

NEEDED, A MAP FOR INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

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

Not long ago, India was seen as a natural rising power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. It was the de facto leader of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It has historical and cultural ties with Nepal. It enjoyed traditional goodwill and influence in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. It had made investments worth billions of dollars in Afghanistan and cultivated vibrant ties with the post-Taliban stakeholders in Kabul. It had committed itself to multilateralism and the Central Asian connectivity project, with Iran being its gateway. It was competing and cooperating with China at the same time, while the long border between the two countries remained largely peaceful.

Cut to the present. India is perhaps facing its gravest national security crisis in 20 years, with China having changed the status quo along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the western sector in its favour. [The border saw violent clashes last month](#), leading to fatalities for the first time in 45 years. SAARC is out of joint. Nepal has turned hostile having [adopted a new map and revived border disputes with India](#). Sri Lanka has tilted towards China, which is undertaking massive infrastructure projects in the Indian Ocean island. Bangladesh is clearly miffed at the [Citizenship \(Amendment\) Act, 2019](#). When Afghanistan is undergoing a major transition, India is out of the multi-party talks. [Iran has inaugurated a railway link project connecting the Chabahar port](#), on the Gulf of Oman, to Zahedan (which India was to have constructed) without India. How did we get here?

Specific reasons can be found for these setbacks. Also, foreign policy need not be static. There will be ups and downs depending on the changes in policy as well as the changes in global politics. But what makes the current downturn serious is that there is a relative decline in India's smart power, especially in the neighbourhood and the extended neighbourhood, which demands a deeper perusal of the foreign policy trajectory itself. And when we dig deep, three problems can be found which are more or less linked to this decline — a closer alignment of policy with the U.S. line, coupling of foreign policy with domestic politics and hubris.

India's official policy is that it is committed to multilateralism. Even after India started moving away from non-alignment, which it calls irrelevant in the post-Cold War world order, New Delhi maintained that strategic autonomy would remain the bedrock of its policy thinking. But there has been a steady erosion in India's strategic autonomy, which predates the current government. When India started deepening its partnership with the United States (which was a historical necessity), New Delhi began steadily aligning its policies with U.S. interests. The case of Iran is the best example. The agreement to develop the Chabahar port was signed in 2003. But India, under pressure from the U.S., was moving slowly, despite the fact that the project offered India an alternative route to Central Asia bypassing Pakistan. India voted against Iran at the United Nations; scuttled an ambitious gas pipeline project and cut down trade ties drastically. After the Iran nuclear deal was signed in 2015, India immediately stepped up oil purchases and expanded works at Chabahar. In 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi travelled to Tehran and signed a trilateral connectivity project with Afghanistan and Iran. But when U.S. President Donald Trump pulled the U.S. out of the Iran deal in 2018 and reimposed sanctions on the country, India toed the U.S. line, bringing down its oil imports to zero.

This dilly-dallying to the tunes of policy changes in Washington co-existed with India's deepening defence and military ties with the U.S. Washington wants India to play a bigger role in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific region to contain China's rise. While India has been cautious of becoming an ally, it has steadily deepened military-to-military cooperation in the recent past —

the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) is one example. These developments probably altered Beijing's assessment of India. The border aggression at different points on the LAC could not be a localised conflict; it is part of a larger strategic move, initiated by the top brass of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). One of the reasons for the shift could be Beijing's assessment that India has already become a de facto ally of the U.S. The forceful altering of the status quo on the border is a risky message as much to New Delhi as it is to Washington.

At least two decisions taken by the government mainly keeping its domestic audience in mind have had foreign policy consequences. First, the passing of the CAA. The official narrative has been that India is offering citizenship to the persecuted minorities of select countries in its neighbourhood. There were two problems. One, this is regionalisation of the domestic problems of the countries in India's neighbourhood, some of which are its long-time friends. These countries are genuinely upset with India's move. Two, Muslims, including those sub-sects persecuted in neighbouring countries, were by design excluded from the citizenship programme. This drove new wedges between India and the countries that had a Muslim majority and were friendly to India in the neighbourhood. Forget Pakistan, which is a traditional rival. Bangladesh took offence at the CAA and the National Register of Citizens (from which the government has temporarily backed off) and the political rhetoric in India against the "termites" from other countries. Bangladeshi media reported recently that the Indian envoy in Dhaka had tried to fix an appointment with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for four months but did not get one. There were anti-India protests even in Afghanistan.

Second, the [abrogation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir](#). This was another popular move among those who form the support base of the ruling party. But it led to the suspension of fundamental rights in the Kashmir Valley for a prolonged period that damaged India's reputation as a responsible democratic power and gave propaganda weapons to Pakistan. The move did not help India quell militancy either as the Valley continues to see violence nearly a year after the decision. More importantly, the change of status quo in Jammu and Kashmir, including the bifurcation and reduction of the erstwhile State into Union Territories, could be another factor that prompted the Chinese to move aggressively towards the border in Ladakh.

Misplaced confidence does not do good for rising powers. Great powers wait to establish their standing before declaring that they have arrived. The Soviet Union started acting like a superpower after it won (with allies), the Second World War. China bided its time for four decades before it started taking on the mighty U.S. Since the 1970s, its focus has almost entirely been on its economic rise. India should learn from at least these modern examples. If it did, it would not have used high-handedness in Nepal during the country's constitutional crisis and caused a traditional and civilisational ally to turn hostile. The updated political map which India released in November rubbed salt into the wound on the Nepal border.

To address the current crises, India has to reconsider its foreign policy trajectory. It is a big power with one of the world's biggest militaries. It is a natural naval force in the Indian Ocean. It does not lack resources to claim what is its due in global politics. What it lacks is strategic depth.

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