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## Original Article

## An Assessment of India's Foreign Policy Under PM Modi

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### ABSTRACT

India's foreign policy has evolved amidst numerous constraints and experienced many ups and downs in the process of its fruition to the present stage. In the years following the independence, India had to steer its foreign policy against the high wave of the Cold war. India's bid to retain its independence in foreign affairs had often led India to compromise its strategic interests against Pakistan and China. Dynamics of the Cold war severed India's relations with the West and reduced its foreign policy more or less to a 'peace diplomacy'. The inbuilt idealism of India's foreign policy was often perceived by the West as weakness. Nonetheless, India's foreign policy has come a long way since the time of the Cold war and has been transformed to a self-reliant and dynamic policy to deal with the existing and forthcoming challenges of the international politics. However, the response of India's foreign policy has been most perceptible, decisive and coercive during the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This paper attempts to outline the shift in the style of functioning of India's Foreign Policy under PM Modi while analyzing the secondary sources only.

**Keywords:** Peace Diplomacy; Act East; SAARC; QUAD; Cold War; Kashmir; WTO

### INTRODUCTION

During the time of Narendra Modi's election campaign in the year 2014, foreign policy was hardly mentioned in his election speeches. Nevertheless, a year after his resounding victory, which gave India its first majority government in nearly three decades, Prime Minister Modi has emerged as one of the most effective Indian leaders when it comes to foreign affairs. With a considerable list of foreign policy "firsts" on his agenda at the onset of his term as prime minister, Narendra Modi emphasised India's strong commitment to its neighbours while forging alliances with other important nations. He was the first Prime Minister of India who showed the prudence to invite SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony. He also happened to be the first Indian Prime Minister who invited and hosted an American president at Republic Day celebrations; the first to travel

to Nepal, a neighbouring country, on an official basis; the first to call for "peace, stability, solidarity, and order" in the oceans, outer space, and cyberspace; and the first to state that India must take the lead in the fight against climate change and take initiative to reverse the process of climate degeneration. Modi faced challenges in his attempt to refocus and realign India's foreign policy priorities. It is said that 'foreign policy of a country is determined by the times in which it is conducted. It is influenced by its history and its geographical position. The recent past colours a country's collective consciousness. Where you are on the map makes a great deal of difference in interacting with the world just as your own view of your position in the world does<sup>1</sup>'. Thus, with the constraints of the space and time, Narendra Modi induced an element of resilience and flexibility not exactly in nature but in the style and framework of conducting India's foreign policy.



## EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

India's foreign policy has evolved through number of phases to attain its present dimension. The personality of Jawaharlal Nehru has deep imprints in the nature of India's foreign policy. The domestic context in which India's Foreign Policy was formulated was influenced by the paroxysm of transforming a so called agrarian and feudal country into a stable political democracy, initiate economic development and maintain its secular credential, particularly after the partition of India on the basis of two-nation theory. The international context was far more well-defined not just for India but for many other countries which incidentally were liberated and attained statehood in the middle of the twentieth century and sometime later. For all these countries the major challenge was to effectively navigate the difficult terrain of Cold War politics to pursue their national interests in the international arena. Thus, the foreign policy of India was mired with certain predicaments either in the domestic front or in external domain since the inception of India as a nation-state. External dynamics often influence the internal scenario of a country. India was no exception to that. India's endeavour to neutralize and stay away from the Cold War politics further worsened the situation for India in the global scenario. There was Pakistan which was in a constant pursuit to counterbalance its power disparity with India. China was the real elephant in the room. Nehru's effort to make every possible concession to Chinese to bring them on board failed to yield any dividend for India. There was the burning issue of Kashmir which brought the Cold War to the doorstep of the Indian sub-continent. Above all, the Western bloc led by the United States was deeply upset by India's determination to not to fall in line with the western camp. Despite his resolve to retain India's freedom in external affairs, Nehru mostly failed to explore the ways and means to counter the challenges besides the principle of non-alignment. The code of Non-alignment was no doubt a noble tool in a given situation but was not comprehensive enough to resist the U.S. doctrine of forging military alliances in Asia, China's aggressive gesture and Pakistan's constant diplomatic manoeuvring to destabilize and weaken India. Obviously, India seemed vulnerable and poorly adjusted to the world that was decided mainly by the rules of the Cold War. 'As states become economically and militarily more powerful, they not only seek greater global influence over international political and economic institutions and the behaviour of other states in consonance with their rising capabilities, but they are also more capable of expanding their interests by changing the established order'<sup>2</sup>. But in case of India the reverse was underway and India appeared to lack the drive to change the status quo. However, India's vast size, diverse geography, its venerable traditions and culture was acting against any outright compromise of India's foreign policy orientation even at such delicate circumstance of world politics.

## CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

The most notable change that India's foreign policy has undergone in recent past is the change of perception. Foreign policy today is an instrument to pursue India's national interests irrespective of the policy orientation and concerns of the countries across the board. This pragmatic aspect of conducting foreign relations was mostly missing in India's foreign policy for a long time since independence. India was always hesitant to take a bold stand at the expense of the interests of other nations. Nehru and Nehruvians were not able to cope with the dilemmas the external powers and Nehru's policies created for the advancement of Indian vital interests. Nehru's policies facilitated the interests of the external powers, because Nehru's frame of reference was driven by the parameters of policies and interests of external powers and external ideologies that were not to India's advantage<sup>3</sup>. Thus, it may be argued that the lofty ideological inclination of India's foreign policy has undergone sea change without having compromised the basic principles of India's foreign policy. Narendra Modi has not recklessly opted for a different course besides being inducing a muscular element in India's foreign policy framework. In the greater interests of India and his profound respect to the legacy of the freedom movement, Modi continued the path already laid out in treading the exterior dealings of India. However, he has tweaked India's external dealings here and there and adjusted it to serve India's national interests most proficiently. India's foreign policy now seems to be far more responsive to India's interests than it was under preceding regimes. Immediately after assuming office of the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi charted out his preferences in foreign affairs just as any decisive leader would have done. At first instance he set the priority on the neighboring states in South Asia, particularly with whom India has no security issues. India's regionalism has transcended beyond South Asia in a substantive and effective note due to his pragmatism and far sight and it is seeking closer cooperation with the states in the South East Asia and the East. In his endeavor to intensify India's regional domain, he rechristened the 'Look East' Policy of the previous governments to the 'Act East' policy. Modi's Act East policy is primarily action oriented and focuses on the development of infrastructure as the key to enhance India's global status and economy. India is pursuing deeper strategic ties with the US, Japan, and Australia and in the process of geo-balancing between the US and China, India seemed to have drawn closer to the US and other western allies. But such developments in India's external outreach and approach did not, however, impact the time tested friendship of India and Russia. India maintained its firm neutrality and remained resilient in its stand in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine Crisis. Instead, by choosing not to vote against Russia at the UN, New Delhi not only did a careful balancing of its foreign policy but also successfully reiterated the tenacity of India's foreign policy to deal with



adversity. A similar stand was adopted by New Delhi in last November when it decided to abstain from voting on the resolution of the UNHRC against Iran. The resolution denounced atrocities perpetrated by the Iranian government on peaceful protester who are fighting for their right for wearing 'hijab'. Two weeks later, on November 16, the UNGA's third committee voted on a draft resolution that referred to the death of Masha Amini and urged Iranian officials to "cease the use of excessive force against peaceful protesters, including women and children". India had voted no<sup>4</sup>. India's distancing yet again from the internal affair was warranted by its economic interests. Iran is the second largest supplier of crude oil to India. India happens to be one of the largest foreign investors in Iran's oil and gas industry. Visibly, India preferred not to disturb its ties with Iran at the face of internal domestic turmoil in the country. Thus, India's foreign policy today is a unique blend of idealism and realism that serves India's national interests optimally without infringing its long standing record of a responsible peace loving state.

## MODI'S ACHIEVEMENTS

In case of a neutral analysis, foreign policy is surely an aspect in which Modi deserves accolade. For example, there was lot of skepticism with India's recent stand in Russia-Ukraine crisis. But more than a year down the lane, India succeeded to prevail over its decision. Nevertheless, India's stand towards Russia was not bereft of India's long standing concern and reverence for international peace and territorial integrity of a nation. India constantly provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine, raised its voice to call off the war and tried to mediate to bring to an end further escalation of the standoff between the two countries. It was indeed a spectacular diplomatic victory for India 'that Putin said he had ordered Russian soldiers "to ensure the safe exit of Indian nationals from the armed conflict zone and their return to their homeland," according to a Kremlin statement<sup>5</sup>. Just as India understands the importance of Russia in expanding its footprints in the west-dominated global sphere, in neutralizing critical voices against India and above all in balancing China, it also recognizes the importance to build proximity with the U.S, Japan, and Australia to attract lucrative global investments, protect the sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific and demoralize China. During the tenure of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, India was already moving towards the Quad, but it took him a while to recognize the threat that China posed. Due to the PLA's intrusions into India in the summer of 2020, the two Asian neighbours engaged in a brief military conflict. Any reluctance Indian leaders and foreign policy experts had on joining the Quad quickly evaporated given China's misadventure in India's vicinity. Since 2020, Chinese incursions into Ladakh, China's repetitive attempts to encroach Indian territory and its smart strategy to encircle India in its neighborhood are major

issues for concern for India. In such a scenario it was a calculated move for the Modi government to join the quad and India opted for it judiciously. The Government of India in the recent past had taken number of decisive steps whenever there was the question of India's national interest. Article 370 was scrapped and Kashmir was liberated from foreign intervention once and for all. Initial hiccups over the abrogation of the Article 370 were also handled proficiently by the government. China's attempt to internalize the issue on behalf of Pakistan was also diffused by India's smart diplomacy. India's military modernization has been speeded up in rapid scale. Just after Modi assumed his office as the Prime Minister, India witnessed the laying of its first missile tracking and first surveillance ship. In 2016, the agreement for Rafale Combat Jets was signed between India and France. The agreement was signed with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) in 2021 for 83 Tejas Combat Aircrafts. Apart from acquisition of sophisticated weapons, Narendra Modi's emphasis on 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' has intensified the partnership between DRDO and private sector to indigenize India's defense requirement. Under the leadership of PM Modi India carried out surgical strikes across the border, both in the east and west, to demonstrate its willingness to go beyond the conventional methods to safeguard India's national interests. Balakot Airstrike has shown the world that India is no longer a country which will procrastinate to take decision during the trying times that concerns India's security. During the COVID outbreak, India had set a record of exemplary management which many so called developed and industrialized countries could not showcase despite their huge prowess on science, technology and medical infrastructure. India not only developed its own vaccine in record time and vaccinated its billion plus population but also exported 65 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to more than 100 countries across the globe, which earned it the name of the 'Pharmacy of the world'. India's role during the COVID outbreak was just not a charitable diplomatic gesture but also a humanitarian move which reflected India's commitment to the humanity at large. Modi government while forging lasting relationships with foreign nations for mutual growth and development also showed extraordinary skill in evacuating people stranded in faraway places. In 2021, India evacuated its citizens stuck in Taliban controlled Afghanistan after the Taliban overthrew the US-backed government and took control of the country. Before that, the Indian government rescued more than 4,500 Indians and 960 foreigners from war-ravaged Yemen in 2015. India also rescued 46 nurses from ISIS captivity in Iraq in 2014. In 2022, thousands of students have been rescued from war-torn Ukraine. Such moves amount to huge diplomatic success of India's foreign policy even in the assessment of a detractor of PM Modi. In nutshell, India's foreign policy has succeeded substantially to achieve its target under Modi. Modi's economic priorities which



are often reflected in his 'economic diplomacy' have earned India the fame of a potential investment destination. "The PM has mooted three 'T' - trade, tourist and technology-to boost Indian economic diplomacy. The proposal aims to use India's overseas missions and embassies as tools to increase exports from the country<sup>6</sup>. Modi also took a strong position on the WTO in favour of developing countries like India. India stood strong for its MSMEs, farmers & fishermen. The voice of the poor and the vulnerable was strengthened globally by India's stand at the WTO. The handling of COVID 19 besides having delicate bilateral negotiations with countries across the board and internal economic reforms are issues of positive reception for India's Foreign Policy. Modi also showed utmost skill in connecting with the Indian Diasporas in all the places that he visited and accelerating their pace of engagement to the economy of the country. Chairmanship of G20 is one more feather in India's foreign policy. Under the leadership of PM Modi, India has grown to assert its territorial integrity in the face of mounting Chinese aggression. Beijing could no longer execute its evil plans of discreetly expanding its frontiers without facing tough resistance from India.

## MODI'S CHALLENGES

However, there is no end to challenge in foreign policy. For PM Modi, major challenge will be to contain China primarily in its neighborhood. India's regional security outlook is shaped by China to a large extent. So far, there is no progress in the protracted boundary dispute between India and China. Persistent misadventure of China in India's border regions including the recent attempt of incursion in the Tawang region of Arunachal Pradesh further reiterates that any break-through in border dispute between the two countries is a remote possibility. Deadlock on issues, such as, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are also likely to endure. While the Modi government has been consistently firm in dealing with Pakistan, consistent Chinese support to Pakistan further complicates India's regional security situation. Thus, managing the rise of China has been a significant policy challenge for most countries in Asia and particularly to India. India needs to accelerate the pace of completion of projects under its Act East Policy, forge closer ties with the US, deepen its relationship with India's time tested partners like Russia and Japan and bring in internal balances by building indigenous defense capabilities. No choice by itself will be a full proof strategy to contain China. Nonetheless, the objective should be to supplement one strategy with the other to end up with a fruitful outcome in favour of India. 'With regard to its wider regional strategic outlook, India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific region seems to be guided by "maximising convergence and minimizing divergence" vis-à-vis both its partners and rivals. New Delhi's delicate handling of the US and China, and fostering stronger ties with Japan, Australia, Russia,

France, and the ASEAN region clearly demonstrates a new boldness and discipline in respect of its regional positioning and protecting its policy maneuverability to meet its strategic and diplomatic objectives<sup>7</sup>. Besides, India needs to ensure favorable dealings in global bodies like the WTO, sustain the Quad alliance without infringing India's interests in the long run, to transform India from a lucrative investment destination to a truly self-reliant and exporting country, to preserve India's constitutional values and ethos and also to counter the West's repetitive strategy to project India as a jingoistic state. The onus to maintain India's internal cohesion also rests with PM Modi lest it does not derail India's current foreign policy endeavor.

## CONCLUSION

Let us not be guided by the fact that foreign policy is determined only by economic compulsions and realistic calculations of national interests of a nation state. A leader's vision and conviction are also important constituents that shape the foreign policy and change the destiny of a nation. Currently, India's foreign policy seems to be moving in the right direction to find a firm ground for India in the global space. The element of leadership seemed to have influenced India's foreign policy perceptibly in the recent past. What have changed under Mr. PM Modi have been the pace of implementation and the style of dealing with the fellow members. A 'New Panchsheel' formula was evolved to deepen and widen India's foreign policy engagement. 'Modi's foreign policy agenda has been pursued along the broad if vague lines set out in the BJP's election manifesto, which outlined three priority areas for action: improving India's international ties with key states (especially in East Asia) in ways that will aid its economic development; bolstering India's security with regard to both Pakistan and China; and leveraging India's 'soft power' in the West and the developing world to increase New Delhi's global standing and influence<sup>8</sup>. The silver lining is that there is no deviation from the priorities set out at the moment.

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