

## Foreign Policy Outlook for India 2019 -24

As during the period 2014 to 2019, the external environment, both geopolitical and geo-economic is expected to have considerable and critical influence on India's security and economic growth during 2019-24. To work towards shaping enabling conditions outside India which would protect and promote the country's interests remains the basic objective of foreign policy. And it can be said that in the past five years this main aim was by and large well attained with India continuing to acquire a higher and more respectable profile on the global scene. Foreign policy being a collective of national consciousness on a variety of concerns and issues symbolises a body of decisions and actions which lends the policy-making a sense of continuity while accepting the need to adapt to the changing circumstances around the globe. This too was witnessed with respect to India's external relations in the recent years. Independence and strategic autonomy have been the watchwords of India's foreign policy and in the rapidly spreading electronic age the people of India are seen asserting their aspirations even more forcefully for a peaceful, secure and economically prosperous country. How to fulfil their expectations remains the principal challenge before the policy-makers.

Today the international environment appears to be in turmoil. A sense of 'disruption' and 'uncertainty' seems to prevail. Regrettably there is also a resigned view that the situation is not temporary and may last long. The response to globalisation which has resulted in the political upheavals in several countries including the developed countries, resurgence of hyper-nationalism and protectionism has seriously challenged the long prevailing open, liberal international order which was incidentally shaped and influenced by the West. While several countries including China and India were major beneficiaries of globalisation they have to now confront anti-immigration or trade protectionism outrages ironically from the protagonists of liberalization themselves. Moreover, religious fundamentalism and terrorism also do not seem to show signs of abatement across much of the world raising an alarm against the broadly accepted belief that the modern day nation state was based on the principles of moderation and accommodation of social and cultural diversity and protection of minorities.

To navigate its foreign policy in such complex and rapidly evolving global circumstances will be India's formidable challenge in the coming years. India has so far maintained a delicate balance of keeping good, peaceful and

mutually beneficial relations with major powers. Even though the term 'non-aligned' may not be commonly applied to its foreign policy today it is marked by more than one way by close relations and growing understanding with practically all countries of the world . India has signed Strategic Partnership with more than 20 countries. India's world view today continues to be based on equality, independence and quest for peace and cooperation with all. The principle of 'strategic autonomy which it is employing to deal with the outside world should therefore be its guiding principle. To preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty in the face of continuing threats in its neighbourhood becomes an obvious priority responsibility . Defence of India in the turbulent Indo-Pacific region would call for modernisation of armed forces, efficient intelligence and eternal vigilance. At the same time it will require astute diplomacy to intensively engage with the neighbours and dialogue with the major powers. As a populous nation with over 1.3 billion people, 6<sup>th</sup> largest economy and a strategic location , India is also increasingly vested with an important role in the region and beyond. India's contribution to the international or regional organisations such as the U.N., WTO, EU, African Union, ASEAN, BRICS, SCO , BIMSTEC, SAARC and others has become a critical element in India's foreign policy. India's support to the principle of multilateralism , be it in trade, disarmament, environment or anti-terrorism is strengthening the cause in these organisations. India's partnership has become essential in addressing issues of 'Global Commons' such as the Climate Change, Food security and multilateralism in trade, Natural disaster management , protection of Human Rights and so on. In fact India's adherence to multilateralism in international trade( as in WTO) or Climate Change has been positively regarded by a number of developing countries. In this context, India's call for a Permanent seat in the U.N. Security Council would need to be kept up and raised appropriately from time to time .

Specifically, the priority areas in foreign policy that would need close and continuous attention in the coming years are listed below.

South Asian neighbourhood –For obvious reasons the relations with our immediate neighbours in South Asia assume highest priority. It is generally believed that India will not be recognised as a major power unless it is in a position to broadly influence or manage affairs in South Asia.

India's relations with Pakistan stand in a distinct category. The background is both historical and psychological. For Pakistan, India is the existential cause

and therefore the adversarial relationship with India has become an integral part of their policy. Pakistan's recent pronouncements such as 'regions can prosper, but not necessarily countries' or 'India cannot do well with a weak Pakistan.' are in line with their belief. With Pakistan, as long as the Pak Army continues to call the shots in the country, relations with India are not expected to be allowed to normalise. Pakistan will not spare anything to use the 'Kashmir issue' as a proxy in continuing with its cross-border terrorism. Moreover, Pakistan's dependence on China for military, political or financial support has become so deep that Pakistan can scarcely adopt any policy independent of China's interest. If only the new civilian govt in Pakistan can effectively use the compelling circumstance of the dire economic situation as a pressure point (and the downsizing of the U.S financial support) with the Pak Army there can possibly be some reduction of violence in Kashmir and across the border from Pakistan. Theoretically there are multiple options for India including resumption of dialogue. However, the main question is what can be the content of the dialogue when Pakistan is determined to have its agenda primarily focused on terrorist violence. The status quo with Pakistan is therefore expected to continue for the foreseeable period.

The Afghanistan situation will be a renewed concern for India as the Taliban resurgence has sharply increased in recent months and also with the Americans and Russians showing inclination to engage with them. India's support for development cooperation and people-to-people programmes has no doubt yielded useful goodwill and should be expanded. Better communications through Chabahar port and greater trade would strengthen bilateral relations further.

With other neighbours especially Bangladesh, Bhutan and to some extent Sri Lanka the relations have been marked by improved understanding and cooperation. India handled the complex humanitarian situation arising out of the influx of Rohingyas from Myanmar and Bangladesh into India by making it clear that they were illegal migrants and not refugees and they must be returned to their country. This was reassuring for Bangladesh. Throughout past ten years the Bangladesh leadership of Shaikh Hasina has been particularly supportive of India and her return to power in the forthcoming elections in Bangladesh is the expectation in India which is quite natural. India is working closely with Myanmar in developing its infrastructure including connectivity through waterway, roads and air.

The Doklam standoff with China during 2017 brought the Indo-Bhutanese relations in a close focus as the area of Doklam actually lies in Bhutan. The latter which has been a steadfast friend of India over past several decades stood firmly by India during the crisis. India has to ensure that its support and assistance to Bhutan in the economic field and people's exchanges continues to expand and that the bilateral relations remain strong as ever.

Today, with Sri Lanka there is no shadow of LTTE terrorist violence. India's humanitarian support to Sri Lankan Tamils has been on large scale. As also to a number of infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka. The issues such as the Chinese takeover of Hambantota port however, raises a question mark. If Sri Lanka agrees to be a part of the Chinese debt trap its implications would extend to political and strategic areas. Sri Lanka is too proximate a neighbour where India can afford to see a security-based footprint of China. The same applies to Maldives or Nepal.

India's relations with Nepal, Myanmar and Maldives are inevitably influenced by China's aggressive posture in these countries. While in Nepal the new Oli government is extensively engaged with India (with recent high level visits on both sides) India's capacity to deliver in terms of economic assistance will be judged against China's massive programmes. India should focus on the Pancheshwar hydro project which has been under discussion for decades. India has certain soft-power advantages such as common cultural affiliation, language, religion or free movement which need to be pursued regardless of the linkage between the Communist party regimes in both China and Nepal.

It is in Maldives that India has to recover its lost political ground. The Chinese influence on the Yameen government in Maldives has been so overwhelming that India's legitimate security interests in Maldives and the surrounding Indian Ocean area are threatened. The Presidential election later this year will be crucial and it will be important from India's point of view if the Opposition comes to power.

In all of India's immediate neighbourhood the common factor today is China's politico-economic thrust. The asymmetry in China's and India's presence possibly reflects the wide difference in the scale of the two countries' economies and the military strengths as also the political determination to establish stronghold in the region. The race between China and India is still on with China distinctly ahead. How the two will fare in the coming years will be shaped by both domestic as well as external forces in the two.

It is China which is the current and expected to be the principal foreign policy challenge for India in the near ( and possibly long term ) future. The Doklam affair in 2017 created a serious apprehension whether the two largest countries in Asia would again go to war on the unresolved border issue. If this did not happen it was possibly due to skilful diplomatic handling . Subsequently Prime Minister Modi's one -on -one meeting with President Xi at Wuhan and several meetings at multilateral conferences can also be cited as useful factors in that direction. However, with President Xi's ambitious doctrine of establishing China's dominant military and economic presence in its neighbourhood ,how would India face China's blitzkrieg is a moot question. China's assertive and aggressive position on South China Sea issue has already put ASEAN in a quandary with the latter's unity itself under threat. The situation in South China Sea is now pressing itself in the adjacent Indian Ocean with China engaged in building a series of footholds across the region in ports such as Kyaukpyu( Myanmar), Hambantota ( Sri Lanka), Maldives, Gwadar( Pakistan) and Djibouti. Combined with this drive on its Maritime Silk Road project China is pushing across the land territory in Pakistan ( China Pakistan Economic Corridor), Nepal, Myanmar( Ruili-Kyaukpyu), Cambodia, Central Asia in its Belt and Road Initiative. From India's point of view China's actions pose a major security apprehension . India's not joining BRI arises out of this serious concern.

The vast economic asymmetry ( China's economy is currently 5 times that of India) as well as the huge trade imbalance are other concerns. The recently started U.S -China trade conflict would in all probability put pressure on China's economic growth and overall trade but is unlikely to improve India-China trade situation.

India -China rivalry is expected to continue in several areas in the near future( such as China's opposition to India's bid to join NSG or Permanent Membership in the Security Council or India's relations with South and Southeast Asian states). The pragmatic policy for India to deal with China would be to maintain its political highest level dialogue to resolve outstanding issues peacefully ; to put pressure on the Chinese to open its markets wider for India's goods and services; continue to deepen its Act East policy( based upon three elements- Commerce, Connectivity and Culture) which creates greater goodwill and assurance among the countries of East and Southeast Asia with respect to India; lend greater logic and heft to the new concept of Indo-Pacific by strengthening the Indian Navy and expanding its domain of operation. India's

China policy would thus have to be an optimal balance of standing firm to China wherever India's core national interests are involved while working with China on multilateral cooperation in WTO, Climate Change negotiations, International Solar Alliance, soft power issues such as people-to-people exchanges including Buddhist tourism, Yoga, films, sports etc.

India-U.S relations The India-U.S relationship which started improving since 2000 onwards received a boost with the historic nuclear deal and in the past five years has expanded substantially to emerge as a very comprehensive partnership encompassing practically every aspect of relations. With the U.S declaring its Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command India is tacitly being accorded a strategic role in the vast region . The tough line adopted by President Trump on cutting down financial assistance to Pakistan for its continuing role of supporting terrorism has given a cause of encouragement to India. With India emerging as a major defence partner for the U.S industry the need for a regular highlevel dialogue on the foreign policy and defence side is being recognised as a necessity. On the economic front, the bilateral trade has reached 125 billion dollars . On the other hand, the unpredictability of the U.S policies reflecting in trade protectionism is causing uncertainty about the future of the economic relationship. The threat of restrictive U.S visa policy especially for the Indian software and other professionals looms large. This is one area where India would need to continue with diplomatic persuasion. One of the main concerns today is the U.S sanctions against Iran and their effect on India's own policy decisions regarding purchase of Iranian oil or S-400 air missile defence system from Russia. India cannot possibly agree to abide by the U.S laws and would need to explain to the U.S its position.

While Indo-U.S relations have been on the upswing there is perceptible coolness in the traditionally close relationship with the Russians. The latter have lately started to provide military assistance to Pakistan and also hold military exercises with them. This is no doubt disturbing to India which has had a strong strategic partnership with Russia for over five decades. Even today the country is heavily dependent on Russia for military supplies. In the field of nuclear energy too the Russians have proved reliable partners. P.M. Modi's recent meeting with President Putin in Sochi and his talks with the latter at BRICKS and SCO summits have no doubt helped create a better bilateral

understanding. However, the fact remains that India can ill-afford to lower the level of its relationship with Russia.

Another important and voluminous relationship is with the European Union where the two seem to be still struggling to resolve a number of issues including immigration, free trade, intellectual property questions, investment. The free trade agreement is hanging fire for years. Adequate political will on both sides needs to be mustered for the agreement to be entered into.

India's bilateral relations with Japan which have improved considerably under the Modi-Abe equation have wider implications in the Indo-Pacific context. Japan and India are two major 'bookends' of this 'region'. The two have conducted for years the Malabar exercises with the U.S. Can Japan, a leading investor in India also play a significant role in the proposed 'Asia Africa Growth Corridor' (AAGC), a plan actually proposed by Japan itself?

India has its own Africa policy which is being invigorated with India-Africa Summits and an ambitious programme of trade, investment and capacity building assistance. India appreciates the diversity and special needs of Africa well given its own similar experience.

Be it India's Act (formerly Look) East policy or Africa policy or AAGC or the present focus on the Indian Ocean countries' development, it needs to be made clear that these projects are of India's own construct developed in consultation with the countries concerned and have not come up as a possible 'counter' to China's activities in these regions. India's ideas of South-South Cooperation date back to the early years after its independence.

Energy security is inevitably going to be a key for India's foreign policy in the coming years. Currently the oil supply question is like a double whammy with a costlier dollar vis-à-vis the rupee and the rising price of crude. Although India is intensively engaged in promoting renewable sources of energy and has taken a laudable initiative in steering the International Solar Alliance (ISA), it will be quite a while before the dependence on imported hydrocarbons will reduce. To meet those needs India has to maintain cooperative and friendly relations with oil supplying nations such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, UAE, Iran, Kuwait, Nigeria, Angola and others.

Finally, there is a discernible thought process underway in government circles as well as common public and media in India that foreign policy is not the preserve of only the elite and is also not restricted to passport and

visamatters. This needs to be encouraged further. Ministry of External Affairs has taken the initiative of opening Passport offices across the country in small towns too. This will promote greater foreign travel of Indian citizens who have also been assured by MEA's frequent examples of humanitarian actions for the Indians in distress in foreign lands. Demystifying foreign policy will only enable enhance India's image abroad and add to the country's external strengths.

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