

## 2 CHAPTER

# *An Overview of Indian Foreign Policy from British Time till Nehru*

*After reading the chapter, the reader will be able to develop an analytical understanding on the following:*

- Role of British in Indian Foreign Policy
- Instances of British assertion of Grand Strategy
- Indian Foreign Policy till 1947
- Early years of Indian Foreign Policy
- Final Analysis

## INTRODUCTION

In the year 1600, the East India Company was formed in Britain to trade with India. The British subsequently acquired control of the Indian territory. The Regulating Act of 1773 is a landmark Act as it marks the establishment of British control over the Presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras. The Act of 1773 also made the Governor of Bengal as the Governor General of British possessions in India. The British primarily aimed to ensure that no European power threatens British presence in India. The British, to control India, used three instruments of national power, namely, industry, navy and their world-wide empire. While establishing control over India, the British first consolidated their position and succeeded in its completion by 1856. The year 1857 saw the Great Indian Mutiny and the consequent transfer of power to the crown and this consolidated the British hold over Indian subjects. From then onwards, the British developed a colony in India, used its men and material resources and undertook plunder of its resources. By early 1900's, a nationalist tendency developed in India. Subsequently, the Acts of 1919 and 1935 secured successful participation of Indians in World War–I and helped in prolonging British rule in India without an aim of self-governance. Up till 1947, the Indian Foreign Policy was used by the British as per British interests. The British, in this period, applied their grand strategy which was based on securing trade routes and using the resources of India for self-benefit. The Government of India enjoyed liberty in decision making but foreign policy was decided in London as per British interests.

## British Indian Diplomacy

In this sub section we will have a look at various instances of British Indian diplomacy. In each instance the British tried to assert their Grand Strategy.

**Instance–1:** In 1798, Napoleon invaded Egypt. Napoleon also planned, with the then-Russian Czar Alexander–I, in 1807 to invade India. The Russian Czar and Napoleon concluded the Treaty of Tilsit to achieve their objectives. When the British got to know

about this treaty, they sent friendly missions to secure Muscat, Afghanistan, Persia, Sindh and safely secured all routes to the British Empire in India.

**Instance–2:** The British decided to manage the entire stretch of land border by establishing a semicircle from Iran to Burma and the Indian Government decided that except Iran, the foreign relations of all states would be decided by the British Crown. They adopted the policy of a buffer establishment.

The idea was to protect one nation by making its neighbour a buffer from outside interference. This policy was followed since 1880's. The buffer was not a satellite state—it had its sovereign government internally but its external sovereignty was under British control. For example, in 1902 Lord Lansdowne also clarified that a buffer state prevents direct contact between the British and other states. The entire system of these buffers was called the system of rising fence. In the outer rising fence were Iran, Afghanistan and Tibet and in the inner were Nepal, Bhutan and Ceylon. By this method, the British successfully kept China and Russia at bay.

**Instance–3:** China, in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, was ruled by the Qing dynasty. It ruled over major areas in China but Tibet and Xinjiang were sovereign territories. The British had control over Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan as buffers. These territories were neither princely states nor colonies and the British maintained separate treaties with each of them. For the British, Tibet was not very important till early 1700. Over a period of time, some Tibetan monks had established relations with the Tsar in Russia. In 1899, Lord Curzon decided to send an expedition to Tibet for fear that the Tzar may use Tibetans to foment trouble for the British. In 1903, the expedition left for Lhasa. But in 1904, when they reached Tibet, Dalai Lama fled to Mongolia. The British subsequently signed a convention in 1904 and made Tibet a British protectorate with Tibet remaining under the Qing Dynasty. From then onwards, Qing Dynasty ruled over it but Tibet was a British Protectorate. After the Tibetan revolt in 1912, the British in 1914 undertook a survey and established a map and demarcated, using a red line, the Indo–Tibet boundary.

**Instance–4:** At the international level, post-World War I, India was a part of Imperial war conference and signed the Treaty of Versailles and subsequently became a member of League of Nations and ILO. India, surprisingly, was the one and only non-self-governing nation of the world in the League of Nations and after the World War II, India became a UN member in 1945 while still under British rule. India had also participated in the Bretten-Woods Conference in 1944.

## MAKING OF FOREIGN POLICY TILL 1947

International relations with respect to India began to develop in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Below are the three broad views that originated laid foundation of our foreign policy:



As Indian nationalism became stronger, India developed the idea that India should strive for human liberty and brotherhood and nationalism assumed a global character as

Gandhi entered the scene. *Ahimsa* became a new line of thought. After 1947, there was further clarity on foreign policy. Idealism and world peace were established as stated goals by India's non-alignment movement and were rooted in ideology of non-violence and non-aggression. The Constituent Assembly debates talked about foreign policy twice. Firstly it debated Article 51 in the constitution that strives to promote international peace and security by having honourable relations with all and respect to international peace and security by having honourable relations with all and respect to international treaties, laws and encouraged that disputes be settled by arbitration. This view of Article 51 was recognized by Biswanath Das and B M Khardekar as combined legacy of India's spiritual heritage. The second instance was that of the issue of India's membership to the Commonwealth (elaborated as a case study in India–Britain relations chapter). The nationalist leaders favoured a united Asia and an Asian Federation. In 1930, the first Pan Asiatic Federation Conference happened as well. As the WW II ended, the establishment of UN translated the Indian idea of an Asian Federation into a World Federation.

The Congress had established an outlook on the world since 1885. Initially, the idea was to use the support of the British to get Indians in the administration and then use it as a bargaining chip. India supported the British against Russia but Indian leaders knew that Russia would not attack India. India opposed the British advancement in the North East as territorial aggression. After WW I, India supported the idea of 'Right to Self Determination' and democracy but as the British refused to extend it to India, the leaders felt disillusioned. The tilt towards leftist ideology grew during the interwar period and finally emerged in the post-independence period under Non-Aligned Movement or NAM.

## EARLY YEARS OF INDEPENDENT FOREIGN POLICY

The foreign policy of a nation is always conducted within a context and a time period and the past always plays an important role in its formulation. When we say time period, it signifies the way the nations of the world are behaving as of then, and when world politics displays a certain trend in behaviour, the way India behaves vis-à-vis those trends. When India became independent, its first priority was to focus on economic rebuilding. As a nation state, India realised that a strong economic foundation is the key to great power. India, under Nehru, initiated the Idea to remain non-aligned. India asserted that it would not align to US or USSR but would neither antagonise the US or the USSR and would engage with both the countries. The USSR never invited India to be a part of the communist camp while India always perceived capitalism to be a form of imperialism and hence decided to stay away from it. The only middle course available for our foreign policy was to be Non Aligned. The basic spirit of non-alignment was to undertake interaction with all without identifying the nation state as either one or the other affiliate.



India continued to maintain an equidistant political stance from two competing ideologies, yet undertake engagement with both powers and their allies. Nehru vested a lot

of faith in the UN and according to him, the UN would take the world out of the present crises. Nehru perceived the UN to be not only a world organization but a world Parliament.

## **FINAL ANALYSIS**

In this chapter we have clearly analysed that India aspires to be a great power, and this owes its origin to the greatness of the nation personified in ancient texts, as perceived by Indians. India's ancient past had a great imprint on the Nehruvian period, which blended perfectly with modern aspirational values India developed during colonial times. India, under Nehru, displayed a suitable combination of assertion and non-violence by maintaining positive neutralism through non-alignment. The policy of non-alignment, rightly based on enlightened self-interest, aptly guided India during the turbulent Cold War period and also echoed in us that great power status can be achieved only by moral idealism and not by any form of territorial or military aggression.

However, despite India advocating for non-alignment, India did recognise and diplomatically engage with a host of nations, ranging from Korea to Congo. The US certainly was not comfortable with NAM and perceived it as an international liability that undermined American influence. Thus, it was natural for Pakistan, after Partition, to align with the US under SEATO in 1954. During early 1950's, India continued to support China on every platform as Indian support was based on civilizational amity between the two. However, after growing distrust due to Chinese aid to Naga and Mizo insurrections, it culminated in 1962 war. The post-1962 period saw the cementing of US–Pakistan relations and Sino–Pakistan axis, which ultimately compelled India to move beyond the orbit of reduced defense expenditure. The subsequent victories in 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan helped India come out of the eclipse of humiliation imposed by 1962 defeat at the hands of the Chinese. The period of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi doctrines saw use of military force to up the deterrence in the region. The end of the Cold War saw India use its economic significance and power to assert influence. The adoption of a liberal economy gave India the needed space to repair the Indo–US relationship and since the 1990's, India has steadily increased its regional and international standing in the world to achieve the goal of being a great power.