

STORMY WEATHER AWAITS INDIA IN 2019

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

Nations are today working at cross-purposes across the globe. (Representational image) | Photo Credit: [Getty Images/iStockphoto](#)

As India prepares for the general election this year, all signs point to 2019 being a difficult year. Whether this would directly impact the poll outcome is uncertain, but the country needs to remain alert to unexpected developments.

As we enter 2019, the world outlook looks gloomy. Global disorder is the dominant imperative. A global leadership vacuum is leading to chaos concerning rules governing the international order. U.S. President Donald Trump's utterances and actions are provoking strong counter-reactions, especially from China and Russia. U.S. Vice President Mike Pence's attack on China, in October 2018, has signalled, according to many world leaders, the beginning of a new Cold War. Mr. Trump has threatened to pull out of a major arms control treaty with Russia. Russia has also been talking of building stronger deterrence. Cold War 2 seems for real now.

Nations are today working at cross-purposes across the globe. Russia is vigorously pursuing its pivot to Asia and for greater influence in Eurasia. It has deepened its partnership with China, and enhanced relations with Japan and South Korea. Growing tensions in the Sea of Azov (following Russia's seizure of Ukraine's ships) could well lead to a major conflagration between Russia and the West.

China is consolidating its position in Asia. In addition to its strategic partnership with Russia, China has mended fences with Japan. Its Belt and Road Initiative has become the most potent weapon in China's armoury, with Vietnam and Japan endorsing this concept. India finds itself increasingly isolated in Asia as a result.

Economic portents during 2018 for most of the world proved highly daunting. The most challenging was the spectre of an all embracing U.S.-China trade war. This had triggered highly unsettled conditions, and the situation was further aggravated by signs of a weakening Chinese economy. At the beginning of 2019, it is amply evident that politics is conflicting with business across the world. Hence, normal economic calculations are getting disrupted.

A decline in Britain's financial assets and of the pound sterling following Brexit, as well as signs of increasing fragility of China's economy, are newer concerns. The likelihood of the U.S. moving into a period of slower long-term growth, one that is likely to continue for a fairly long time, is aggravating this situation. India cannot hope to remain insulated from these trends.

Coming to India's foreign policy concerns, relations with Russia and Japan could see a reset. The strengthening of the Russia-China strategic relationship and the recent warmth in China-Japan relations could impact India's relations with both countries. Notwithstanding the warmth displayed in public by the leaders of India and Russia, and India and Japan, the character of our relations with these two countries could undergo a change. To what extent, is yet to be seen. What is evident, however, is that India will need to expend a great deal of its diplomatic capital to ensure that relations do not decline to any considerable extent.

Managing relations with China will be India's top priority. India-China relations are marked by a surface calm, but this masks an intrinsic struggle for influence in Asia and even beyond. The Wuhan Spirit, notwithstanding, little has changed as far as India-China relations are concerned,

except that there has not been any major Chinese incursion across the disputed India-China border.

In 2018, China had initiated certain moves to create a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor on the lines of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The Chinese Navy is also poised to challenge India's position in the Indian Ocean. Chinese submarines already outnumber India's here. China is preparing to outflank India by seeking control of the Kyaukpyu Port on the Arakan Coast in Myanmar, and planning a canal (the Kra canal), connecting the Andaman Sea with the Gulf of Thailand. Together with China's existing control over the Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) Ports, if China were to succeed in its attempts, it could give it a stranglehold across the Indian Ocean Region. India's capacity to counter such moves in 2019 appears extremely limited.

This year could see a further consolidation of the 'all weather friendship' of China-Pakistan. During 2018, Pakistan facilitated China's involvement in Afghanistan (and also succeeded in co-opting Russia to be a party to talks with the Afghan Taliban). The CPEC having weathered quite a few storms in 2018, seems well set to progress this further in 2019.

The prospects of India-Pakistan relations improving on the other hand, are extremely limited. Cross-border terror attacks are likely to continue, as also sponsorship of terror groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammed. Where India will face even rougher weather, is in Afghanistan, where the Afghan state is perilously close to imploding. India has been kept out of talks with the Afghan Taliban by all countries concerned, including the U.S., China, and Russia, apart from Pakistan. This is making India's position here highly invidious.

The outlook for India in the rest of South Asia is also mixed. Towards the end of 2018, India could retrieve its position in the Maldives. It also succeeded in re-establishing its influence in Bhutan. The return of Sheikh Hasina as Prime Minister after the general elections in Bangladesh has been a welcome relief. Yet, India will need to work harder in 2019 to check China from weaning away its neighbours, including Nepal as also Bangladesh, with offers of economic and military aid. India will also need to use all its resources to assist Bangladesh to limit the influence of radical Islamist groups there.

Internal security, for the better part of 2018, remained on a relatively even keel. There were fewer Pakistan-sponsored terror attacks, but this is hardly an index of what lies ahead in 2019. Left extremist violence went up marginally in 2018, but the movement remained circumscribed within a core area in Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha and Jharkhand. Ideologically, the movement has remained vibrant, and in 2019, both ideological and militant aspects will need deft handling.

The more challenging internal security problems will be Kashmir and the Northeast. In 2018, the situation in Kashmir sharply deteriorated, and the year witnessed some of the highest levels of violence since 1989. There was again a sharp spurt in the number of security forces personnel being killed, alongside targeting of their families.

The deadlock between the Jammu and Kashmir administration and militants is unlikely to be resolved. President's rule has made little headway in sorting out the conflict-prone situation. Militant outfits, the JeM and the Hizbul Mujahideen, appear energised by the turn of events and can be expected to become still more active. More educated locals are joining militant ranks. Disclaimers notwithstanding, the presence of the Islamic State is also in evidence. The consequences of this as far as 2019 is concerned could be considerable.

The other major internal security threat that India faces in 2019 is the resurgence of ethnic sub-

nationalism in the Northeast. This has been simmering for some time, but now threatens to boil over, following the enactment of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill. The Bill has given rise to fears that it would drastically alter the status quo in the region. The Amendment has helped unite vast segments of people across the entire Northeast. The divisive potential of the recently enacted Act, will have special resonance in an election year. It will demand sensitive and careful handling in 2019.

Two other issues that kept the nation on the edge in 2018, i.e. farmers' and Dalit unrest, still remain unattended as 2019 begins. Both can ignite fires, specially in an election year. There is little evidence, however, that the causes for the unrest are receiving careful consideration.

Considering the difficult external and internal situation, peace in 2019 may prove elusive. On the diplomatic front, India will need to be more dexterous. The internal situation will require to be dealt with far greater understanding.

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