



Indian Foreign Policy : Emerging Challenges and the Road Ahead

Rahul Mohanty

Introduction

Foreign Policy and Foreign relations are important aspects of the state policy of a country. More often than not, the foreign policy of a country reflects its aspirations, national interest, pragmatism and domestic politics. India is no exception to this. India is the founder member of almost all international institutions like the Bretton Woods institutions, League of Nations, United Nations, Asian Development Bank, G20, NAM etc. India's rising status in the world has also led its economic policy becoming more complex and keenly scrutinised—both by Indian and international observers. Therefore as India is emerging as a great power, its foreign policy is increasingly becoming more and more important. In this context the globalised world international relations have assumed great importance. Now the health of a country's economy, its development and other indicators depend on international factors as much as domestic factors. Therefore importance of foreign policy can hardly be understated.

Indian Foreign Policy in initial years (1950-1991)

Right from the independence, India has had a responsible foreign policy. Under the aegis

of First Indian Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru India had a well-crafted policy. It has supported de-colonisation, carried the voice of developing and poor countries, international peace and regional stability. India was an anchor of stability during the destabilising times of cold war. It was one of the important founding members of the Non-Alignment Movement which did a commendable job in balancing between the two camps during the Cold War. It has been long considered as a leader and sensible voice of the developing countries.

Many observers accuse that although India was a founding member of NAM and bespoke of ideals like staying away from superpower struggle, ultimately India informally aligned itself with erstwhile Soviet Union. However it has to be recognised that it was a historical necessity and more of inevitability. Firstly, during the freedom struggle of India, Soviet Union was one of the few countries which had supported its freedom movement. Secondly, just after India got its independence, it was badly in need of industrialisation, modernisation, infrastructure and endless number of other things. India got this valuable technical assistance and aids, both technical and financial from Soviet Union. Thirdly, India suffered long from ruthless imperialism and extreme poverty. Going by social



indicators India was extremely underdeveloped. Poor Indians and Indian leaders saw imperialists, big landowners, zamindars etc. enjoying the wealth extracted by exploiting Indian masses. Therefore socialism as an ideology of uplifting poor had an understandable appeal in India. Indian leaders saw miraculous transformation that happened in Soviet Union. They were attracted by the level of social development that had happened in Soviet society. India as a democracy did not approve of Soviet style dictatorship, of course. However it cherished the values of social justice for which Soviet Union had stood for. So there was an ideological connection with Soviet. Fourthly, pragmatism rules the roost in international politics. India got high material assistance from Soviet Union. Moreover as U.S. became closer with Pakistan, India got wary of growing of their partnership especially military aid given to Pakistan. So India had no option than to take recourse to Soviet Union for getting military assistance. In the Indo-China War of 1962 and Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 India suffered a lot due to inferior weapon systems. Then it took the momentous decision to upgrade the war machinery of military by all costs. At this crucial juncture, Soviet Union emerged as a dependable ally providing advanced military and strategic support in case of any foreign invasion. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship 1971 signed by Leonid Brezhnev and Indira Gandhi cemented this relationship. During the 1971 War with Pakistan, India saw U.S. threatening India and it had ordered to send its Seventh Fleet of Navy. During this crucial juncture however Soviet had supported India. Brezhnev's ambassadors in U.N. vetoed one after another resolution in the UN Security Council aimed against India. It also put its nuclear missiles and submarines in high alert, signalling the U.S. that it will retaliate if the U.S. attacks India. All these justify India being cosy with the then Soviet Union and later Russia.

India also did a commendable job as a regional power and voice of the developing nation. India's flagship Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation did a good job in providing valuable technical expertise to least developed and under developed countries. India in those times did not have enough money to provide monetary and other financial assistance. In fact India needed foreign aid and assistance. However India-as the largest democracy and a welfare nation had expertise in many sectors like development programmes, conducting elections etc. India sought to train the foreign officials and spread its expertise. This was a very smart diplomatic move. It cost almost nothing but created a lasting goodwill for India. Today many senior officials, government lawmakers (Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan being one of endless examples) of many foreign states have been Indian trained.

Indian Foreign Policy in the Post Cold War period

Indian Foreign policy and for that matter foreign policy of almost all countries underwent a fundamental shift after the end of Cold War. But for India the end of cold war coincided with opening up and globalisation of Indian Economy. So the shift in Indian foreign policy was more pronounced. Henceforth India undertook a much engaging and aggressive foreign policy. India sought to engage with more and more countries. Many of the foreign relations were elevated to the status of "strategic partnership". We shall examine the India's Changing Foreign policy particularly the much talked about "Look East Policy", "Connect Central Asia Policy" and "African Policy" etc.

Look East Policy

During the nineties India developed "Look East Policy" about engaging with the



ASEAN countries. This is again a necessity. Now India is aspiring for a great power status. This is evidenced from India's quest for increasing its sphere of influence, diplomatic clout, and quest for permanent seat in UN Security Council. Also as Indian Industry is growing, they need more markets and newer places to invest. So it is only natural that India's relationship with many countries will only deepen. East Asian Countries offer a logical choice as they are developing in a fast pace, have a consumption hungry population, and are stable countries.

Connect Central Asia Policy

This policy is a very recent policy to engage with the Central Asian countries namely: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The first India-Central Asia Dialogue was organised on 12-13 June 2012 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. In this E. Ahmed, Minister of State, External Affairs of India announced that "India is now looking intently at the region through the framework of its Connect Central Asia policy, which is based on pro-active political, economic and people-to-people interaction with Central Asian Countries, both individually and collectively". This policy is seen as an instrument to promote political, economic and cultural relations with Central Asian republics. Also India wants to play a greater role in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and wants full membership in it. India has already signed strategic partnership agreements with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Recently India and Tajikistan signed six agreements about cooperation in fields of education, sports, textiles, social and labour relations and health. This policy is too new to be evaluated. But positive results are expected from on-going push by India.

African Policy of India

India is pushing ahead for increase in its relations with African countries. In 2008 the first India-African Forum Summit was held. Agricultural sector, trade, industry and investment, peace and security, promotion of good governance and civil society, information and communication technology were identified as some key topics of engagement and cooperation. Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh announced a \$5.4-billion credit line to be invested in projects across Africa between 2009 and 2013 in this Summit. India can tap into vast potential of Africa and it can act as an engine of growth for India. Recently major Indian telecom company Bharti acquired Zain's telecom assets in Africa worth \$10 billion.

However despite this sweet promise, in reality the Indian investments and cooperation in Africa has been plagued by the proverbial bureaucratic inefficiency and delays on Indian side. As ambassador of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) pointed out in 2011, India had agreed to fund 60% of a dam in Congo in 2009. Till then there was no implementation yet and discussions were going on. In contrast, China was aggressively investing in comparison to India.

Shifts in Relationship with U.S., Russia and Middle East: India walking a tightrope

In last decade there has been a paradigm shift in India-U.S. relations. Earlier Indo-U.S. relations were beset with mutual suspicion. While India remained unhappy with unwavering American military support to Pakistan. U.S. was deeply suspicious about Indian relations with the Soviet Union. When India decided to go nuclear in 1999, U.S. immediately slapped sanctions. However during the Bush Administration there was a shift in Indian policy of U.S. U.S. began to see India as a viable counterweight against a growing



and increasingly assertive China. They also saw opportunity of U.S. firm in the vast untapped markets of India. Indo-U.S. Nuclear deal 2005 marked deepening of this relationship. There is a lot to this relationship. However, there have been some irritants in this relationship. U.S. expects India to tow its line on every foreign policy matter. Iran, Myanmar, Syria, Afghanistan everywhere U.S. wants India to echo its sentiments.

However India has adopted a more cautious approach. India itself has great stakes in these regions. Foreign Policy has always been guided by national interests and pragmatism. India has deep and friendly relations with both US (& Israel) and Iran. Hence it is becoming increasingly difficult for India to walk a tight rope. U.S. is pursuing aggressive sanctions against Iran. However much of Crude oil imported by India comes from Iran. Iranian oil cannot be so easily replaced. Despite Saudi Arab being willing supplier, its stock of oil is rapidly diminishing. Also Indian refineries have been designed to process Iranian oil; any other oil is likely to create problems. Secondly, India has deep cultural and people-to-people relations with Iran. Any adverse step against Iran will be met with huge criticism within India and is sure to discontent Indian Muslims. India has already got a lot of flak for voting against Iran in IAEA. Also Iran is a friend of India and acts as a counterweight for India against a hostile Pakistan. India has and needs diplomatic leverage in Iran. Due to the support to U.S. India had already lost much leverage in Myanmar and the vacuum created was filled by its rival China. India is determined not to yield any further leverage to hands of China, be it on Iran, or Syria or Myanmar. Due to all these reasons it is both undesirable and impossible for India to tow U.S. line on Iran. Similar conditions exist in host of other situations making it difficult for India to tow US line.

However India should address some of US concerns. Recent reforms like 100% FDI in multi-brand retail may go some way in addressing US concerns. Also, US must discard its policy of “if you are not with us; you are against us.” It must realise that it is impossible for country like India to do whatever US wants. The rejection of US aircrafts in MMRCA deal irked US, but it was taken due to technical reasons which US must respect.

Conclusion: Challenges Ahead

In years to come as India will graduate to a responsible world power, its foreign policy will be facing many more challenges. The biggest challenge will be walking tightrope between competing interests of India’s friends; who may not be each other’s friend. Other challenge will include increasing Indian leverage and presence in other developing countries and use their potential for own benefit. India will also be required to make its stand clear on many important global issues and there will be no escaping from this.

India should align itself more with the BRICS grouping it has formed. It must try to have a more consistent foreign policy aligned with its BRICS allies. This may be the road ahead for India.

Rahul Mohanty, Student, NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad - 500 078.