

LOOMING CHALLENGES TO INDIA'S STANDING

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

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has maintained a frenetic pace, renewing contacts with world leaders ever since the results of general election 2019. [He was the cynosure of all eyes at the G-20 meeting in June](#), in Osaka. At the BRICs informal meeting, also in Osaka, he called for the strengthening of the World Trade Organisation and for a global conference on terrorism. He discussed counter-terrorism and climate change issues at separate meetings with China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's President Vladimir Putin. He participated in the Japan-India-U.S. trilateral grouping, arguing for a "rules based order" in the Indo-Pacific region. He met with U.S. President Donald Trump, to discuss the future of India-U.S. relations.

This may convey an impression that everything bodes well for India in the external realm. What is often overlooked is that while we were fortunate in the past to be able to take advantage of a rare combination of favourable conditions, this situation no longer exists. The 2019 election verdict was a definitive victory for Mr. Modi, but it hardly carries an assurance that India can pursue the same policies as before. While it has become commonplace for most Indians to affirm that India has arrived, there are a host of issues that exist which need to be reconciled before we can achieve what we aspire for.

Among members: on G-20 Osaka summit

The past cannot be a guide to the future. In the past, we did manage a shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment, could improve our relations with the United States without jeopardising our long-term relationship with Russia, and paper over our prickly relations with China without conceding too much ground; all the while maintaining our strategic independence. This is too much to hope for at the present time.

The global situation that made all this possible has altered. Rivalries among nations have intensified. There is virtual elimination of the middle ground in global politics, and it has become far more adversarial than at any time previously. Even the definition of a liberal order seems to be undergoing changes. Several more countries today profess support for their kind of liberalism, including Russia and China. At the other end, western democracy appears far less liberal today.

In this backdrop, India needs to rework many of its policies in the coming five years. South Asia, in particular, and the region of our highest priority, according to the new External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, needs close attention. The region is one of the most disturbed in the world and India has little or no say in any of the outcomes taking place. India-Pakistan relations are perhaps at their lowest point. Tarring Pakistan with the terror brush is hardly policy, and stable relations continue to be elusive. India has no role in Afghan affairs and is also excluded from current talks involving the Taliban, the Afghan government, Pakistan, the U.S. and even Russia and China. India might have recouped its position more recently in the Maldives, but its position in Nepal and Sri Lanka remains tenuous. In West Asia again, India is no longer a player to reckon with.

The Asian ripple effect

Across much of Asia, China is the major challenge that India has to contend with. Smaller countries in the region are being inveigled to participate in China's programmes such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India and Bhutan are the only two countries in this region that have

opted out of the BRI, and they seem like the odd men out. The challenge in the coming years for India is to check the slide, especially in Asia, and try and restore India to the position it held previously. India cannot afford to wait too long to rectify the situation.

Deepening India-U.S. relations today again carry the danger of India becoming involved in a new kind of Cold War. This is another area that needs our special focus. India must ensure that it does not become a party to the conflicts and rivalries between the U.S. and a rising China, the heightened tensions between the U.S. and Russia, and also avoid becoming a pawn in the U.S.-Iran conflict.

There is little doubt that current India-U.S. relations provide India better access to state-of-the-art defence items; the recent passage of the National Defence Authorisation Act in the U.S. makes India virtually a non-NATO ally. However, such close identification comes with a price. It could entail estrangement of relations with Russia, which has been a steadfast ally and a defence partner of India's for the better part of half-a-century. Closer relations with the U.S. also carries the risk of aggravating tensions between India and China, even as China and the U.S. engage in contesting every domain and are involved in intense rivalry in military matters as well as competition on technology issues.

The U.S.-China-Russia conflict has another dimension which could affect India adversely. The strategic axis forged between the Mr. Putin's Russia and Mr. Xi's China will impact not only the U.S. but also India's position in both Asia and Eurasia, with India being seen as increasingly aligned to the U.S. Hence, India needs to devise a policy that does not leave it isolated in the region.

An upbeat tone amid tensions

Again, notwithstanding the 'Wuhan spirit', India cannot but be concerned about China's true intentions, given the regional and global situation and its desire to dominate the Asian region. Within the next decade, China will become a truly formidable military power, second only to the U.S. The ongoing India-U.S. entente could well provoke a belligerent China to act with greater impunity than previously. As it is, China would be concerned at the rise of a 'nationalist' India, which is perhaps not unwilling in the prevailing circumstances of today to become embroiled in a conflict over 'freedom of navigation' in the South and East China seas.

On another plane, as India intensifies its search for state-of-the-art military equipment from different sources, it may be worthwhile for India to step back and reconsider some of its options. Military power is but one aspect of the conflicts that rage today. Experts point out that outright war, insurgencies and terror attacks are fast becoming passé. Nations confront many other and newer threats at present. Today, disruptive technologies have tremendous danger potential and nations that possess these technologies have the ability to become the dominant powers in the 21st and 22nd Centuries.

A major challenge for India will hence be how to overcome our current inadequacies in the realm of disruptive technologies rather than remaining confined to the purely military domain. The U.S., China, Russia, Israel and few other countries dominate these spheres as also cyberspace and cyber methodologies. New policy parameters will need to be drawn up by India, and our capabilities enhanced in areas such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology and cyber methodology, all of which constitute critical elements of the disruptive technology matrix.

None of this would, however, be possible unless India pays greater heed to its economy. Despite a plethora of official statements, the state of the economy remains a matter of increasing concern. Even statistics regarding the economy are being questioned.

Notwithstanding India's ambition to become a \$5-trillion economy by 2024-25, the reality today is that the economy appears to be in a state of decline. Jobs, specially skilled jobs, are not available in sufficient numbers and this should be a matter for concern. The ability to sustain a rate of growth between 8.5% and 9.5% is again highly doubtful. Neither the Economic Survey nor the Budget contain useful pointers to a more robust economy, one that is capable of providing a higher rate of growth, more opportunities for skilled labour, and greater potential for investments.

The looming challenge for India in the coming five years, therefore, would be how to build a strong economic foundation, one that is capable of providing the kind of power structure needed for an emerging power, and also one possessing the best liberal credentials.

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