

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Volume 3, Issue 2, 2023

INDIA MATTERS

Changing goals of Indian foreign policy: A reflective essay



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India has completed 75 years of its independent foreign policy. It is time to reflect on how India articulated its foreign policy goals over the decades. To begin with, it needs to be recorded that even before becoming a free country, the Indian National Congress which spearheaded the freedom struggle under the leadership of Gandhi, Nehru and others had consciously articulated its 'foreign policy', independent of the British. Accordingly, the INC passed several resolutions expressing its support for freedom struggles in Asia and Africa. It even distanced itself from the Second World War.

After becoming independent, India pursued its goal of opposition to Colonialism, Imperialism and Apartheid. It convened the Asian Relations Conference in 1948 and took a leadership role in articulating a non-aligned foreign policy under Prime Minister Nehru, leading to the organisation of the first summit of the non-aligned nations in Belgrade in 1961. India also expressed itself strongly against the Soviet-American arms race and pleaded for nuclear disarmament. India opposed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) as discriminatory and unequal and refused to sign it. It is a different matter that under Indira Gandhi, India carried out peaceful nuclear tests in 1974. In 1998 India became a nuclear weapon state to protect its national security, but in keeping with its commitment to the goal of Nuclear Disarmament, it gave a no-first-use of nuclear weapons pledge.

Under Indira Gandhi, India vigorously put forward its pro-Third World goals by supporting the Palestinians in their struggle for independence, opposed the Apartheid policy in South Africa and played a pioneering role in the passage of resolutions on the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace and the New International Economic Order in the UN General Assembly and its resolution on the Nuclear Disarmament under Rajiv Gandhi.

With the ending of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the dawn of the era of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation (LPG) in the early 1990s, there was a paradigm shift in India's foreign policy goals. It also coincided with the gradual rise of China with its growing challenges to our security-strategic interests, leading to a gradual move towards the United States to contain the Chinese challenge. It manifested itself in the form of the 'Nuclear Deal', an agreement signed by the UPA regime under Dr. Manmohan Singh with the United States ending the latter's policy of nuclear 'apartheid' towards India. Over the years and decades, India's military-strategic ties with the US have strengthened, despite allowing continuity in our test-timed defence ties with Russia. But, somewhere down the line, Indian leadership's attachment to the policy and strategy of nonalignment also changed so, one heard about other leading nations in the NAM taking over the leadership of the movement. The Rabat fiasco is often cited as an example of it.

It also needs to be mentioned that the NDA coalition government under Vajpayee and presently under Narendra Modi, emphasized improving ties with China, other South Asian neighbours and the larger Asia-Pacific nations. The Look East and Act East policies were manifestations of such policies. In a novel manner, Narendra Modi invited his South Asian counterparts to his Government's swearing-in ceremony signalling the importance he attached to improving ties with the neighbours. His efforts to strengthen relations with China were manifested in his summit meetings, formal and informal, with the Chinese President. But, the Balakot developments with Pakistan and the Chinese military adventures in the Galwan Valley in 2021 led to a realistic assessment of the Pakistani and Chinese challenges respectively. The Chinese challenge also led to our getting closer to the United States and members of the QUAD, though India doesn't want to get sucked into the US military approach to the handling of China.

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 provided the Indian leadership with an opportunity to rediscover the virtue of adopting a nonaligned stand towards the ongoing war. Right from the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, India has followed an independent stance by not joining the west in its resolutions condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine by abstaining from the UN resolutions. But it has strongly expressed itself in favour of diplomacy and negotiations to end the war. Prime Minister Modi's statement at the Bali G-20 summit that 'this is not the decade of wars' projected our peace approach and won, grudgingly though, western appreciation. External Affairs Minister, Dr. Jaishankar, during his visits to western capitals and in his periodic interviews with the western media explained the validity of our approach towards the Ukrainian crisis.

While there is a clamour for Indian mediation to end the war as President of the G-20, the Indian leadership is treading cautiously in trying to bring Russia and Ukraine to the negotiating table. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was well aware of this strategic reality and hence advised the G20 nations at the recent Foreign Ministers' conference in New Delhi to set aside their differences and focus on the economic and other challenges facing the Global South. (Hindustan Times, 3rd March 2023.) While reiterating that the theme of India's G20 Presidency was 'One Earth, One Family and one Future', Modi stressed the need for unity in action to strengthen the areas of agreement. While making no direct reference to the Ukrainian crisis in his speech, he observed that the foreign ministers were meeting "at a time of deep global divisions. The New Delhi meeting could not issue a joint communique due to the contending positions taken by Russia on the one hand and the US and European countries on the other on the Ukrainian issue.

Realism demands that as President of G20, India should concentrate its attention on achieving tangible benefits to the member states, especially, for those belonging to the Global South in areas such as climate financing, North's developmental assistance to the countries of the South, educational and technological advancement etc. The need of the hour is to push the concerns of the developing South on issues of food security, fertiliser prices, fuel supply and rising inflation across the world.

As President of the G20 India's priority should be on the cessation of hostilities first and the initiation of diplomatic negotiations to resolve the tangle. If India cannot directly mediate

between Ukraine and Russia, it should offer its good offices to Russia and Ukraine to talk to each other within the overarching framework of preserving Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, addressing Russia's security concerns and the imperative of preserving the rules-based international order. Our leadership should try and build a consensus on the idea of Ukraine becoming a neutral nation, acting as a bridge between Eastern and Western Europe. Success in this direction would be the crowning glory of India's G20 leadership. It would be a recognition of India's place as a major player in world politics.