateral projects. A pragmatic foreign policy has been initiated by the Modi government, and a series of bilateral as well as multilateral agreements have been signed with many countries. Relations with traditional friends, like Russia, have been strengthened. India has also branched out to make new friends. However, India's neighbouring countries too have become more adventurous and sought out new partners. China, with its aggressive economic posture and relentless pressure, has ensured that it becomes the next big actor in world politics. This has made western powers uncomfortable and subtle strategies to counter China are being chalked out through alliances, treaties, multilateral trade investments, projects, and strategic cooperation between nations.

In the larger picture, India can become the 'swing state'⁴⁴ of world politics. For this to happen, the Modi regime will have to do more externally - that is, take up more responsibilities and continue to invest in the neighbourhood. It will also have to make more efforts domestically, particularly in reducing political and social cleavages in the country. A federal framework, a vociferous opposition, the growth of regional parties, and the emergence of coalition politics have made the task for Prime Minister Modi more difficult. Additionally,

Prime Minister Modi's willingness to accept religious and other forms of bigotry within India could eventually pose a threat to his ambitions to gain higher status for the country on the world stage.⁴⁵ The coming years will be a test for the Modi regime - making new friends, meeting new challenges, and safeguarding regional interests will prove to be a herculean task.

Notes :

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- ³ Ian Hall, 'Narendra Modi and India's Normative Power', *International Affairs*, 93: 1, 2017, doi: 10.1093/ia/iiv004, p.113.
- ⁴ Taya Zinkin, 'Indian Foreign Policy: An Interpretation of Attitudes', *World Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Jan., 1955, pp. 179-180.
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- ⁶ W. K. Andersen, 'The Domestic Roots of Indian Foreign Policy', *Asian Affairs: an American Review*, 10(3), 1983, doi:10.1080/00927678.1983.10553720, p. 45.
- ⁷ Manjari Chatterjee Miller and Kate Sullivan De Estrada, 'Pragmatism in Indian foreign policy: how Ideas Constrain Modi', *International Affairs*, 93: 1 (2017) 27-49; doi: 10.1093/ia/iiv001, p. 30.
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- ¹⁶ Ian Hall, 'Narendra Modi and India's normative power', *International Affairs* 93: 1, 2017, 113–131; doi: 10.1093/ia/iw004, p.119; See also, Sandra Destradi, 'Reluctance in International Politics: a Conceptualization', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23(2), 2017, doi: 10.1177/1354066116653665, pp. 315–340.
- ¹⁷ Manjari Chatterjee Miller and Kate Sullivan De Estrada, 'Pragmatism in Indian Foreign Policy: how Ideas Constrain Modi', *International Affairs*, 93: 1, 2017, doi: 10.1093/ia/iw001, p. 30.
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- ¹⁹ India's Defence Minister George Fernandes declared China as the country's 'potential threat number one', and said India was surrounded by Chinese military and naval activity. For more details, see 'China is potential threat number one', 4 May 1998, available at <http://expressindia.indianexpress.com/fe/daily/19980504/12455554.html>, accessed 10.10.2018.
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