

The Making of India's Foreign Policy: From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

P.S.Raghavan*

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office in May 2014, he promised to pursue a robust, pro-active foreign policy that would leverage India's strengths, create equities through our network of bilateral and multilateral engagements, and promote India's political, economic and security interests in the current global geopolitical flux.

This paper reviews the main elements of foreign policy, the challenges confronting it and the global geopolitical trends that have a major impact on it. It also looks at some factors that influence foreign policy in democratic societies, and important considerations for formulating and analysing foreign policy.

Foreign Policy Furthers National Objectives

Essentially, foreign policy is the external strategy adopted by a country to further its national objectives. India's national objectives are pretty clear: to achieve rapid and equitable economic growth, with the aim of becoming a developed country in the shortest possible time.

How can the foreign policy assist in this endeavour?

One, it has to create conducive conditions to enable India to preserve its sovereignty and territorial integrity. We may need external political support in

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*The author, Ambassador P. S. Raghavan, is presently the Convener of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB). ; a former Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi. A former Ambassador of India to the Czech Republic and to Ireland, he was till recently the Ambassador of India to Russia.

difficult situations. The Pakistani aggression in Jammu & Kashmir in 1947-48 and the subsequent pressures on India in the UN Security Council (UNSC) is an important example, where vetoes in UNSC by the USSR helped to protect our interests. In 1999, the US applied pressure on Pakistan, at an important juncture, to end its Kargil misadventure. Our network of external relations should also ensure that we have access to the best military technologies to strengthen our capability to defend our borders against external attack.

Two, we need to protect our autonomy to pursue political, economic and social policies, which we deem to be in our national interest. This requires strengthening key bilateral relationships which can help us deflect pressures, and building coalitions with like-minded countries for pursuing specific interests in multilateral organisations. Our strategic partnerships with the US, Russia and the European Union create space for our nuclear policies. We work with like-minded countries in WTO, IMF, World Bank and UN agencies to ward off intrusive prescriptions for our policies on social issues, agricultural subsidies, government procurement and others.

Three, we need to create conditions to attract foreign capital and technology into the Indian economy, as well as to maximise our access to markets and natural resources in foreign countries. This is essential to accelerate economic growth and development.

The foreign policy has to help India expand its network of bilateral relationships and its participation in multilateral groupings, building coalitions to promote specific objectives and creating equities abroad, in such a way as to further these national objectives.

From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

During the Cold War days, India was a leading light of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). One often encounters negative views about this in India today, but NAM benefitted India by enhancing its room for manoeuvre in international affairs during the Cold War. It enabled India, and a large number of other newly-independent countries, to avoid becoming a part of either of the two politico-military blocs – the US-led NATO or the USSR-led Warsaw Pact. Non-alignment was not a wooden doctrine of equidistance between the two blocs. Non-aligned countries used the strength of their numbers to navigate their way through these blocs, in order to not get pressurised into actions by one bloc or the other. Non-alignment was a useful tool to use one or the other bloc to promote own interests, by exploiting the hostility between the two. Non-aligned countries have, at times, aligned more closely with one or the

other superpower, when their national interests dictated it. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship of 1971 (of which, more follows in a later section) was an illustration of this.

The end of the Cold War made the original concept of non-alignment irrelevant, though NAM continues as an international organization to this day. A number of countries emerged in the early 2000 – China, India, Japan, Russia (after recovering from the breakup of USSR) and Europe (as a group of countries) – freed from the shackles of the Cold War and with the political and economic strength to seek a greater role than before, in the world order. These are the ‘poles’ in a multi-polar world order. None of them is strong enough on its own. In their interactions among themselves and with the sole superpower – the US – they seek accommodation of their interests and aspirations in the world order. India has to build relations with all of them and with others in the international community, navigating through a complex matrix of cooperation, coordination and rivalry, and building or joining coalitions of like-minded countries to pursue specific common goals. It means strengthening broad-based relations of mutual benefit in both the developed and the developing world. It is this foreign policy orientation that has been termed multi-alignment.

Priority One: Dealing With Neighbours

Building relations of mutual trust and vibrant cooperation with neighbours is an important priority for any country seeking to establish a larger global footprint. A secure and stable environment in its neighbourhood enables an aspiring great power to interact with greater confidence with other major powers. The neighbourhood has, therefore, always been the strongest focus of India’s foreign policy. Prime Minister Modi signalled this clearly when he came to office, by inviting the leaders of all the South Asian countries to his inauguration ceremony.

India has some peculiar problems with countries in its neighbourhood, like most similarly placed countries. It is the largest country in South Asia. The asymmetry of size and strength generates reactions, which have been ascribed to a ‘small neighbour syndrome’, a characteristic of countries bordering much larger neighbours. There is a persistent apprehension of domination by the bigger neighbour - that their sovereignty will be undermined by the political pressure of the big neighbour, or that their economies and societies would be overwhelmed by its economic and cultural influence. India has one other neighbour – China – with which the asymmetry of size and

strength is in the reverse direction; this reality impacts not only India-China relation, but also India's relations with its other neighbours.

Each one of India's South Asian neighbours has intimate ethnic links and cultural affinities with the Indian states adjacent to it. This is a valuable asset, which has to be managed sensitively. In some cases, demonstration of these affinities may be construed as intrusion into the neighbour's affairs; in others, developments in the politics or society of the neighbour may arouse adverse reactions in the adjacent Indian state.

Dealing with the sensitivities of smaller neighbours needs an acceptance of the need for unequal reciprocity. There is often a strong public demand for a 'fitting response', when a smaller neighbour reacts sharply to a perceived slight or interference. This is not a sustainable policy. The bigger country needs to show understanding of the insecurities of smaller neighbours. This does not mean surrendering important political, economic or security interests. Former Prime Minister Gujral was often accused of going a bit too far with his 'Gujral doctrine' of concessions to neighbours, but the principle, that a bigger country has to do more to ensure stable relations with its smaller neighbours, is valid.

It is also understandable that a smaller country, apprehensive of domination by a larger neighbour, would seek to 'balance' it by seeking to cultivate strong relations with other bigger neighbours. In India's case, the presence of China serves this purpose for its South Asian neighbours, which have, at various times and in differing degrees, tried to play one off against the other, to secure greater autonomy of action and to extract greater benefits from each.

Another, more troublesome, manifestation of neighbours trying to offset their handicap of size and strength is providing refuge and assistance to insurgents or militants from India, in an attempt to increase their leverage with India.

We can look at some concrete examples of how these dynamics work. Bangladesh broke off from Pakistan on a strongly Bengali identity. The Bengali identity does not distinguish the nation much from West Bengal. This leads to efforts by some elements to hark back to the East Pakistan days and emphasise an Islamic identity. The politics of that country is highly polarised between secular and radical forces. India-related issues, including sharing of river waters, harbouring of Indian militants, and transit facilities between East and Northeast India (to name a few), inevitably become part of the domestic political discourse.

With Nepal, geography and history have ensured that in addition to the ethnic and cultural connection, that land-locked country has a strong economic dependence on India. Its Terai population in the south, which has intimate ethnic and family connections with the bordering Indian states, is engaged in a bitter struggle for equal representation in the country's polity. As the country passed through turbulent phases, moving from monarchy to democracy, with fractious debates on the crafting of a constitution, India has had to walk a delicate path of trying to promote the legitimate political expectations of the Terai people, even while rebutting allegations that it is misusing its dominant economic relationship with that country.

In Sri Lanka too, the Tamils in the north and east are struggling for equal political and economic treatment with the Sinhala majority. Again, India's (specifically Tamil Nadu's) affinities with the Sri Lankan Tamils have to be balanced against the Sri Lankan government's concern that our intercession on their behalf should neither encourage a secessionist movement nor infringe on Sri Lankan sovereignty.

A difficult situation is now developing in Maldives, a tiny maritime neighbour, strategically located in the Indian Ocean, whose internal power struggles are of great consequence to India, because of their international ramifications.

Pakistan is a case that engages most public attention, because of the continuing tensions, exacerbated by the Pakistani army's cross-border incursions and its arming, funding and training groups to carry out terrorism in India. The fundamental problem is that Pakistan's political and military establishment has still not come to terms with its partition from India (specifically, the accession of Jammu & Kashmir to India) and, even more acutely, the Indian role in the breakaway of Bangladesh from Pakistan, which exploded the fundamental theory behind the formation of Pakistan – that Hindus and Muslims are two incompatible nations. Unfortunately, the national narrative encouraged by the official Pakistan establishment is one of being 'not India'. This has ensured that Pakistan's foreign policy is obsessed with India. It has been unkindly said of Pakistan that while every other country has a domestic and a foreign policy, in the case of Pakistan, they are the same. There is more than a grain of truth in this assertion. It is also true that Indian public sentiment, outraged by terrorist incidents and egged on by the media and political elements, demands a harsh response by India to Pakistan's hostility. India's foreign policy has to take into account this domestic factor, while fashioning its policy on Pakistan.

Afghanistan is a neighbour of India, whose border with India is in the part of Kashmir under the occupation of Pakistan since 1947. It is another country with strong historical and cultural connections with India. Unlike in the case of India's other neighbours, this has not been a mixed blessing. Particularly, over the past nearly two decades, India has strengthened its partnership with Afghanistan, including support to its government in its struggle against terrorist forces and in economic reconstruction efforts. India is today among the largest donors to Afghanistan's economy, with an exposure of over \$3 billion. The problem is, unfortunately, that the India-Pakistan rivalry has driven Pakistan to encourage terrorist attacks on Indian personnel and interests in Afghanistan, in an effort to weaken India's foothold in that country. Pakistan's perception is that Indian presence in Afghanistan represents a threat to it from the west, to reinforce that from its east. Afghanistan has also recently become the arena of a proxy war between the US and Russia, and Pakistan is exploiting this.

Bhutan is another South Asian neighbour, wedged between India and China, which was in the limelight recently, during the Doklam standoff between India and China, near the India-China-Bhutan trijunction. India has had long-standing relations of trust and close cooperation with it. The Doklam incident saw China's effort to pressurise Bhutan. This is an aspect that India would increasingly have to confront: China's attempts to extend its political influence and military clout in Bhutan, as it has done in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Dealing with the Great Powers

Beyond its neighbourhood, India has to fashion its relationship with the great powers. The great powers are, in a way, the 'balancers' of all relationships. The effort is to build a strong relationship with each of the great powers, in such a manner that it does not unduly influence relations with the others.

India had a difficult relationship with the US during the Cold War. Pakistan joined a military treaty organization in the 1950s. Later, the US used China to counter the Soviet Union, and Pakistan played a valuable intermediary role in this. Therefore, in the run-up to the 1971 India-Pakistan war, the famous US 'tilt towards Pakistan' occurred, which drove India to the Soviet Union for a security guarantee in the form of a Treaty of Friendship.

The end of the Cold War freed both countries from the political paradigms of the past: in the words of PM Modi, to overcome the 'hesitations of history'. In the early 2000s, the US saw India (after the nuclear tests) not as a non-

aligned, pacifist country, but as a muscular one, willing to protect its security interests. After its economic liberalisation, India presented a big and exciting market. India grasped the opportunity to strengthen partnership with the sole superpower. The need for US technologies and investments to fuel India's growth and development was a major incentive, as also the attraction of sophisticated US defence equipment, which could help diversify India's defence acquisitions, hitherto almost solely from Russia. The strategic partnership enabled India to work with the US on the shared goal of helping to restore peace and stability in Afghanistan. In addition, India hoped the partnership would persuade the US to apply pressure on Pakistan to stop cross-border terrorism, and not supply it lethal weaponry that could be used against India. Finally, and of great importance, were the shared India-US perceptions on China. In 2000, the US already saw increasing challenge from China as the rising super power, and saw the potential of India as a counterbalancing force to China. That became another important plank in the India-US strategic partnership.

The India-US nuclear deal of 2008 was a concrete outcome of their strategic partnership. In many ways, it was an extraordinary agreement. After India's nuclear tests of 1998, the US spearheaded the move to impose sanctions against India. The clear message was that unless India surrendered its nuclear weapons option and signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), there would be no cooperation with India, even on civil nuclear energy. The NPT, signed in 1967, was a treaty by which the five nuclear weapons powers of that time retained their nuclear weapons capability, with the vague promise that at some point of time they will disarm and enable total nuclear disarmament; meanwhile, the rest of the world obediently agreed to not develop nuclear weapons and to live in the shadow of these five. India did not sign the NPT, because of its discriminatory character. Moreover, India knew even then of Pakistan's ambitions; and its northern neighbour, China, was already a nuclear weapons power.

What happened in 2008 was that the US, which was the high priest of the global non-proliferation regime, agreed to make an exception for India. It got the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (a 48-country group, which was meant to stop countries like India from developing nuclear weapons) to open up cooperation with India in civilian applications of nuclear energy, waiving the requirement of signing the NPT. This was a major milestone in India-US relations. It opened the door to US defence sales to India, which have gone up considerably since then. India and the US have since also developed considerable cooperation on Pakistan, though India has not got full satisfaction on this as the US

continues to give military assistance to Pakistan. It continues to believe that without this aid, Pakistan will fall into Chinese arms or succumb to radical Islamic terrorists. There is cooperation on Afghanistan, on helping the government in that country to overcome the Taliban and to restore stability. The US is now India's second largest trade partner after China and a major source of investment. Lakhs of Indian students are in US universities. The Indian community in the US makes a major contribution to strengthening political and economic relations.

Russia (and, before it, the Soviet Union) has traditionally been a strategic partner for decades. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was a source of support to India on its major political and security concerns. In 1957 and 1962, it cast vetoes in the UN Security Council on resolutions on Jammu & Kashmir, which sought to undermine India's case. Again, in 1971, three Soviet vetoes were cast on UNSC resolutions during the India-Pakistan war, which would have arrested India's military advance and may have changed the course and outcome of that war (including the liberation of Bangladesh). In the first few decades after India's independence, the Soviet Union extended considerable assistance to its infrastructural and industrial development. It supplied weapons and equipment to keep its military capability at a high level. It was obviously not altruism that motivated these initiatives; there was the underlying geopolitical logic of the US-China-Pakistan axis described earlier.

One of the important objectives of India's foreign policy was to ensure that the rapid advance in India-US relations did not degrade relations with Russia. The India-Russia strategic partnership continued to strengthen after the end of the Cold War, particularly since 2000. Political and defence cooperation remained vibrant. The defence cooperation over the years has ensured that today, about 60 to 70 percent of the weapons with the Indian armed forces are of Soviet or Russian origin. To this day, no country supplies to India the kind of sophisticated weaponry that Russia does, or is willing to transfer technologies as readily as Russia is. The India-Russia joint venture for supersonic cruise missiles, Brahmos, is one example. Even as India seeks to get military technologies from the US, France and Israel, the Russian example sets the bar for the levels of technology that India should seek to extract from them. Another India-Russia success story is that of nuclear power. It is ironic that while it was the US that opened the door to civil nuclear cooperation with India it was Russia that walked in. As suppliers from the rest of the world hesitate because of India's civil nuclear liability act, Russia brought in technology and soft loans to India's nuclear energy sector. Two 1000 MW nuclear power plants with Russian collaboration are already operational in

India and another 11200 MW is to be installed in two decades. In hydrocarbons, Indian companies have invested about \$10 billion in Russian oil and gas fields. Russia has invested \$13 billion recently in a port and refinery complex – India's biggest inward investment and Russia's biggest foreign investment.

It is important to recognise, in addition to all these important facts, that there are other strategic considerations for India-Russia relations. Russia is a huge landmass to India's north, bordering much of its near and extended neighbourhood. Its actions in that neighbourhood have an impact on India in various ways. Russia is a major player in the energy sector in West Asia. It is politically and militarily active in Iran, Syria and Afghanistan. It is also worth remembering that Russia is still a permanent member of the UN Security Council with a veto, which it has used in the past to India's benefit. It, therefore, remains in India's interests to sustain a broad-based relationship with Russia.

China is another great power, which is also a neighbour. Many of the issues in India-China relations have been much in focus in recent years. The 4000 km border is entirely un-demarcated and no real progress has been made in resolving differences over the border, in spite of the two countries having appointed Special Representatives, directly reporting to the executive heads of their governments, to deal with the matter from a larger political perspective. There are a number of disputed pockets along the border, including the area of Jammu & Kashmir that China occupied during the India-China war of 1962. This does not include the preposterous claim, which China has started pressing in recent years, to nearly the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh. The Doklam standoff has already been mentioned. In addition, when the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959 and India agreed to grant him asylum, it created an India-China discord that continues to rankle with China, which regularly accuses the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan followers of using India as a base to split Tibet from China.

Since the 1950s, China has extended political and military support to Pakistan, including clandestine assistance to its nuclear and missile programmes. In recent years, it has strengthened its economic and military cooperation with other South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, etc. using its presence in these countries to chip away at India's influence with them. Its strategy is to keep India bogged down in its South Asian neighbourhood, so as to inhibit its global outreach. Just as the US sees China as a strategic rival, China sees India as a potential strategic rival. The difference between them today – in terms of economic and military strength – is vast, but China is seeking to slow down the process of bridging the gap.

With its phenomenal economic growth and increase in military strength over the last decade or so, China now literally feels it is strong enough to take on the world. It has flexed its muscles in its own neighbourhood, 'settling' its disputes with countries by simply occupying land claimed by it, and imposing trade sanctions against any country which offends it.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is another bold initiative by China to expand its political and economic influence across the globe. India's fundamental problem with the BRI is that it includes a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes right through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. India objected strongly to the fact that China proceeded with this project bilaterally with Pakistan, without regard to the fact that it passes through India-claimed territory (which China has, in the past, recognised as disputed territory). It was because of this fundamental sovereignty issue that India refused to send any representation to the BRI summit in China in May 2017. However, BRI raises much larger geopolitical issues of global relevance. Its land corridor extends from western China through Central Asia to Russia and further into Europe, with additional spurs to Southeast Asia, and West Asia (besides CPEC). The plan is to build road and rail links and other allied infrastructural projects. All these projects would be identified mainly by China, would be built by Chinese companies, and largely with loans from China. It is easy to see how this would vastly expand Chinese influence over large parts of the world, and – since they are based on loans – make countries financially indebted to China. There is already an example of this model in Sri Lanka, where a port built with Chinese loans proved unviable and the Sri Lankan government has handed over its ownership to China, in lieu of loan repayment.

There is a sea corridor of BRI, which runs through ports which China wants to use in the Indian Ocean, from Myanmar to Maldives and all the way up to Djibouti. This is a grandiose plan; a major geopolitical thrust. It is a threat not only to India; it is a strategic threat to many countries of the world. Increasingly, there are voices in Europe, Asia and the US, drawing attention to implications of BRI.

China, therefore, is a strategic threat that India has to deal with. Besides bilateral engagement, India has to work with like-minded powers to tackle the China challenge suitably. The engagement with the US on this has already been described. Other initiatives are also outlined in a subsequent section.

At the same time, China is a large neighbour with which India has significant economic cooperation. It is India's largest trade partner and a

significant investor. China is the dominant supplier to Indian industry of pharmaceutical raw materials, solar panels and PV cells (to take just a few examples). It has a near-monopoly over the supply of rare earth manufactures, which go into products from smart phones to cruise missiles. This interdependence has to be factored into India's approach on China. India's policy should be to cooperate with China on areas where it is of mutual benefit, even while firmly standing up for its core interests (as it did in Doklam). There are convergences of interest in issues relating to global trade and investment regimes. Both countries seek greater democratization of the global economic and financial architecture. These are areas for constructive cooperation. In short, therefore, the strategy is to cooperate where possible, choose one's battles carefully and to team up with others to deal more effectively with China.

Europe (a short form for the European Union) emerged as an independent global player after the Cold War, when it achieved greater economic integration and expanded to include former Warsaw Pact countries. In a way, Europe is a geopolitical 'balancer' between the US and Russia. It retains its strong Atlantic alliance, but also has to engage with Russia as a proximate power, a major source of its energy supplies and a significant economic partner for trade and investment. India-EU relations expanded rapidly in the post-Cold War period. As a group, EU is India's second largest trade partner (after China) and an important source of technology and investment. Political and security relations have also expanded significantly, with many of the same drivers as those moving India-US relations. This move to a strategic partnership was signalled in 2000 by an India-EU Summit, which became an annual event, until some political and economic issues caused a slippage in the sequence. In addition to a vibrant relationship with UK, driven by historical connections and the thriving Indian community in that country, France and Germany have developed into close partners. France is today an important defence partner. European countries like Germany are sources of technologies which India needs. There are many other linkages in education, science and technology.

The Extended Neighbourhood

Southeast and East Asia

India has traditionally had close cultural and economic links with the countries of Southeast Asia. The pattern of alignments during the Cold War prevented the development of relations – especially political relations – more fully with

most of these countries. The tempo has quickened considerably since, particularly in the last few years. It is strategically a very important region for India: the eastern Indian Ocean contains sea lanes of great importance for its commerce. The neighbouring ASEAN countries can provide convenient access to India's North-eastern states, both, from the rest of the country and from the outside world, as well as an outlet for the Northeast in the reverse direction. This is an aspect that would be more fully appreciated when the construction of the Kaladan multimodal transport corridor, a waterway and road link from the Bay of Bengal port of Sittwe in Myanmar to the Indian border, is completed. It would reduce the distance from Kolkata to the Mizoram capital, Aizawl, from 1550 km to roughly half of it; and it would avoid the logistical constraints caused by the narrow land passage connecting West Bengal with Assam. Access to and from the Northeast opens the door to trade and investment exchanges to and from Southeast Asia. The trilateral highway, which will link India to Thailand through Myanmar, also helps this objective.

There is also a China angle to this. As mentioned before, China totally dominates this region. Through its famous 'nine dashed lines' claim (lines drawn on a map), it now claims almost two-thirds of the area of the South China Sea, and has virtually occupied much of it, creating facts on the ground by developing artificial islands and building infrastructure on them. Not only India, but much of Southeast and East Asia, is conscious of the need to temper this dominance. This cannot be achieved in an immediate timeframe, and not by India alone. It can only be done through development of strong links with the countries of the region, through economic, political and security links that will create the solidarity and strength to balance Chinese influence in the region. Countries in the Indo-Pacific region (the region spanning the Indian and Pacific Oceans) like Japan, Vietnam, Korea and Australia, all of which have apprehensions about the implications of a domineering China, need to participate in this endeavour; and the strong support of the US, which has extended a security umbrella over the region since the end of World War II, is crucial. This was the logic of the recent US-India-Japan 'Malabar' naval exercises in the Indian Ocean, and the 'Quad' US-India-Japan-Australia meeting.

West Asia

India has crucial political, economic, security and cultural interests in this region. There is an Indian community of about 7 million living and working

here, sending remittances of somewhere between \$30-40 billion annually to their families back home. The region is a major energy source for India, accounting for about 70 percent of its energy imports. There is another important aspect. Pakistan claims West Asia as a part of its natural 'Islamic' constituency; India has to counter that narrative and project itself as both Islamic (there are almost as many Muslims in India as Pakistan) and secular. There are important security interests: terrorists, terrorist financing, and drugs, all tend to use the route through West Asia to India; cooperation of these countries can help to intercept them. A lot has been done recently to strengthen our cooperation with these countries. In fact, no leader has put in more effort into this than PM Modi. During his three years plus in office, he has visited Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, UAE and Qatar; and has received the leaders of many West Asian countries in India. We have developed cooperation on security issues – tracking terrorist movements, curbing terrorist financing, etc. Many of these countries are now looking to invest in India.

Another important significance of West Asia is as a trade route to Europe and Central Asia. The shortest land route from India to Europe is effectively closed, because of geographical, political and security issues in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The sea route to Europe for Indian goods is circuitous, time-consuming and expensive. Today, there is the opportunity of an International North South Transport Corridor – by sea from western Indian ports to Bandar Abbas or Chabahar port in Iran, and then by road or rail to the Caspian Sea, Russia and Europe or to Afghanistan or Central Asia. Dry runs have shown that both freight and time on this route are about 50 percent that of the conventional sea route. India has been in discussion with Russia and Iran to develop the infrastructure to operationalise this route; Japan has also recently shown interest in parts of this project. This would be a real game-changer for India's trade and for its links with Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia.

The Triad of Great Power Relations

Relations between the great powers have an impact on India's relations with them, as well as with the rest of the world. The Russia-West standoff today is comparable to that during the worst period of the Cold War. This has driven Russia more firmly into the arms of China. Russia and China have had a turbulent history of conflict and rivalry; they are big neighbours and see each other as potential strategic adversaries. At the same time – and a bit like the India-China case – there are many economic opportunities of mutual benefit. In its relations with China, Russia balanced cooperation with caution.

But the political isolation and financial stranglehold, which the West tried to impose on Russia after the Ukrainian conflict in 2014, broke down much of this reserve. The Russia-China strategic partnership strengthened, Russian military sales to China increased, and Chinese hydrocarbons investments to Russia went up. This close Russia-China partnership can have many consequences for India, including its neighbourhood. It is also not a prospect with which the rest of Asia or Europe would be comfortable.

The US-China relationship has intriguing aspects. The US has developed a huge economic interdependence with China, and cannot escape it. China is a power rising to challenge the US, but the US cannot cut it down to size without hurting itself. To take just one example of the interdependence: about a trillion dollars of US treasury bonds are held by China. The future global geopolitical map will depend on how the US tackles China's superpower ambitions, without hurting its own economic interests.

Deteriorating US-Russia relations have sparked confrontational proxy wars from Ukraine to Syria and Afghanistan. While all of them will have an impact on India, the situation in Afghanistan is of particular concern. India is apprehensive that the US-Russia confrontation there may strengthen a Russia-China-Pakistan axis that would seriously jeopardize Indian interests. Again, if Chinese expansionism in its region and beyond is to be balanced, the inter se relations among the great powers are important. A new great game seems to be unfolding in West Asia, with the Syrian civil war, Saudi-Yemen, Saudi-Iran and Saudi-Qatar tensions. Great power rivalries there can create huge problems for India, for the Indian community, oil supplies, oil prices, etc.

India's diplomacy has to manage relations with major powers to see how Indian interests can be best protected in these areas.

Making and Understanding Foreign Policy

The foregoing sections have considered the way in which India seeks to shape its external relations in order to fulfil its national objectives. The formulation and execution of a strategy to achieve these objectives requires an understanding of the dynamics of international relations and an imaginative use of foreign policy tools.

A foreign policy strategy has to incorporate an understanding of asymmetries of power. While national pride always demands equal treatment, the asymmetry in India's relations with each of the great powers today favours the other side. Until the balance changes, this asymmetry should be factored

into India's actions vis a vis these powers. Second, it is important to recognise that in today's multi-aligned world even the closest strategic partnership is not exclusive. India has had a close strategic partnership with Russia, but it cannot expect Russia not to develop relations with Pakistan to further its national interests. Equally, India cannot let relations with Russia inhibit the development of its relations with the USA. Third, convergence of interests should not be mistaken for congruence of interests. The US extends a security umbrella over the Indo-Pacific; this does not mean that it would go to any extent to protect countries in the region against China. Other interests, not least its economic interdependence with China, would have to be balanced. Fourth, relations with countries are not a zero-sum game; they need to be pragmatically balanced to protect multiple national interests. India will need to use its diplomatic skills to ensure that US-Russia relations do not force it to dilute its Russia partnership. It should similarly resist succumbing to US pressure on relations with Iran, or Arab pressure on relations with Israel.

The making of a pragmatic foreign policy requires an understanding of the interests and aspirations of the countries involved. The first tool for this is to put yourself in the shoes of your interlocutor: how you see the world depends on where you see it from. Such a perspective is essential for formulating a policy that has the desired results with the target country. It is necessary to look at the world from North Korea to understand why Kim Jong Un is behaving the way he does. Equally, one has to look at North Korea from China to understand why it has so far let North Korea do what it is doing.

A second important foreign policy tool is the use of cross-linkages – make concessions in one area to take benefits in another. The India-US nuclear deal is an apt example. The US relaxed the non-proliferation obligations in return for defence sales and other bilateral commercial benefits. Another example of cross-linkage is from China, which has successfully made large import orders conditional on the political behaviour of the seller-country (e.g. avoiding criticism of China's human rights record).

Nations work multilaterally to multiply strength to achieve common objectives. In the context of India, BRICS was an example. Its primary motivating force was to generate pressure for a democratisation of the global economic and global architecture. Some multilateral organisations involve a voluntary surrender of sovereignty for larger benefits. The World Trade Organization is an example of this.

An important consideration, often lost track of, is that foreign policy should not ignore the small and seemingly insignificant countries. There are benefits to be had from cooperation with every country; diplomats have to identify them. It is also important to remember that when a country needs support in the UN, every country has the same vote. To take an example, whenever the question of India's permanent membership of the Security Council comes to the UN General Assembly for a vote, it needs a minimum of 128 votes; and Papua New Guinea has the same one vote as the US.

Even while identifying objective factors governing the formulation and analysis of foreign policy, it should be recognized that subjective factors may, at times, drive national decisions. Domestic democratic compulsions may cause governments to take decisions not in their best foreign policy interest. Regional perspectives on relations with neighbours – West Bengal on Bangladesh, Tamil Nadu on Sri Lanka and so on – have at times forced the Union government's hands on some bilateral issues. Elections in one or another part of the country may also influence the nature or timing of foreign policy decisions – for example, those relating to Israel. Domestic perceptions, increasingly shaped by conventional and social media, may sometimes hustle governments into hasty responses. Governments constantly face the challenge of not getting carried away by their rhetoric. Politicians use rhetoric to pander to public perceptions, for short-term electoral reasons or for international posturing. They need to ensure, however, that their policies are based on ground realities and not rhetoric; otherwise they will not achieve their objectives. Such subjective factors influence actions in all countries; it is, therefore, equally important for a foreign policy maker to recognize actions by other countries that are caused by immediate subjective reasons, and not reflect their longer-term intentions.

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