



Changing Contours of Indian Foreign Policy

India's foreign policy in recent times has shown remarkable resilience and initiative to reach out to the countries in her neighbourhood and beyond to secure a strategic partnership for securing her national interests. The frenzy of diplomatic activities, as experienced in past few years, offer a clear picture of India's diplomatic priorities and strategic objectives. They primarily include prioritising an integrated neighbourhood through a "Neighbourhood First" policy, leveraging international partnerships to promote India's domestic development, ensuring a stable multi-polar balance of power in the Indo-Pacific through its 'Act East' policy, dissuading Pakistan from supporting terrorism and projecting Indian leadership in matters of global governance.

The 'Neighbourhood First' policy signifies India's eagerness to give diplomatic priority to its immediate neighbours and the Indian Ocean countries. The policy reflects India's desire for greater connectivity and integration to improve free flow of goods, people, services, capital, and information to promote a model of India-led regionalism without discomforting its neighbours.

Be it the biggest ever defence deal with Mauritius, extending humanitarian assistance to Nepal and Sri Lanka, reaching out to Pakistan and Afghanistan, deepening her engagement with Myanmar and Bhutan or completion of Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) with Bangladesh and accessing her Chittagong port, India has gone out of way to cooperate and collaborate with her neighbours. The same has set a positive tone for improvement of bilateral and multilateral relations in a region long defined by mutual mistrust and animosity. However, relations with Nepal and Pakistan have remained hostage to historical politicking notwithstanding significant diplomatic demarches.

Despite considerable Indian assistance in the aftermath of recent earthquake, India's complicated involvement with Nepal's constitutional crisis for modifying some contentious aspects of Nepal's constitution has negatively affected the bilateral relations with the Himalayan

country. With respect to all its neighbours including Nepal, India has taken concrete steps over the past two years to promote goodwill and deepen economic and social connectivity. But nationalist sentiments in all these countries – often directed against India as the region's predominant power – continue to present a challenge. It is notable that while India shares a littoral or territorial border with almost all her South Asian neighbours, none shares border with anyone else. The same often goads her immediate neighbours to bandwagon against India much to her chagrin.

Quite importantly, China has always been prepared to step in to provide financial, military, infrastructural, and even political support to all her neighbours in a bid to neutralise India's effort to strengthen her position as a dominant player in South Asia. Hence, it would be imperative for India to carefully monitor and appropriately respond to these developments to pre-empt her security interests being seriously compromised.

Another major objective of India's foreign policy has been to leverage international partnerships to the advantage of India's domestic development. This includes improving technological access, sourcing capital, adopting best practices, gaining market access, and securing natural resources. Indo-US nuclear deal, India's induction into Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), forthcoming Japanese investment for bullet trains, tax treaty with Mauritius and financial deals with Iran and some African countries for Greenfield investments are examples of India's diplomatic achievements in recent times.

Here, the greatest challenge remains harnessing improved international relations to spur economic developments at home. Such collaborations have positive multipliers for our economic growth though India continues to struggle with her under-performing military-industrial complex in a bid to indigenise her defence procurement.

With India rhetorically changing her 'Look East' policy into an 'Act East,' the purpose has been largely to counterbalance China's increasing dominance to maintain the delicate balance of power in the subcontinent. While India has become a destination for Chinese investment with a significant jump in Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI), from Rs. 767 crores in 2013–2014 to Rs. 3,066 crores in 2014–15, India continues to flounder in securing an entry for her software companies in Chinese market or to prevent China's dumping of goods in our markets.

Despite an ill-timed Chinese incursion during Xi Jinping's 2014 visit to India, the disputed Sino-Indian border has proved reasonably stable over the past two years with India-China border negotiations continuing apace. Even though the diplomatic conditions are currently favourable for India, any breakthrough in Sino-India border dispute remains elusive.

In terms of a broader strategic context, India's 'Act East' policy has largely been successful, mostly as a by-product of her economic accomplishments since 1990s. Barring the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, India has successfully integrated into Asia's multilateral for a including the East Asia Summit. However, the conclusion of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, the largest trade pact in history, threatens to compromise India's commercial interests in the region.

To date, India's Act East policy has added greater urgency to its regional aspirations.

Certain aspects, such as institutional participation, bilateral and 'multilateral' security cooperation have seen steady improvements. India's primary challenge lies in preserving the military balance on the disputed border with China, and integrating itself into the region's commercial networks. This will require improving border infrastructure, overland connectivity to Southeast Asia via Bangladesh and India's North-east, improved port and shipping infrastructure at home and tackling the implications of TPP for India.

India's relations with Pakistan continue to be problematic despite her frantic efforts to improve the same. This is because of former's continued dalliance with terrorist entities and a refusal to open up economically by reciprocating to India granting her the 'Most Favoured Nation' (MFN) status. Every time India has tried to renew and revamp her ties with Pakistan, the same has been consistently sabotaged by the sinister military-intelligence-terrorist nexus in that country as also exemplified by Pakistan's Kargil incursion in 1999 and the negative role played by her in the wake of recent Kashmir disturbances. India's constant eagerness to engage has successfully kept the United States and others from interjecting themselves in the region.

New Delhi's protestations with the US decision to supply Pakistan with F-16s and prime ministerial visits to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Afghanistan have all been part of an attempt to isolate Pakistan, to slowly compel it reconsider its priorities. India has also expressed concern with the ambitious, multi-billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. While India has expressed its apprehensions, dissuading Beijing from this path remains a big challenge, more so because China's historical support for Pakistan has always been driven by its desire to balance Indian influence in South Asia.

India is not yet fully in a position to lead, or set the rules of the international order, but it has been taking steps to seek full membership of the most important global governance platforms. India is already a member of the G20, the East Asia Summit, and the BRICS coalition, a testament to its status as a large country with a fast-growing economy. New Delhi also deservedly aspires for permanent membership of the UN Security Council. It has also been actively lobbying for full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as well as the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

All the while, India has been trying to bolster its leadership credentials, whether through international relief efforts in Yemen and Libya, its historic engagements with the sundry UN peacekeeping missions, or the public reclamation of its contributions to the World Wars. While India will continue to lobby consistently for inclusion in multilateral security institutions, its presence in the evolving international economic and trade order will still require a clearer articulation of its trade policy, one that gives greater priority to India's concerns on services, intellectual property, and labour mobility.

Russia being a time-tested Indian ally, India should ensure that the bilateral relations between the two countries should once again become an important pillar of India's foreign policy. India has been trying to build strategic partnership with Russia in areas of defence procurement and indigenisation, nuclear energy, hydrocarbon prospecting, trade and economic ties.

A broad overview of the Indian government's foreign policy in recent times amply shows not just a strategic vision, but also a movement along every one of India's major objectives. It also reveals some of the frustrations and structural limitations that confront the Indian government. India clearly has to do a much better job remaining vigilant in its own neighbourhood, managing or proactively addressing the domestic political fallout of its Pakistan policy, while suitably modifying its foreign policy imperatives to the evolving situations to better secure her national interests.

Salient Points

- India's foreign policy in recent times has shown remarkable resilience and initiative to reach out to the countries in her neighbourhood and beyond.
- The 'Neighbourhood First' policy signifies India's eagerness to give diplomatic priority to immediate neighbours and Indian Ocean countries.
- Relations with Nepal and Pakistan have remained hostage to historical politicking notwithstanding significant diplomatic demarches.
- China has always been prepared to step in to provide financial, military, infrastructural, and even political support to India's neighbours in a bid to neutralise India's effort to strengthen her position.
- India has tried to leverage international partnerships to the advantage of her domestic development.
- India's greatest challenge remains harnessing improved international relations to spur economic developments at home.
- India has changed her 'Look East' policy into an 'Act East' to counterbalance China's increasing dominance in the subcontinent.
- India's relations with Pakistan continue to be problematic despite her efforts to improve the same.
- India is not yet fully in a position to lead, or set the rules of the international order.
- India has tried to renew her strategic partnership with Russia.
- Indian foreign policy in recent times amply shows not just a strategic vision, but also a movement along every objective.

Glossary

Resilience: capacity to recover quickly from difficulties

Dissuade: persuade not to take a particular action

Demarche: a political initiative

Littoral: relating or situated on sea shore

Bandwagon: an activity or cause that has suddenly become popular

Greenfield: undeveloped site being developed for commercial exploitation

Dalliance: a casual involvement with something

Sabotage: deliberate destruction of something **Incursion:** an invasion or attack

Reclamation: process of claiming something back