

Some conceptual underpinnings of Indian Foreign Policy Today

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A synoptic overview of Indian Foreign Policy from the perspective of early 2019 throws up some broad conceptual themes: neighbourhood first; balancing the continental and the maritime; balancing regional and extra regional powers; consolidating a favourable external environment for domestic economic growth and safeguarding national security. This cocktail of priorities is not substantively new in themselves but each of its themes constantly acquires new characteristics.

The recent context to our neighbourhood policy comes from an energized electoral cycle. In South Asia a principal axis of change over the past two years was elections. Elections led to new governments in Nepal in Nov-Dec 2017, Pakistan (July, 2018), Maldives (September, 2018) and Bhutan (October, 2018). In each case electoral verdicts were unambiguous – this trend most strikingly demonstrated in Bangladesh (December, 2018) in favour of the existing ruling party.

2019 may also see Presidential elections in Afghanistan and in Sri Lanka. Continuation of the same trends as elsewhere in South Asia would be to the advantage of the region as a whole and certainly be a factor in facilitating strong relations with India. The frailties of the election process were however also evident in Afghanistan where results of the Parliamentary election held in October 2018 are still trickling in. How much the security situation erodes normal function of institutions and prevents stability is the obvious takeaway.

Alongside the election cycle another institutional factor was that of the judicial process playing a major role. In both Sri Lanka and Maldives the Supreme Courts took firm stands based on constitutional norms and provisions. A contrarian trend was however visible in Pakistan. Its Judiciary and legal fraternity had been a strong protagonist of democratic norms just over a decade ago. In 2018 the

judiciary however appeared bent on being an active and somewhat partisan player in the political maelstrom as it unseated a prime minister and then effectively kept him out of the poll process.

Expanding the lens to include the subcontinent's flanks on the east and the west shows a considerable contrast. Our Act East Policy looks at South East and East Asia and provides a conceptual underpinning for our bilateral and regional initiatives. BIMSTEC and the expanded ASEAN mechanisms and summit processes alongside strong bilateral relationships are institutions that sustain a web of interactions. The other flank comprises the littoral of the Arabian Sea and is a region no less vital for us in terms of trade, investment, remittances and finally as a source of hydrocarbons and a place of employment for large numbers of Indians. As is the case of south east Asia and the Bay of Bengal littoral countries, we have strong bilateral relationships with Iran and all the gulf countries. The contrast between the two littorals is however considerable. While on the east, these are frameworks such as BIMSTEC, the ASEAN and all its ASEAN plus mechanisms that work towards stability, on the west there are none. Intra GCC tensions, rivalries with Iran and poor US-Iran relations are therefore factors that mean balancing by India between different interests is a much more delicate and sensitive process.

A broader focus unites both the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea into the wider maritime framework of the Indo Pacific. For India its utility lies in the fact that it underscores the growing importance of foreign trade, much of it being sea borne, in our total economic profile. The criticality of openness of oceans and free navigability has therefore expanded greatly for our national interest. The Indo Pacific domain for India unites a number of themes: our traditional links with

Africa and other littoral countries of the Indian Ocean, the importance of the western Indian Ocean as it merges into the Pacific and freedom of navigation and trade in all these spaces. Bilateralism, multilateralism, naval diplomacy and economic imperatives all merge together under its rubric. That the Indo Pacific is fundamentally a maritime concept also means the reentry of the maritime into the otherwise largely continental perspectives that have traditionally dominated Indian foreign policy. Obviously there a mix of reasons for this – in particular the changes in our macro economic profile and structure and the emergence of China as a major economic and military player regionally and globally including in the maritime domain.

This focus on the maritime cannot however imply any dilution in the continental emphasis of our foreign policy. China, Central Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan all fall in this domain and here too both major opportunities and real threats jostle against each other. Full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and adding even more ballast to our traditionally strong relations with Russia provide a platform to maximize opportunity and manage the threats and challenges. How we manage our continental concerns while simultaneously balancing the maritime and continental domains may well prove to be the litmus test for Indian foreign policy in the future.

Balancing between major powers is not a new challenge. China's emergent profile, US-China, US-Russia relations and finally our own substantive relationship with each of the three means that such balancing will have a continuously kinetic quality to it as also occupy a high priority in our external policies. The difference in the situation is that in the past balancing was postulated on the premise that keeping South Asia free from great power rivalries was in the

region's overall interest. The situation now is that South Asia is more open and a major power in the form of China adjoins it. Balancing has therefore a new character and perhaps even greater criticality.

India has however has challenges and expectations to meet that go far beyond geopolitics and geo economics. None is more pressing now as that of social development. How we address issues of malnutrition, illiteracy and healthcare falls largely in the domestic domain. To the extent that an external facilitatory environment can be achieved, that will remain a principal objective of Indian foreign policy. Ultimately however it is only success on the domestic social development front that can cement India's progress externally.

Finally national security and foreign policy. The rise of the terrorist threat from Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1990s and post 9/XI, the morphing of this threat with a larger global concern with terrorism has since been a near constant feature in our external policies. Developments in the middle east and nearer to us in Afghanistan and Pakistan underline how this will remain a principal challenge. Addressing national security concerns will thus require working with others and building concerts and alliances with the likeminded. This is, as it has always been, the traditional domain of diplomacy and foreign policy and must remain one of our principal thrust areas.

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