

FROM SELECTIVE TO UNIVERSAL ENGAGEMENT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The remarkable hyper activism of Indian foreign policy will be the legacy of 2021, though the COVID-19 situation was not congenial for travel, high-level meetings on sensitive matters and protocol. Those who travelled ran the risk of falling sick in foreign lands. Every time I saw External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar braving it all with a mask that covered much of his stern and unsmiling face, with the demeanor and stride of a determined crusader, I whispered a prayer for my former colleague's safety. At a time when diplomacy had retreated behind laptops, he unhesitatingly undertook extensive journeys, making him the most visible face of India last year.

The activism was inevitable with geopolitics having turned topsy-turvy not only by the pandemic, but also by the events before and after it through periodical elections, which brought new dramatis personae to the centre stage, and the volatility of the economic and political changes across the world. The pandemic turned the wind of change into a whirlwind and it became necessary for nations to move fast even to stay in their positions. The paradigm shift in foreign policy was palpable and the field was open to nimble-footed and decisive governments, not to hesitant, doubting, calculating ones. A decisive Prime Minister and a seasoned diplomat as the External Affairs Minister (EAM) rose to the challenges of the times for India.

Under Modi 2.0, a course-corrected foreign policy

Coping with the change from President Donald Trump to President Joe Biden and the consequent changes in U.S. policy were big enough to keep the world leaders on tenterhooks. But even that appeared small against the increased onslaught of the pandemic. India suddenly became the epicentre of the tragedy after a relatively easy period which gave it the honor of being the pharmacy of the world. The exposure of the inefficiency of India's health system and the panic caused by pictures of unattended funeral pyres put the country in the defensive and weakened its credibility as it tried to contribute to the resolution of global issues. Every global forum was compelled to find vaccines, medicines, masks and sanitisers when it met to deal with political and economic crises.

For India, the biggest preoccupation of 2021 was the effort to get China to disengage in areas in Ladakh. Dialogue, military preparedness and economic pressure met with limited success. The sooner we achieve disengagement in the remaining sectors, the better it will be for India to be more effective in the other areas of concern. Much of the time for dialogue with others must have been spent on establishing the rationale of our position on the border.

Afghanistan turned out to be a bigger crisis than expected, with the Taliban's walkover in Kabul. India appeared to be the sole defender of the Americans against Pakistan, China, Iran, Russia and others. Bringing some civility to the Taliban in Kabul became a high priority in the face of a Pakistan-China-Taliban axis with some support from Russia and Iran. Wherever the Prime Minister and EAM appeared either in person or on virtual platforms, priority was given to Afghanistan and anti-terrorism rather than Chinese expansionism.

With recent overtures, India, China eye stability in ties after a year of tensions

Climate change, United Nations reform, and charges of India being only a part-democracy also demanded attention, but the Indian interest in these areas did not appear as urgent and crucial

as in the other areas. India threatened to stand out of the line on the matter of net-zero emission target years, but succumbed to the pressure to commit more on promoting renewable energy and phasing down of coal. UN reform was not going anywhere and there was no need to concede on our position on expansion of the Security Council. As for Indian democracy, the Prime Minister's assertion that India is the "mother of democracy" and the EAM's primacy of governance went uncontested at the political level.

What made Indian diplomacy hectic during the year was a distinct change of style of openness and readiness to deal with friends and foes alike. From selective alignment, India moved to universal engagement, even to the extent of convening meetings with antagonists. Engagements with the U.S. went beyond familiarisation with the new government to increased commitment to Quad and acceptance of AUKUS and formation of the 'western Quad', with the U.S., Israel and the UAE.

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The engagement with China at the level of commanders and diplomats was intense, and ministerial interaction continued even when China tore up many fundamental agreements that sustained the dialogue for many years. Major agreements were signed with Russia, despite the American threat of CAATSA against S-400 missiles and the Russian inclination to align with China in the days to come. Patience, diligence and firmness rather than reaching conclusions through concessions were the ingredients of Indian strategy. India attended a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting, where a sub-group led by China took its own decisions on Afghanistan. We also attended a meeting of Russia, China and India. Such an approach demanded high-level personal involvement at the senior levels.

Perhaps because of the unique geopolitical situation, India gave particular importance to its presidency of the UN Security Council in August 2021. Unprecedented in the history of the UN, an event at the Security Council was chaired by the Prime Minister. India also brought global issues of particular importance to the agenda of the month. Significant inputs were provided during discussions on issues like maritime security, peacekeeping and anti-terrorism for active consideration in the future. Although it is illusory to believe that the way has been cleared for India's permanent membership of the Security Council, India's diplomatic capabilities and its commitment to the UN were demonstrated yet again.

Deuba visit ideal to resume India, Nepal talks: Former envoy to India

The Foreign Secretary's visit to Myanmar to engage the military junta at a time when Aung San Suu Kyi and other opposition leaders are in prison may raise eyebrows in many countries, but this is another instance of India's readiness to engage those in power to explore possibilities of friendship and co-operation. The intention is to prevent China from having a field day in Myanmar.

Sadly, the extraordinary efforts made by India have not been fruitful in the cases of China and Afghanistan. China has not shown willingness to disengage in Ladakh and withdraw to the previous positions behind the Line of Actual Control. But the expectation is that China will take a more reasonable approach once the current convulsions end with the beginning of another term for President Xi Jinping. He cannot afford to show any sign of weakness in his external and internal policies at this critical time.

As for Afghanistan, the haul may be longer, given the stubbornness of the Taliban and its proclivity to endanger its own people for the purity of faith. The international community is already moving in the direction of rescuing the regime by providing humanitarian assistance

even without any change in the repressive regime. India has a formidable challenge in Afghanistan, regardless of its open and universal engagement with all concerned. But India's new style of diplomacy will have an impact in shaping the world of the future.

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There are questions that need to be raised and allegations that must be countered about the vaccine strategy

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