

SCORING A FOREIGN POLICY SELF-GOAL

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

The frightening fall of a great nation has begun. Once a leading light of inclusiveness, democracy, and a major pole of stability in the comity of nations, despite occasional failings, India today is embarrassingly at the centre of attention for bad behaviour. While the present government's decisions on Jammu and Kashmir put the spotlight on New Delhi, the recently legislated Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, or CAA, 2019 pushed it over the edge. Not only has the Act deeply divided a communally sensitive country, its effect is bound to have long-term implications for India's foreign policy. India's global standing is ever more vulnerable today, and the chinks in India's diplomatic armour have never been so evident.

But before we weigh the foreign policy implications, let us understand the CAA for what it really is. Shorn of the deliberate confusion and politically-convenient rhetoric, the CAA is neither about refugees nor about illegal immigrants, as the government would like to claim; it is about the Muslims in India. If you are an Indian Muslim with incontrovertible domicile documents, it is a message for you. If you do not have the requisite documents and you are Muslim, this is where you should be scared about your future.

Let us be clear: If the objective is to provide refuge to the persecuted, what we need is a proper refugee law with legally sound standard operating procedures on a par with global standards, and without discrimination. If it is about illegal immigration, the assumption — when one reads the CAA and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) together — that only Muslims can be illegal immigrants is a deeply problematic one.

The present government's zealous pursuit of the CAA citing human rights violations in the neighbourhood and illegal immigration from it is a foreign policy self-goal. Clearly, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) could not have, if it were to derive domestic political utility from it, talked about illegal immigration to India without castigating Bangladesh, nor could it have pontificated about the human rights violations of non-Muslims in the region without pointing fingers at Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. It is such political expediency that has landed the government in an unenviable diplomatic spot today.

It would, however, be foolish of those of us who are outside the government to assume that the leadership did not foresee the negative fallout its policies and rhetoric on India's relations with two of its best friends in the region, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, at a time when it does not have many friends in the neighbourhood.

But that is not the point. That the BJP leadership would have, most likely, foreseen the serious loss of diplomatic capital with these countries and yet gone ahead with its anti-neighbour rhetoric given its domestic political utility is what makes it singularly worrying. Put differently: the political bosses of the Indian government decided to sacrifice the country's crucial foreign policy interests at the altar of domestic political contingencies.

This becomes a diplomatic double whammy given how India is already losing its traditional heft and influence in the region and at a time a China-led balance of power is emerging in the region. Once again, New Delhi is not unaware of it. On the contrary, South Block's foreign policy mandarins are wary of the Chinese state's sure-footed engulfment of the neighbourhood. And yet, the political bosses have preferred domestic political gains over diplomatic benefits, relegating foreign policy to the whims of electoral outcomes.

That from a foreign policy point of view the CAA is short-sighted is obvious, and that it will adversely affect India's regional influence and standing is an unavoidable outcome; what is shocking is that the political leadership does not seem bothered by it. That is what should worry us.

From Kashmir to the NRC to the CAA — one reckless action after another — New Delhi seems to have finally exhausted the goodwill of the international community. In December, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called the CAA “fundamentally discriminatory” — something unheard of in recent memory. Again in December, the United States, arguably India's best friend today, urged the country to “protect the rights of its religious minorities in keeping with India's Constitution and democratic values”. The same month too, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) referred to CAA as not only “highly discriminatory and arbitrary” but also contrary to New Delhi's “obligations under international human rights laws”.

New Delhi's attempts to reach out to the international community, albeit selectively, while assiduously avoiding those critical of its policies, have not met with much success. When India's External Affairs Minister pulled out of a meeting with senior members of the U.S. Congress after U.S. lawmakers refused New Delhi's demands to exclude Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal — she has been critical of the Indian government's policies in Kashmir — the message that went out was that India is unable to justify its own policies. Or that it does not bother with what others think of it.

For a government that steadfastly shied away from internationalising domestic issues, its own actions have done precisely that thereby bringing lasting damage to the country's reputation. Now, one might ask as to why a state should worry about its reputation and whether it is not enough to use one's material power to achieve foreign policy outcomes. For one, the BJP has traditionally been more concerned about India's reputation, at least as a rhetorical plank, than anyone else. Second, India's traditional foreign policy pursuit has been a careful mix of soft power and material capability with the balance often tilting in favour of soft power. Finally, reputation, among other things, is critical in aiding India's quest for a place at the high table of international politics, such as acquiring a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) seat.

More so, status quo powers, as opposed to revisionist ones, are far more favoured by the international order. India was the region's quintessential status quo power that the world loved to engage and promote. This key characteristic of India may be undergoing a dramatic change, with many viewing India as a reckless power with revisionist ambitions — just as Pakistan has long been viewed.

India is a major power with great power ambitions and may even be an indispensable power in some respects. However, if India decides to shape its foreign policy based purely on domestic calculations, its indispensability and system-shaping abilities will take a serious hit. A great power, among other things, is a state that is willing to live up to certain global expectations and has the ability and willingness to help with system maintenance.

Great powers have traditionally been supportive of India's rise in the global order and have more or less stood by India in its pursuit of power and reputation. This is bound to change thanks to the government's domestic preoccupations. While the Trump White House may be indulgent towards New Delhi, at least for now, the patience of the Washington establishment is fast running out. If there is a Democratic government in Washington DC next year, things might get harder for New Delhi. Moscow's unequivocal support for New Delhi is now a thing of the past, and New Delhi's fall from grace suits Beijing more than anyone.

When was the last time we heard a mention of rising India? When was the last time someone

“seriously” argued that India should be part of the UNSC? Our sheen has come off and the world is beginning to see the ugly realities within.

Moreover, thanks to the heavy political fire-fighting that it needs to do on a daily basis on issues such as Kashmir, the NRC, and the CAA, much of New Delhi’s diplomatic capital is spent on doing precisely that. Its focus on crucial regional and global issues seems to be waning fast. With little talk of renegotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, no appetite to be part of the Afghan peace process, and disinterest in the Indian Ocean’s geopolitics, among others, the regime in New Delhi resembles a provincial capital today.

Meanwhile, the world is watching as we make a spectacle of ourselves.

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