

REFRAMING INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES

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

The year 2021 should see a cementing of the many trends that had their genesis in 2020. Leadership change in the United States is perhaps the most awaited change, but is unlikely to bring about a major power shift in the international arena. Even before the changeover, and despite the promise of a Biden presidency to invigorate the U.S.-Europe axis, Europe has turned its back on the U.S. and revived its China links, by 'concluding in principle the negotiations for an EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment'. In one swift move, Europe has thus shattered all hope that China would remain ostracised in 2021.

Many countries will now find themselves scrambling for cover. India which has greatly curtailed its relations with China since April 2020, (in the wake of Chinese aggression in Eastern Ladakh) will find itself 'out on a limb', with many countries likely to seek closer economic relations with China now.

The year 2021, hence, begins on a triumphal note for China and China's Supreme Leader, Xi Jinping. China is about the only major country which had a positive rate of growth at the end of 2020, and its economy is poised to grow even faster in 2021. Militarily, China has further strengthened itself, and now seeks to dominate the Indo-Pacific Ocean with its announcement of the launch of its third aircraft carrier in 2021. Simultaneously, it is seeking to strengthen its military coordination with Russia. Consequent on all this, and notwithstanding Chinese intransigence in several matters including its heavy-handed actions in Hong Kong and Uighur, China's position across Asia is, if anything, stronger than in 2020. News emanating from China is that President Xi will further cement his position, both as Party leader and as President during 2021, despite internecine tensions within the Communist Party of China. China is, hence, unlikely to concede any ground to its opponents across the world in 2021, a fact that India will need to reckon with. It cannot expect any Chinese concessions in Eastern Ladakh, until India 'makes amends'.

The new year will be dominated by strong authoritarian leaders like Xi Jinping in China, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Recep Tayyip Erdoan in Turkey. International politics may not be very different from that in 2020, but any hope that the Compact of Democracy would emerge stronger will need to be eschewed. Europe, minus Britain following Brexit, and the retirement of Germany's Angela Merkel, could become even less relevant in world affairs. The China-EU Investment Treaty which saw Europe capitulating to China's brandishments is an indication that Europe values its economy more than its politics.

Major changes are afoot in Eurasia and West Asia which could lead to significant shifts. Russia is beginning to display greater interest in the affairs of countries on its periphery and, together with strengthening ties with China and reaching an entente with Turkey, this seems to signal reduced interest in countries such as India. In West Asia, the Abraham Accords, leading to a realignment of forces in the Arab world, have sharpened the division between the Saudi Bloc and Iran-Turkey. Despite the hype surrounding the Abraham Accords, the situation, however, remains fluid and has not reduced the risk of a confrontation between Iran and Israel. This does pose problems for India, since both have relations with it. Meanwhile, China demonstrates a willingness to play a much larger role in the region, including contemplating a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with Iran.

Saudi Arabia could find the going difficult in 2021, with a Biden Administration taking charge in Washington. The healing of wounds among the Sunni Arab states in the region should be

viewed as a pyrrhic victory at best for Saudi Arabia. One by-product of this could be a sharpening of hostilities between the Sunni and Shia camps. Given the strategic flux in the region, Iran could well be tempted to use its nuclear capability to enhance its position, confident that the West may be unwilling to challenge it at this juncture.

At the start of 2021, India seems the odd man missing as far as these developments are concerned. No breakthrough in Sino-Indian relations has, or is likely to occur, and the confrontation between Indian and Chinese armed forces is expected to continue. India currently plays no significant role in West Asia. India-Iran relations today lack warmth. In Afghanistan, India has been marginalised as far as the peace process is concerned. While India's charges against Pakistan of sponsoring terror have had some impact globally, it has further aggravated tensions between the two neighbours, and in the process, also helped Pakistan to cement its relations with China. While hostility between India and Nepal appears to have reduced lately, relations continue to be strained. Through a series of diplomatic visits, India has made valiant efforts to improve relations with some of its neighbours such as Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, but as of now worthwhile results are not evident. One key takeaway is that as India-China relations deteriorate, India's neighbours are not averse to taking sides, increasing India's isolation.

Whether India's perceived marginalisation from global mainstream events as we enter 2021 signifies a sharp drop-off in its foreign policy capabilities is, no doubt, debatable. India's foreign policy objectives are to widen its sphere of influence, enhance its role across nations, and make its presence felt as an emerging power in an increasingly disruptive global system. It is a moot point though whether any of these objectives has been achieved. Today, India's voice and counsel are seldom sought, or listened to. This is a far cry from what used to happen previously. India will serve as the president of the powerful UN Security Council for the month of August, 2021, but if it is to make a real impact, it must be seen to possess substantial weight to shape policies, more so in its traditional areas of influence.

Many explanations could be available for this state of affairs. Admittedly, our diplomats conduct their activities with a high degree of competence, but they are possibly hampered by other factors. One, could be the kind of policy choices the country has adopted in the recent period, which have possibly altered the perception of India in certain quarters. There is again a perception that India's closeness to the U.S. has resulted in the weakening of its links with traditional friends such as Russia and Iran, impacting the country's image. Perhaps the most relevant explanation could be the shifting balance of power in the region in which India is situated, notably the rise of China, and the enlarging conflict between the two biggest powers in Asia, compelling many nations to pick sides in the conflict.

A less obvious, but perhaps more relevant aspect, could also be that India's foreign policy suffers from an ideational vacuum. It is not the sharp decline in the economy, problems caused on account of the pandemic, or the growing polarisation in values across nations and societies, but more possibly India's inability or failure in the ideational realm that lies at the root of our foreign policy inadequacies.

Currently, India remains isolated from two important supranational bodies of which it used to be a founding member, viz., the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Efforts to whip up enthusiasm for newer institutions such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), have hardly been successful. India has opted out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (a majority of Asian countries are members), and failed to take advantage of the RIC, or the Russia, India and China grouping, even as relations with Russia and China have deteriorated. On the other hand, India's foreign policy imperatives, across Asia and South

Asia in particular, today seem to be a mixture of misplaced confidence, sometimes verging on hubris (as in the case of Nepal), a lack of understanding of the sensitivities of neighbours such as Bangladesh and long-time friends (such as Vietnam and Iran), and according excessive importance to the policy needs and pressures of nations such as the U.S. There is possibly a misplaced perception in much of Asia that the India of today is not unwilling to sacrifice its strategic autonomy under U.S. pressure.

As part of the ideational restructuring of India's foreign policy, what is urgently required, apart from competent statecraft, is the adoption of prudent policies, pursuit of realistically achievable objectives, and, above all, a demonstration of continuity of policy, irrespective of changes in the nature of the Administration. These may be time consuming, but are a surer recipe for success in attaining foreign policy objectives.

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