

Managing the Emerging Challenges of Indian Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Since independence Indian foreign policy has refined and evolved, a great deal like that of all other major nations. The basic premises of non-alignment, Panchsheel too have changed and national interest of the country as perceived by the government of the day has become paramount. While it was dictated and directed by hardcore politicians till the nineties, a fair degree of professional expertise in the domain has now become an integral part of the core decision-making process in South Block. There have emerged new challenges as well as opportunities in this field to supplement our national interests and developmental priorities. Using the emerging opportunities in the context of such challenges requires us to be dynamic, flexible and grounded to reality.

Keywords: Indian foreign policy, foreign policy, India, national interest, diplomacy, Panchsheel, Jammu and Kashmir

Introduction

One of the widely accepted notions of foreign policy is that it is dynamic, constantly evolving and a nation with national interests as its guiding principle, will have to keep it refined, broadly flexible in line with the changing global equations and scenario. In India's post-independence era, the world has been witness to some very historic developments like the beginning and end of cold war, the disintegration of once mighty Soviet Union, the integration of Germany, Vietnam, Korea, Iran-Iraq wars, Afghanistan and Syria conflicts, US-Iraq Gulf war and the very latest Covid-19 pandemic plaguing the whole world with severe political, economic and strategic implications in near and medium-term future.

A study in the independent India's foreign policy brings out some interesting observations. One, the country during the first six decades of its independence, mostly remained a moral force with a broadly static foreign policy, hovering around idealist notions of Non-Alignment, Panchsheel, Disarmament and unity of developing world, even at the cost of realpolitik and national interests. On global platform, India's voice was largely ignored, except on certain moral issues like disarmament and world peace where calls for Gandhian ideals were

used by all interesting parties, subject to their respective national interests. Two, in economic, political and military issues, India at most, turned into a peripheral player whose voice was considered but exploited to suit interests of major players. It was of course, given a major role in most of the UN Peacekeeping Operations, probably some kind of consolatory role. Three, restructuring or formation of UNSC to NSG, MTCR or economic or military blocks, mostly eluded India, so much for India's leading voice of the developing world. Fourth, in the post WTO-era it was only the late nineties when economic reforms brought about some radical economic changes and country's demographic dividend started getting recognition that India secured some real global attention.

Now in spite of being endowed with so much of natural and human resources and historical, cultural linkages, how is it that India has failed to secure a 'rightful place under the Sun,' so far. My article tries to traverse through post-independence era with important foreign policy or diplomatic milestones trying to identify reasons for failures or successes.

Objectives

It is a fact that national interest is and ought to be the predominant factor in determining the diplomatic and foreign policy moves by the government of the day. A vibrant and argumentative democracy that India is, however been, subject to different opinions/interpretations, has failed to capitalize on available opportunities. Through this paper, I intend to portray my own assessment on India's major foreign policy moves over the years, how some of them have let us down while a few have helped to achieve our national interests in more effective ways.

Indian Foreign Policy in Post- Independent Era

An important development that one notices in India's post-independence period is that the international relations has changed, evolved and constantly been dynamic. While in the 1940s, politically and militarily, UK, Germany, France and Japan were the leading international players, the next decade saw emergence of the US and erstwhile Soviet Union as global superpowers and these countries turning allies of USA. In the 1950s India emerged as the spokesman of the developing world, however, the 1962 debacle at the hands of China and faulty economic policies and limited economic growth diminished its role at the global fora subsequently.

At the time of Indian independence in August, 1947 our country had very different needs and priorities. The most important were establishing a peaceful

societal order and then embarking on the path of peace and prosperity for the country. No wonder, wounds of partition and seeds of discontentment and hatred bowed by the erstwhile British rulers had to be tackled and it necessitated some manoeuvring that subsequently led to the political unification of India. That was followed up with setting up of a constitutional democratic framework of the country in the form of a Sovereign, Democratic, Republic of India. Five-Year Plans with a target-oriented approach was initiated to promote the socio-economic development of the country.

However, unlike countries like China and a few other Asian-African nations who secured nationhood in the late forties and early fifties and had foreign policy at the bottom of their priorities, for India the case was dramatically the opposite. Thanks to Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India who himself was passionate about issues relating to foreign policy and had himself kept this portfolio with him till his entire reign, ensured that India remain at the crux of global politics. From the happenings at the UNO to the foundation of Non-Aligned Movement, to taking a hard line stance against Israel in its dispute against the Arab World to trying to broker peace in Suez Canal conflict and creating a big group of African-Asian developing nations, India could be seen in most places, doing something irrespective of how and what far that helped in promoting our national interest, is a matter of interpretation.

Era of Cold War

The concept of Cold War and the emergence of two power blocks in the form of NATO and Warsaw Pact had then become a reality on the global landscape. India at that time required huge amounts of financial and political support from the western world backed World Bank, IMF and also from individual countries like the USA, UK, West Germany (at that time) and also technological support from them and also from eastern block led by Soviet Union. Geopolitical realities of the time demanded trying to keep all leading countries of the two blocks in good humour and forging the Non-Aligned Movement thus, could be construed as the most important reason behind this development. We also needed time to enhance our socio-economic growth and that needed time and resources to focus on peace and order within our territories. The concept of non-alignment along with Panchsheel as our guiding principles with non-interference in other countries affairs, probably was the reason behind this line of thinking.

However, in the overenthusiastic espousal of peaceful co-existence in the form of Panchsheel and non-alignment, the decisions by the then Indian government virtually has hampered our growth, stature and political and strategic autonomy whose consequences we have been forced to bear for nearly seven decades. On the Kashmir issue when Indian army had an upper hand while dealing with the crisis, taking the issue to the UNO and letting it getting involved in the crisis, has neither helped India nor secured the security of our frontiers for all these years. Irrespective of our stated stand, Kashmir issue continues to attract global attention as one of the ‘disputes’ between India and Pakistan.

On Tibet too, when China surreptitiously got into the defenceless nation in 1954 we should have got alarmed as the buffer zone between two big Asian nations on the arduous, mountainous terrains of Himalayas had fallen. The then American administration’s repeated warnings that India should oppose Tibet’s illegal annexation by China was ignored due to political reasons by Indian government thereby putting our own security in jeopardy since then The sheer mishandling of Indian foreign policy and getting its priorities wrong, led to the 1962 debacle against the Chinese. Instead of focusing on our security and enhancing strategic autonomy, our foreign policy mandarins were busy tackling various disputes and conflicts around the world and trying to broker peace in some places even as unwanted and unsolicited.

Era of 1970s

In the early seventies, the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War and creation of a separate, sovereign state on our eastern frontier, certainly turned out to be one of our greatest foreign policy and military successes. On one side, it demolished the myth of India-Pakistan hyphenation in political and military terms, so far done by the western world in particular, it also enhanced our strategic options and military security

The integration of Sikkim into India from being an independent nation-state, could also be construed as a major milestone in Indian foreign policy. This tiny, beautiful state was being watched with interest by China for some time and India ensured that it does not become another Tibet. In the same year 1974, the first so-called Peaceful Nuclear Experiment (PNE), testing of a nuclear bomb by India may well be regarded as one of the major events that heralded a big change in India’s global outlook and stature and no doubt, it required a very crafty management of diplomacy during the time.

Era of 80s

In the later half of the eighties, major military exercises Operation Falcon, Operation Chequerboard and Operation Brasstacks under the stewardship of brilliant General Sunderji, the then Chief of Indian Army Staff also turned a new leaf into the Indian foreign policy domain. Though not widely reported, these exercises perhaps for the first time, gave Indian state an element of confidence of the ability to militarily handle two-known adversaries, China and Pakistan, simultaneously.

Era of 90s

In the early nineties, the focus with regard to India was mostly on economic reforms initiated by Narasimha Rao government. Rightly so, these reforms changed the very face of Indian polity, society, economy as well as diplomacy. However, establishment of India's total diplomatic relations with so far shunned states of South Africa and Israel, marked a very important phase of our diplomacy. How did the government and foreign policy establishment manage to do so in spite of tremendous domestic and foreign opposition and convince the middle east Arab states of India's continued friendly interests with them, certainly must be a testimony that needs to be told someday. The six nuclear tests conducted in June, 1998 to be followed by initiation of dialogue with the US on India's formal nuclear status, marked another era of crossing of a threshold. The dialogue between late Jaswant Singh with Strobe Talbott of US and bringing of western powers on board with India's broader interests while publicly declaring China as a threat to Indian security, marked a new chapter in the management of Indian foreign policy. In the first decade of 21st century, the Indo-US Nuclear Deal with George Bush at the helm in the US, also saw a challenging and pragmatic agreement being worked out, keeping the greater national interests of India in mind. However, the 26/11 mayhem of Mumbai by the Pakistani establishment-backed terrorists and the government's lukewarm reaction to it, again saw red-faced Indian diplomatic fraternity, unsure of how to respond to such a blatant attack on country's sovereignty and the development again put the emerging challenges that confront our diplomacy.

Change in Political Leadership

With a change in government and leadership in 2014, our diplomacy too, has got into a new dimension. A pro-active, forward-looking and sometimes aggressive diplomacy has come to portray the new Indian diplomatic outlook. Calling all the SAARC heads of government/state to swearing-in ceremony of new government, a bigger push to SAARC and look East policy and a bold,

pragmatic reach to China emerged as major tenets of our diplomacy. In the emerging global scenario, with US being the undisputed superpower, a healthy commercial and strategic relationship with it was certainly required. This is something that we have seen developing with US as our largest trading partner, not to forget India having a huge trade surplus with it. Politically too, we have a healthy traditional relationship with the US over decades, except for the Nixon-Kissinger era, and that has continued. Post-WTO, with easier migration of human resources around the world, US, UK, Canada and Australia along with middle East have emerged as important destinations for Indians. No wonder, such flexibility in human movement has helped in facilitating better, more effective political and commercial relations with all such countries. In spite of the healthy state of Indo-US relationship, certain irritants remain. In the last decade or so, we have reduced our dependence on Russia for our armaments. We have diversified our defence imports basket and US, Israel and France have emerged as other options. However, securing substantial defence needs from the US does have its own pitfalls as happened in the case of Indian orders for Russian SS-40 defence system with the US threatening sanctions. On the petroleum front too, we are being forced to manage our relationship with Iran to keep the incumbent US President happy. With Russia, political and strategic relationship have continued and even flourished with PM Modi himself establishing a very warm personal rapport with Putin. With Iran too, ups and downs notwithstanding, India has continued with political and economic relationship with it at the highest levels. The building up of Chabahar Port to be used as a transit route up to Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan could later on turn into a commercial and strategic asset for India in its competition with China who have, some reports suggest, have already been developing Gwadar port near Karachi into a naval asset, of course, with an eye on India

Policy with Neighbours

Among neighbours, our relationship with Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan have improved well. As for Bhutan, while the previous UPA government had acceded to it getting into a diplomatic relationship with China, the Modi government quite sensibly, got into some deft manoeuvring and prevented the development which obviously would have had grave security implications, both for Bhutan and India. With Bangladesh too, Shiekh Hasina at the helm contentious issues like exchange of disputed enclaves, sharing of river waters, border smuggling has been amicably settled or are being talked about. Political and strategic relationship with Myanmar and Sri Lanka too have

improved. Maldives with a new president Ibrahim Solih has reversed the previous administration's explicit pro-China leanings. Dealing with OIC, especially energy diplomacy with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar will be interesting. And not to forget, relationship with Pakistan in short term is likely to remain frosty. Imran Khan with his explicitly personalized attacks against Modi has virtually closed doors behind any immediate peace overtures. However, for future, India politically and strategically needs to force China into a position where it will stop using client state Pakistan to hyphenate India and then deal bilaterally with it.

Conclusion:

Management of foreign policy in international relations is also strategic and multi-dimensional. The principles of PODSCORB are very much applicable in this domain too. Proper planning with effective organization and optimum utilization of available resources within the allocated budget are imperative for successful execution of a nation's diplomatic prowess and global perception. Similarly getting the right people in the right places and their co-ordination with all the concerned departments and divisions along with effective human resources will surely help a government to achieve its diplomatic objectives and protect and promote its national interests.

In the near term, dealing with internal conflicts like aftermath of abrogation of Article 370 and the countrywide anti-CAA protests, securing global attention have undoubtedly affected country's image abroad. And perception management in today's era of information warfare, is critical. On the external front, putting SAARC in the cold storage for long at the cost of BIMSTEC may not be a viable solution. Dealing with a Chinese patronized Communist ruling dispensation in Nepal while maintaining a strict vigil on Chinese military movements, close to Bhutanese borders are very significant. Balancing peace to maintaining territorial integrity and strategic parity with an overtly aggressive China, will play a big role in determining India's place in the global community. India's own role in South China Sea with China flexing muscles against smaller nations of the region and its likely aggression against Taiwan, are also areas where India's role as a passive onlooker or an active participant will mark an important development on the lines of one that happened in case of Tibet in fifties.

Finally, political stability and internal peace will be vital for India's diplomatic and strategic objectives. A rapid economic growth may help India in expanding its economic/commercial reach to Africa, South America, Asia and Europe,

emerge as a viable alternative to China's debt diplomacy and use the quad to strengthen its strategic and political objectives vis-a-vis China that may well decide India's course of journey on global platform in future.

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