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India in World Affairs During the Last 75 Years: A Reflective Commentary

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ABSTRACT

This article is a brief summary of the role played by India in World affairs from the times of Jawaharlal Nehru to the present. The section on the Nehru era also covers in nut shell the role played by the Indian National Congress on global issues, showing how it differed from the British Indian interests. The Nehru and Indira eras were marked by a strong commitment to global and third world issues, which declined relatively in the post-Cold War era. It looks like some of it is being rediscovered by the present regime, though a definitive judgement awaits as we are close to the developments as they unfold themselves, despite some of the negative images of India being projected in the international media regarding its handling of some domestic issues.

Keywords: Nonalignment; Anticolonialism; Antiimperialism; national security; nuclear disarmament

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the fact that 75 years is hardly a long time in a country's history, India is happy to be celebrating its 75th year of independence. Now it is a good reason to consider India's contribution to global affairs. In our effort at understanding India's role in world affairs, we need to bear in mind that the twin goals of Indian foreign policy from the times of Jawaharlal Nehru to the present has been to project India's role for positive and value-oriented changes in world affairs, project its image in the International arena and secure its national security from external challenges. It is against these goals that an attempt is made in the following pages to reflect on India's role in world affairs.

The Nehru era

India involved in world politics before its independence in several ways. Under Mahatma Gandhi's direction, the Indian National Congress (INC), which spearheaded the liberation movement, had a cell specifically dedicated to international relations. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who had extensive experience in international affairs, served as its leader. The INC came up with the idea of a cell because it wanted to demonstrate to the world that its opinions on important international concerns differed from those of imperial Britain, which ruled over us. The INC adopted resolutions condemning the British annexation of Upper Burma and the expansion of their imperial rule over Egypt and other nations.



In February 1927, Nehru spoke passionately against imperialism at the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels, where he also pledged INC's support to the struggle of liberation for countries in Asia and Africa. The INC increased the stakes for Indian independence during the Second World War as a means of expressing its opposition to the conflict. Nehru convened the first conference on Asian Relations while serving as prime minister of the Provisional Government in March and April 1947. He outlined the cornerstones of his foreign policy as being India's rejection of imperialism and colonialism and good neighbour relations. "We stand at the end of an age on the threshold of a new period of history," he said, reiterating India's support for the independence of Asian countries. India's formal declaration of independence on August 15, 1947, prompted Nehru to deliver his famous speech about "our tryst with destiny." India then became more ardent in its pursuit of the independence of the Asian-African countries.

India had declared its strong opposition to the "entangling alliances" that developed when the Cold War engulfed the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. As is widely known, the Cold War gave rise to a distinct course for pursuing our foreign policy that became known as nonalignment. In 1955, India participated actively in the Asian relations conference in Bandung, Indonesia, demonstrating its continued support for the many Asian and African countries still engaged in the war for independence from imperial forces. Under the leadership of Marshall Tito, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sukarno, and Nasser, the Asian and African countries' efforts to pursue an independent foreign policy culminated in the first conference of the Nonaligned countries in Belgrade in September 1961, which eventually led to the formation of the Nonaligned Movement (NAM), which Peter Willets criticised as the emergence of a "non-military alliance."

Nehru's China policy was marked by the desire to have friendly relationship, which led to the signing of the 'Panchasheel' agreement. His desire to project China in international forums made him impervious to the military challenge from China. In fact, in his perception, Pakistan posed a bigger challenge to India, than China. Under Nehru, India persistently championed nuclear disarmament on a worldwide scale and appealed the nuclear-armed powers to stop their nuclear weapons race. Nehru made India a signatory to the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963, praising it as a modest but important first step toward nuclear disarmament.

The conclusion that can be arrived at regarding Nehru's foreign policy is that his central objective was to project India an important player in international affairs and project India as a key leader in world affairs from the developing world consisting of Asian-African nation. His dominant concerns were the creation of an 'Aea of Peace' and 'Asian Solidarity' and contribute to the effort in taking the world closer to

nuclear disarmament. He failed to perceive the military dimension of the challenge from China and paid a price for it in 1962. He could not prevent Pakistan from joining the US sponsored alliance system in the region. His decision to take the Kashmir issue to the United Nations for a fair solution also ended up in failure as the Western Powers sided with Pakistan. Domestically, however, Nehru laid the foundations for the industrial and scientific development of the country.

The Indira Gandhi era

India's influence in world affairs increased under Indira Gandhi, and this was demonstrated by the way she rejected the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). She refused to allow India to become a signatory to the NPT because of its unjust and discriminatory nature. In order to ensure the country's national security in the wake of the Bangladesh crisis, Mrs. Gandhi took the extraordinary decision of signing the Indo-Soviet Treaty in 1971 to strengthen India's strategic position, all of which helped her to play a significant role in the liberation of Bangladesh. She also took the decision to carry out a peaceful nuclear experiment in 1974 signalling India's capability to become a nuclear weapon state if her national security demanded it.

The anti-imperialist streak in Mrs. Gandhi prompted her to project India's stature internationally by getting the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace resolution passed in the UN General Assembly in 1971. Her desire was to free the Ocean from imperialists rivalries. It is a different situation now, though. She also played a pioneering role in getting the New International Economic Order resolution passed in the UNGA in 1974, highlighting the need for dialogue between the developed North and the developing South to eventually establish an economic order based on equity and justice. Mrs. Gandhi also contributed immensely to the growth of the nonaligned movement and consistently expressed India's support to the Palestinian cause as well as the need for ending the policy of Apartheid in South Africa. The conclusion that can be drawn about the Indira Gandhi period is that she strived hard to play a pro-active role in world affairs. She also made conscious efforts to strengthen India's national security by adopting the policy of keeping the nuclear-option open by carrying out the peaceful nuclear explosion and more so by strengthening our security in the neighbourhood by bringing about the liberation of Bangladesh.

The downfall of Mrs. Gandhi's government in the 1977 Parliamentary elections led to the rise of the Janata Party government under the Prime Ministership of Morarji Desai. The Janata government talked about the need for correcting the pro-Soviet leanings in India's foreign policy and coined the phrase 'genuine non-alignment with its pro-American leanings. Many scholars too started writing about genuine non alignment. But, in reality, both the Janata experiment and the phase of genuine nonalignment were short-lived as Mrs. Indira Gandhi came back to power following



the 1979 Lok Sabha elections and along with her own style of conducting foreign policy. The pro-Soviet leanings returned to the fore, though Indira made conscious efforts to strengthen Indo-US relations.

The Rajiv Gandhi years saw a continuity in India's foreign policy. The key features of his foreign policy were to improve ties with China following his historic visit to Beijing in 1988. He talked of the need for the coming together of the hardware superpower (China) and software super power (India) to rule the world technologically. He was equally interested in strengthening Indo-US ties in the fields of science and technology, while maintaining a continuity in India's special relations with the Soviet Union. His period too saw India playing an activist role in world affairs. He argued India's case for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, the demand for which have been continued by his successors.

Rajiv Gandhi made a proposal in October 1988 to the UN General Assembly outlining his Comprehensive Action Plan for a nuclear weapon-free non-violent world order for a time-bound achievement of nuclear disarmament, which if implemented would rid the world of nuclear weapons by 2008. He said that India is a responsible nuclear power having given the 'No First Use of Nuclear Weapons pledge' to the international community. He also took active interest in the non-aligned movement as part of his initiatives in playing a pro-active role in world affairs.

Rajiv Gandhi's successors did not effect any major changes in foreign policy except that of I. K. Gujral, who as Prime Minister accorded priority to the maintenance of good neighbourly relations on the basis of non-reciprocity, except with reference to Pakistan.

The Post-Cold War era foreign policy

Though Indian governments continued to take up international causes, the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union led to a paradigm shift in India's foreign policy. In the opinion of this writer, with the dawn of the Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation (LPG) era in world politics, the focus, from the times of P. V. Narasimha Rao, came to be one of integrating India with the global North, in the economic and military-strategic field, rather than accord priority for transformation of the international system, specially from the perspective of the developing South. The trend continued under the UPA and NDA regimes. Continuity in relations with Europe and the rest of the world was focused upon, but India became more inward looking and did not show any meaningful interest in reclaiming the leadership role in the nonaligned movement (NAM) or in the UN system as a champion of the Third World countries and their causes. While Vajpayee made India a nuclear-weapon state resulting in sanctions on India, which were however short-lived. Dr. Manmohan Singh took the step of signing the Nuclear Deal with the United States to get over the pariah-status that India faced in the hands of

the nuclear weapon powers.

The Narendra Modi period

The coming to power of Narendra Modi as head of the BJP-led NDA government in 2014 has revived the quest for India playing an activist role in world affairs. Modi's foreign policy has come to occupy a prominent space in academic discussions, both for and against. For a person who had no experience in parliamentary politics, (having become the Prime Minister after being Chief Minister of Gujarat), Modi introduced a certain novelty in his approach to foreign policy. He took the unusual step of inviting his counterparts from South Asia to his swearing in ceremony in 2014. His intention was to convey that good-neighbourly relations are going to be one of the key goals of his foreign policy. He followed it by an unofficial visit to Pakistan while returning from a foreign tour. As for China, Modi's desire was to aim at an upswing in bilateral relations towards which he strived during his visit to Beijing and return visits by the Chinese President Xi to India. Modi's focus was to build a personal rapport with the Chinese President. Obsessed with his desire to establish a good personal relationship with his Chinese counterpart, Modi failed to gauge the depth of the Chinese challenge, which resulted in Chinese forces killing Indian soldiers in the Galwan valley in eastern Ladakh in June 2020. The Chinese are also in possession of 23 sq.miles of Indian territory and are yet to withdraw from it. Foreign Minister Dr. Jaishankar has often referred to the challenge of achieving 'strategic equilibrium' with China while China is bent on maintaining its strategic superiority. As regards maintaining the country's national security, the post-Galwan situation demonstrates that India continues to face stiff challenges from China. If we add to it the continuing China-Pakistan military-strategic collusion, the severity of the challenges to India's national security are clearly apparent. At the recent G-20 summit, foreign minister Dr. Jaishankar reiterated the need for an early resolution of all outstanding issues along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh. He underlined that India-China relationship is "best served by observing three mutuals-mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interest".

Yet another priority of the Narendra Modi government is that of working towards a strong military-strategic relationship with the United States. His official visits to the US since 2014 and the personal equation he struck with Donald Trump during his first term and presently with the Biden Administration demonstrates it. While the strategic relationship with the United States has pushed India to join the American sponsored QUAD under the leadership of the American President Joe Biden to contain the Chinese influence and challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, the Indian leadership has to be careful enough not to get too close to the American designs vis-a-vis China. India's national interests demand that the Chinese challenge has to



be dealt with at our level, and bilaterally, however daunting the task is.

The Modi government is actively pursuing a policy of projecting India's image in its extended neighbourhood. Its 'Act East Policy' has the objective of advancing its trade and economic interests with the Southeast-Asian nations. The relationship with Europe and other regions of the world too have acquired proactive overtones, indicating India's desire to play an active role in world affairs at the regional and global level.

It is however the handling of the ongoing Ukraine crisis/war that has come to highlight the strong sense of realism and national interest that is guiding Modi's foreign policy. India has refused to join the chorus of western condemnation of Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. The leadership is constantly pleading for a diplomatic solution to the tangle, asserting that there will be no winners in this ongoing war. Indian abstentions on the UN resolutions in the UN General Assembly and the Security Council, though has met with the displeasure of the Western nations, is serving India's interests well. India is importing crude oil from Russia at a cheaper rate and has kept up its bilateral channel open with Russia. In a way, the Ukrainian crisis has come handy to India to rediscover the utility of its nonaligned (the word used, however, is neutral) foreign policy. Foreign minister Jaishankar seems to be using the situation to restore the

Nehruvian elan in the conduct of diplomacy. An indication of it came when India opted for a safe position by supporting the BRICs group, without putting itself at odds with the western nations at the recent BRICs summit.

As a continuation of its role in world affairs, the Modi government is taking initiatives to work towards resolving issues associated with climate change. It was gratifying to see Prime Minister Modi calling for concrete action by the developed nations in his address to the US-sponsored virtual summit of 40 global leaders on Climate Change in April. He urged them to come up with specific action plan for an ambitious renewable energy target of 450 Gigawatts by 2030'. Additionally, Modi's appeal to the global community to come forward with initiatives for International Solar Alliance and Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, provides a glimmer of hope for fresh thinking on meeting the climate-related challenges for a better future for the global commons. It is hoped that as part of its role in world affairs, India will continue its fight for an inclusive world order, based on equity and justice and thereby play an influential, if not a militarily powerful, role in world affairs, a term used by the late Prof. Hedley Bull, (a well-known India watcher of Australian origin) in one of his articles on the Nehruvian foreign policy. Time alone will tell whether these goals will be achieved or sacrificed at the altar of personal image building exercises.

