

## Is India's foreign policy adrift?

*India has lost its eminent position in South Asia due to reckless adventurism in the neighbourhood*

The National Democratic Alliance government has severely tripped on the first principle of Indian foreign policy, which is finessing the 'big powers' dynamic. This means that equilibrium must be maintained with the U.S., China, Russia, the European Union and members of the ASEAN. While the first three carry geostrategic heft, with the U.S. still being the number one outside power balancer in almost every region of the world, the last two are economic powerhouses. India needs all of them, not one at the cost of the other.

India has lost its eminent position in South Asia as a consequence of reckless adventurism in its neighbourhood. Today, the neighbourhood is bending towards China, with India looking on like a hapless bystander. Even in Afghanistan, where the attention of what remains of the 'Western Alliance' is focussed, India is a non-player.

Losing its eminent position

India has lost its pre-eminent position in the developing world as a consequence of its wilful abandonment of the leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and other such institutions of the postcolonial world order. Recall how Prime Minister Narendra Modi obtusely skipped NAM in 2016. India emerged as the natural leader of the newly liberated nations emerging from the ravages of imperialism and neocolonialism in the late 1940s and early '50s, a position it assiduously maintained even after the collapse of the Soviet Union when strategic thinkers were characterising the victory of the West as the end of history.

Let us now examine these cardinal errors one by one, starting with the U.S. Neither during the Obama years nor during the term of the current dispensation has a single "big" idea emerged that could take the India-U.S. relationship forward. Former U.S. President Barack Obama personally called out the BJP government's track record on fundamental human freedoms at the Siri Fort town hall. New Delhi has still has not understood the Donald Trump phenomenon. He is not a man-child as some commentators label him. Beneath the contrived angst and Twitter storms is a well-calibrated intent to write the obituary of the post-Second World War order as it has outlived its utility to the U.S., and create a new paradigm. India does not fit into the calculus. Nothing exemplified this more than Mr. Modi being the 40th head of state to enter the portals of the White House, behind even Montenegro. The mimicry of Mr. Modi by Mr. Trump, the snub on the '2+2' dialogue, and U.S. envoy to the United Nations Nikki Haley's harangue on Iran should therefore come as no surprise.

Up a creek without a paddle

The BJP government's denseness has ended up antagonising both Russia and China. Nothing typified this more than Russia holding antiterror exercises with Pakistan in DRUZBA-2017. Similarly, rather than taking a nuanced position, the ill-conceived boycott of the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in 2017 invited the wrath of China via the Doklam standoff. Notwithstanding government claims, the withdrawal from Doklam was sequential — India first, then China — rather than simultaneous. The sequel was that the Prime Minister had to travel to Wuhan and Sochi to effectively pay 'court' to Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, respectively.

The worst casualty has, however, been India's neighbourhood. In the past four years, the BJP

government has swung from the sublime to the ridiculous on Pakistan, blockaded Nepal for not declaring itself as a Hindu Rashtra, lost Sri Lanka to the Chinese, been belittled by the Maldives and even Seychelles. Europe, Africa, Latin and South America have fallen off the map.

The list is interminable. India's foreign policy is up a creek without a paddle.

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*Thanks to Prime Minister Modi's leadership, India's stature has grown significantly in the world*



Since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister, India's foreign policy has been on an upward trajectory. Thanks to his leadership in the foreign policymaking process and charismatic role as India's diplomat number one, the country's stature has grown significantly.

Mr. Modi's vision of turning India into a leading power that is a net provider of security and prosperity is a much-needed booster shot of ambition that has transformed the hitherto cautious and bureaucratic character of Indian diplomacy. By setting an unambiguous goal of India as a great power, Mr. Modi is aiming big and reflecting the aspirations of contemporary Indians.

Living up to its potential

Once a perennial disappointment that was not fulfilling expectations of greatness, India is now widely acknowledged as an actor living up to its true potential. Mr. Modi's strategy is to adopt a proactive and flexible diplomacy that transcends previous reactive and rigid stances.

He has filled a serious attention deficit in Indian foreign policy by personally visiting a record 55 countries and hosting dozens of foreign counterparts at home. When the Prime Minister is leading the show, it sends out a message that India is no longer parochial, inward-looking and navel-gazing. Showing up is half the battle won. In today's impressionistic social media age, Mr. Modi has made India omnipresent.

Two areas where Indian foreign policy has leapfrogged under Mr. Modi are cultural and commercial diplomacy. Well-thought-out policy reforms and emotional engagements with the Indian diaspora have added a force multiplier to our soft power. By tapping into the transnational Hindu and Buddhist civilisational linkages and harnessing them for strategic benefits in our extended neighbourhood, Mr. Modi has reified India's image as a repository of ancient wisdom that generates global public goods.

Record levels of inward FDI flows and improvements in a range of global ranking indices bear testament to Mr. Modi's success in selling the India story abroad and linking his economic diplomacy with domestic reforms. Fuelling economic development is a core purpose of Indian foreign policy. The dividends of Mr. Modi wooing crucial centres of investible capital are evident.

Being decisive

In geopolitics, Mr. Modi has made decisive choices. He has broken free of taboos that restrained

India from capitalising on closer defence and strategic cooperation with the U.S., Japan and Israel. Casting aside the obsolete concept of non-alignment and entering into deeper circumstantial partnerships to expand India's geostrategic footprint are no minor accomplishments.

India is working its way to becoming a third power centre in the world alongside the U.S. and China. Contrary to misguided portrayals of Mr. Modi as excessively pro-American, he has invested in a variety of non-Western relationships and also challenged the U.S. whenever it has hampered Indian interests through trade barriers and economic sanctions.

The strategic resolve that Mr. Modi displayed over Doklam, the risks he has taken by deploying the military for surgical strikes against terrorists in Pakistan, and humanitarian rescue missions overseas offer glimpses of the nationalistic resurgence driving contemporary Indian foreign policy.

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*There are sui generis challenges and headwinds, requiring course modulation and adaptation*

India is facing a unique combination of diplomatic, security and strategic challenges today. The growing economic, defence and strategic partnership with the U.S. is being questioned on account of the transactional nature of the Trump administration, its unreasonable trade demands, its focus on other issues such as North Korea, and its sanctions related to Iran and Russia that are unmindful of India's interests and costs.

#### Changing relationships

India's hitherto reliable and largest defence partner, Russia, is becoming increasingly enmeshed with China. Unlike in the past, Russia has now supplied military helicopters to Pakistan, positively assessed some of its claimed actions against select terrorist groups, and shown sensitivity to its proclivities in Afghanistan.

China now has a GDP that is five times that of India's and military expenditure that is three times larger than ours. It has a growing global and regional economic and strategic footprint. India's neighbours, including the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, are exploiting new opportunities to leverage their possibilities with China vis-à-vis India. Pakistan, while continuing to be perceived globally as problematic because of its sponsorship of several terrorist groups, remains useful to the U.S. for its efforts in Afghanistan, and to China in its regional and global strategies.

Some of India's efforts, such as membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and a facility in Seychelles, have been stymied. Debate continues endlessly on expansion of the UN Security Council.

Although this particular combination of circumstances is unique, Indian foreign policy has faced seminal challenges before. Soon after Independence, India's decision to stay away from military blocs and alliances had prompted negative orientations from the U.S. and the U.K. The 1962 conflict with China is seared in Indian memory. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a U.S.-dominated world order had posed new challenges.

#### Some successes

India also has successes to its credit. There is a broad bipartisan consensus in the U.S. on the value of the India relationship. The U.S. National Security Strategy document of 2017 welcomed “India’s emergence as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defence partner”. The U.S. has also supported India’s growing role in Afghanistan. Europe, unnerved by the Trump administration, is attaching importance to its values and economic opportunity-based partnership with India. The Indian Prime Minister was welcomed by the French President and German Chancellor soon after their inauguration. In the Indo-Pacific, relations with Japan and ASEAN countries continue to strengthen. A renewed thrust has been made in the Gulf, especially with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, keeping in mind the interests of our eight-million-strong diaspora, around \$50 billion of remittances, energy security, and sovereign wealth fund investments in India. Relations with Israel, a major defence and technology partner, have been taken a notch higher, even as Chabahar port is being developed in Iran to enhance connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The picture is complicated. There are strong sui generis challenges and headwinds, requiring course modulation and adaptation. But foreign policymaking always faces challenges in an evolving world. Along with nimble footedness, India will also need to strengthen itself further economically and in its defence capacity, including in technology and production. It will also need to improve its capacity for implementation of agreed upon cooperation projects.

*Arun Singh was India’s ambassador to the U.S.*

This refers to the tendency to form friendships and other forms of interpersonal relationships with people we come across often in our daily lives.

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