

India's foreign policy at the crossroads

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Country drawing attention as its economy grows and market expands

India's foreign policy is once again at a crossroads. Another period of adjustment becomes necessary. But the high sense of drama when the Berlin Wall collapsed is absent today, and a big reset of the compass as such is not needed. Simply put, it is about a recalibration to cope with new imperatives in the contemporary world situation as well as India's development trajectory.

The signs are that the tectonic plates in world politics are shifting once again and the quarter century since the end of the Cold War is drifting away, while a new world order is struggling to be born. The 'unipolarity' that seemed to be the leitmotif of the twenty-first century has vanished and despite the United States remaining the only superpower, this does not look at all like the New American Century it was supposed to be.

However, the residues of the delusionary 'unipolar predicament' still linger in many quarters and it creates contradictions. Eurasia and the Middle East are theatres where the dialectic is most visible today. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization remains the only military alliance system remaining in world politics but its identity as a bloc needs to be constantly fostered and its *raison d'être* has become questionable.

How does India cope with a multipolar world? The former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao had once said with great prescience in one of his last interviews after leaving office and as he was walking into the sunset that India's challenge is going to be that its non-alignment would have "a better chance of success" in a multipolar world because "you don't have to choose between the two" and the choice will be so wide that "on any particular issue you can formulate a stand that is really non-aligned."

After all, within the span of 10 days, the Russian Defence Minister and the American President came to India and the Indian Foreign Minister would travel to Beijing to confer with her Chinese and Russian counterparts and to set the ball rolling for a visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to China. In sum, much of the confusion today stems from the fact that the concept of non-alignment itself is not properly understood. Mr. Rao had said, "The break-up of two blocs into many blocs is in itself a kind of movement in a particular direction... The combinations of the world have become much more complex. We have to view it in this perspective before we can understand the role of non-alignment."

Getting the fundamentals straight becomes extremely important because the security environment in our immediate neighbourhood, which has been characterised by regional conflicts for decades and has become an epicentre of international terrorism, is in all probability also about to witness Great Power confrontation of a kind India has not known since independence. The Indian Ocean politics is churning and threatens to form new whirlpools. Our capacity to deal with these trends and events will be crucial to our ability (and success) of achieving our national objectives of development.

To be sure, much as the world has changed and the regional security environment is becoming more challenging, India too has transformed. On the one hand, it is an aspirational power today, uncomfortable with the exclusivity of the international system. Yet, the entrenched powers do not easily cede their perks and privileges or even show willingness to share them with the emerging powers. History teaches us that an accommodative spirit is seldom if ever forthcoming from the established powers. At the same time, India's negotiating power on its own steam often remains insufficient, and need arises for collective bargaining. But then, the established powers will do all they can to frustrate such collective bargaining so as to buy time to perpetuate the prevailing international system. They are mostly succeeding, too, because individual priorities and deal-making appear attractive.

India is not unfamiliar with these grim realities of global politics but the difference today is that it is drawing more attention as its economy grows and its market expands. Indeed, its potential heft on the world stage is getting noticed seriously in the big power centres. Put differently, India should extract the best dividend at present while also pressing with the same interlocutors its legitimate long-term agenda of 'power-sharing', which is of course not easy to harmonise, especially given the proliferation of interest groups and middle men within our country.

Having said that, India is also entering a new phase of development. The reforms of the early nineties have run their course. India kept up a relatively higher growth rate but the benefits didn't percolate down as they should have in a democratic polity, and the plain truth is that there is a huge backlog of poverty yet to be tackled. Meanwhile, iniquities breed discontent and alienation in the society. A new trajectory of inclusive growth has been promised with accent on job creation, infrastructure development and manufacturing industry. India needs technology and investment from different sources.

A primary function of foreign policies will be to enable India to advance its development agenda. What needs to be factored in here is that if the traditional source of technology and capital used to be the West, this is no longer the case today. Again, eschewing blocs and alliances and navigating the choppy waters with strategic autonomy would serve our interests today even more than before.

Looking back, successive Indian leaderships always kept the prism 'India First' when it came to the foreign policy agenda. What else was India's point-blank refusal to sign up on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968) or the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (1996)?

Clearly, today's 'Make in India' also stems from the familiar impulse of 'self-reliance.' After all, Indo-Soviet friendship didn't arrive riding on the wings of the MiG-21 fighter, but followed Nikita Khrushchev's offer that Soviet Union would get involved in India's development strategy and pointedly directed the legendary Soviet Oil Minister Nikolai Baibakov to see why a 'Make-in-India' approach was not possible to replace the foreign companies which controlled post-independent India's oil industry. Thus was born the saga of the Oil and Natural Gas Commission in 1956.

Interestingly, while recently reconstituting the India-U.S. CEOs Forum, Prime Minister Narendra Modi included two Soviet-era PSUs – ONGC and BHEL – which would provide a platform for 'Make in India' projects. Indeed, Jawaharlal Nehru was as robust a nationalist as India would ever have and he made an enduring legacy by setting in stone the fundamentals of our foreign policies. Mr. Modi seems conscious of his 'inheritance.'

The two exciting things Mr. Modi has introduced into the foreign policy domain are, first, his promise to have a big course correction as regards our patchy record in making India's neighbours stakeholders in a regional agenda, and, second, his bold presentation of 'Make in India' as a litmus test of the seriousness and quality of India's strategic engagement with the world community. We have a yardstick here to measure the success of our government's foreign policies. So, let us not digress into ephemerals and fall for the form rather than be riveted on the content of India's engagement with the international community.