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India's Foreign Policy: Big Shift or Pragmatic Makeover?

By Akanksha Sharma and Akanksha Narain

Synopsis

In light of recent events, especially President Obama's visit to India and Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj's visit to China, India's foreign policy appears to have undergone a transformative shift since the heyday of Non-Alignment. Is this indeed the case?

Commentary

PRESIDENT OBAMA'S visit to New Delhi as guest of honour for the Republic Day celebrations on 26 January 2015 has been notable beyond its significant symbolism. It was marked by the issuing of a joint statement entitled the "India-US Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region". That document was the focus of the Chinese media's coverage of the visit.

Among other things it spoke about the need to ensure "freedom of navigation and over flight ... especially in the South China Sea". The inclusion of this issue in the document was a bold departure from India's past reticence to name names and take a stand on critical international issues.

Significant shift in foreign policy?

Analysts have pointed out that this is indicative of a significant and transformative shift in India's foreign policy. They argue that India's interests in exploring oil and energy reserves in contested areas of the South China Sea, claimed by both China and Vietnam, have driven this momentum. China has been consistently opposing Indian excursions into the contested region in its own effort to make a case for customary law.

Some commentators heralded India's assertive stance regarding China's maritime aggressions as a 'coming of age', with the country emerging out of the shadows of non-alignment and embracing the era of alliances. India's renewed attention towards the Southeast Asian region has been branded a way to drive its new 'Act East' policy, a new rendition of the previous 'Look East' policy which had been criticised for being merely rhetorical.

India's foreign policy has certainly matured and stepped out of non-alignment's long summer. While non-alignment gave India a moral high ground, it did not bestow great benefits upon the country. In

recent times, India's strategic relationship with the US has gained momentum, with the latter championing India's entry into the Nuclear Supplier's Group. But does this mean that India is entering an era of alliances?

We would like to argue otherwise. Given the US' interests in maintaining its dominant power status in the Asia-Pacific region, it wants India to act as a balancer against China. Although India shares the US' concerns, especially given China's aggressive behaviour over numerous territorial disputes in the South China Sea, it is worthwhile to observe how India is choosing to conduct its foreign relations with China despite this less than ideal state of affairs.

Shifting towards pragmatism

It is slowly becoming apparent that Indian foreign policy is turning towards a pragmatic direction under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi who possesses a charismatic pull and a slick public relations machinery. The new government is actively working to build good relations not just with the US but also its immediate neighbour China. The 'Act East' policy does not just involve building maritime cooperation with Southeast Asian countries but also, to a significant extent, the cultivation of China.

Towards this end, Indian foreign minister Sushma Swaraj embarked on a visit to Beijing. While addressing the Second India-China Media Forum in Beijing on February 1 2015 she spoke of the current century being an Asian one. At the same forum Chinese Minister of the State Council Information office, Jiang Jianguo, stated that Indian and Chinese peoples shared common dreams of growth, development and economic success.

After the 13th Trilateral meeting between the foreign ministers of India, Russia and China on 1 February 2015, India also attempted to assure Russia and China that it was still very much in favour of a multipolar world. China declared that it was supportive of India's desires to play a greater role in the United Nations. Back in 1971 India had been a vocal advocate of China's taking over Taiwan's membership in the UN and a permanent seat in Security Council.

Thus, even though China's statement is not an endorsement of India's bid for a permanent seat on the Security Council, it holds symbolic importance and can be interpreted as a positive beginning to a closer relationship between the two countries on the international stage.

Whither India's Foreign Policy?

The time is appropriate for India to decide its own terms, conditions and innovations with regards to its foreign policy rather than being constrained by an inflexible version of non-alignment. The Indian notion of non-alignment has evolved to suit the workings of present day international relations, and it is coloured by strong shades of pragmatism. This pragmatism is demonstrated not just by its attempts to build strategic partnerships with the US and China but also in the South Asia region.

The civil nuclear cooperation agreement concluded between India and Sri Lanka on 17 February 2015 during Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena's visit to the country is Sri Lanka's first such agreement with any country. The deal can be hailed as a diplomatic achievement for Modi's foreign policy and an attempt at rewriting India-Sri Lanka relations. The US has also declared its support for the agreement as it is in line with the safety protocols of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

As can be seen from the examples above, India's foreign policy moves have been dynamic and visible in the past few months. The Modi administration is media savvy, and is actively communicating with the 300 million Indians that have Internet access. The new Indian government knows that it must dust off the cobwebs that clog the wheels of Indian bureaucracy. The digital age has given India an unprecedented opportunity to increase its soft power by reaching out to citizens and leaders from other countries in a short span of time.

It seems that India is on the road to strengthening its ties with close partners and rekindling its once neglected relations with others. There are big expectations from Modi's visit to China in May and Sri Lanka in March. While India and the US are bound to become closer, what remains to be seen is how

India will balance its relations with other powers including Russia and Europe. India cannot put all its eggs in one basket; hedging will be pivotal to keep its national interest and security paramount.

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