

# India's New Foreign Policy Strategy

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### I. Introduction

Most nations and large ones at that do not easily alter their international orientation. States tend to be conservative about foreign policy. Fundamental changes in foreign policy take place only when there is a revolutionary change either at home or in the world. Much as the ascent of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s produced radical changes in Chinese foreign policy, India's relations with the world have seen a fundamental transformation over the last decade and a half. A number of factors were at work in India. The old political and economic order at home had collapsed and externally the end of the Cold War removed all the old benchmarks that guided India's foreign policy. Many of the core beliefs of the old system had to be discarded and consensus generated on new ones. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the new wave of economic globalization left India scrambling to find new anchors for its conduct of external relations. This paper examines the origin, dynamics and the implications of India's new foreign policy strategy.

Most Indians agree that its first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had defined a unique foreign policy for India at the very dawn of its independence. Despite many criticisms of his world view, a broad national consensus had emerged around Nehru's ideas on independent foreign policy, non-alignment, and third world solidarity. Since the 1990s, though, the challenge for the Indian leaders has been to reinterpret Nehru's ideas to suit the new political context that had confronted it. The new Indian leaders could neither denounce Nehru nor formally reject Nehru's ideas, for that would have invited serious political trouble. Yet they had to continually improvise and refashion India's foreign policy to suit the new requirements.

This has not been easy. The tension between the imperative of the new and the resistance of the old ideas on how to conduct foreign policy is real and is unlikely to end in the near future. The fear of the new and fondness for the old continue to be reflected in all aspects of Indian diplomacy from engaging the United States to an optimal strategy towards the smallest of the neighbours. The “new” foreign policy of India is indeed work in progress. Yet it is not difficult to see that the direction of Indian diplomacy has changed substantially since the end of the cold war amidst internal and external impulses.

## II. Structural Changes in India’s World View

Underlying India’s current foreign policy strategy are a set of important transitions in India’s world view. Not all of these were articulated self-consciously or clearly by the Indian political leadership. A few of those changes stand out and are unlikely to be reversed. The first was the transition from the national consensus on building a “socialist society” to building a “modern capitalist” one. The socialist ideal, with its roots in the national movement, had so dominated the Indian political discourse by the early 1970s, that a Constitutional amendment was passed in 1976 to make the nation into a “socialist republic”. But 1991 saw the collapse of the Soviet Union, the veritable symbol of socialism, and the edifice of India’s state-socialism began to crumble. Adapting to the new challenges of globalization now became the principal national objective. The change in the national economic strategy in 1991 inevitably produced abundant new options on the foreign policy front.

Implicit in this was the second transition, from the past emphasis on politics to a new stress on economics in the making of foreign policy. India began to realize in the 1990s how far behind it had fallen the rest of Asia, including China, in economic development. With the socialist strait jacket gone, and the pressures to compete with other emerging markets, Indian diplomacy now entered uncharted waters. In the past, foreign for aid was so symbolic of Indian diplomacy that sought to meet the government’s external financing requirements as well as developmental needs. India was now seeking foreign direct investment, and access to markets in the developed world. The slow but successful economic reforms unleashed the potential of the nation,

generated rapid economic growth and provided a basis to transform its relations with great powers, regional rivals Pakistan and China, and the neighbourhood as a whole.

A third transition in Indian foreign policy is about the shift from being a leader of the “Third World” to the recognition of the potential that India could emerge as a great power in its own right. While independent India always had a sense of its own greatness, that never seemed realistic until the Indian economy began to grow rapidly in the 1990s. In the early decades of its independent existence, India viewed many of the international and regional security issues through the prism of the third world and “anti-imperialism”. The 1990s, however, brought home some painful truths. There was no real third world trade union, that India believed it was leading. After a radical phase in the 1970s, most developing nations had begun to adopt pragmatic economic policies and sought to integrate with the international market. Much of the developing world had made considerable economic advances, leaving the South Asia way behind. While the rhetoric on the third world remained popular, the policy orientation in India’s external relations increasingly focused on India’s own self interest. There was a growing perception, flowing from the Chinese example, that if India could sustain high growth rates it had a chance to gain a place at the international high table.

The 1990s also saw India begin discarding the “anti-Western” political impulses that were so dominant in the world view that shaped Indian diplomacy right up to 1991. Rejecting the “anti-Western” mode of thinking was the fourth important transition of Indian foreign policy. As the world’s largest democracy, India was the most committed to Western political values outside the Euro-Atlantic world. Yet the Cold War saw India emerge as the most articulate opponent of the Western world view. A strong anti-Western bias crept into Indian foreign policy supported by the left as well as the right and underwritten by the security establishment. The disappearance of the Soviet Union and China’s rise as a great power demanded that India to break the decades old anti-Western approaches to foreign policy.

Finally, the fifth transition in Indian foreign policy in the 1990s was from idealism to realism. Idealism came naturally to the Indian elite that won independence from the British by arguing against colonialism on the basis of first principles of Enlightenment. The new leaders of India had contempt for “power politics”. They

believed it was a negative but lingering legacy from 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe that had no relevance to the new times of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. India tended to see its role in world politics as the harbinger of a new set of principles of peaceful coexistence and multilateralism which if applied properly would transform the world. Although Nehru demonstrated realism on many fronts, especially in India's immediate neighbourhood, the public articulation of India's foreign policy had the stamp of idealism all over it. Since the 1990s, India could no longer sustain the presumed idealism of its foreign policy. India had to come to terms with the painful reality that its relative standing in the world had substantially declined during the Cold War. Much like Deng Xiaoping who prescribed pragmatism for China, the Indian leaders began to emphasize practical ways to achieve power and prosperity for India.

### III. Dynamics of the New Foreign Policy

One area which saw the cumulative impact of all these transitions in a powerful manner was India's nuclear diplomacy. After years of promoting idealistic slogans such as universal disarmament, India by the late 1990s recognized the importance of becoming a declared nuclear weapon power. Despite the steady nuclearization of its security environment over the decades, India remained ambiguous about its attitudes to its national own nuclear weapons programme. Even as it tested a nuclear device in 1974, India refused to follow through with the nuclear weapons project. By the late 1990s, though, India found it necessary to make itself an unambiguous nuclear power. The economic growth of the decade gave it the self-confidence that it could ride through the inevitable international reaction to it. India was also right in betting that a country of its size and economic potential could not be sanctioned and isolated for too long. Even more important, India sensed that there might be diplomatic opportunities for getting the great powers acknowledge if not legitimize its nuclear weapons programme and remove the high technology sanctions against it. Within seven years after its second round of nuclear testing in 1998, India signed the historic nuclear deal with the Bush Administration in July 2005 under which the U.S. agreed to change its domestic non-proliferation law and revise the international guidelines on nuclear cooperation in favour of India.

Another area of transformation was India's relations with the great powers. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, allowed India to pursue, without the political inhibitions of the past, simultaneous expansion of relations with all the major powers. Injecting political and economic substance into the long emaciated relationship with the United States, now the lone super power, became the principal national strategic objective. At the same time, India was unwilling to let its old ties to the Soviet Union, now a weakened Russia wither away. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has remained an important source of arms and a strategic partner. Meanwhile India's ties with Europe, China and Japan have all become far more weighty and diversified. The upgradation of the relations with China since the early 1990s has been one of the biggest achievements of India's new foreign policy. The once wary relationship with China has now blossomed into a strategic partnership for peace and development. China is now all set to emerge as India's single largest trading partner. India and Japan, which drifted apart from the Cold War, have steadily expanded the basis for political cooperation in recent years and have proclaimed a strategic partnership in 2005.

India's new foreign policy was not all about "big power diplomacy". It involved a strong effort to find political reconciliation with two of its large neighbours—Pakistan and China. Since the end of the Cold War, India had sought to cope with Pakistan in the radically changed context that brought nuclear weapons into the bilateral equation and an increased ability of Pakistan to intervene in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir through cross-border terrorism. The diplomatic history of Indo-Pak relations in the 1990s is a rich, if frustrating, tapestry that included every possible development—from a limited conventional war to a total military confrontation to many summits that struggled to define a new framework peace between the two neighbours. A new peace process under way since 2004 has produced the first important steps towards a normalization of Indo-Pak relations, including a serious negotiation on the Kashmir dispute. At the same India is also involved in purposeful negotiations to end the long-standing boundary dispute with China. For the first time since its independence, India is now addressing its two of most important sources of insecurity—unresolved territorial questions with Pakistan and China. Both involve de-emphasizing territorial nationalism, which in turn carry

significant political risks at home. Yet, the Indian political leadership now believes resolving either or both of these problems would fundamentally alter India's security condition.

By the 1990s, India, which always saw itself as the pre-eminent power in South Asia, found its relations with the smaller neighbours had reached a dead end. Recognizing the need to transform its South Asian policy, India embarked on a series of policy innovations that demanded greater generosity and a willingness to walk more than half the distance in resolving its many accumulated problems with smaller neighbours. As it embarked upon the policy of economic globalization, India also saw the importance of promoting regional economic integration in the Subcontinent, which was a single market until the Partition of the region took place in 1947. While India's weight in the region began to increase it also had to temper the past temptations to unilaterally intervene in the internal conflicts of its neighbours. Unlike in the past, when it sought to keep major powers out of the Subcontinent, India is now working closely with the great powers in resolving the political crises in Nepal and Sri Lanka. India's unilateralism in the region is increasingly being replaced by a multilateral approach. India has also supported the participation of China, Japan, and the U.S. as observers in the principal mechanism for regionalism, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

Even as India seeks to define a new approach towards smaller neighbours, the regions abutting the Subcontinent beckoned India to reassert its claim for a say in the affairs of the Indian Ocean and its littoral. The 1990s saw India making a determined effort to reconnect with its extended neighbourhood in South East Asia, Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the Middle East. India's renewed engagement with the surrounding regions is within a new framework that emphasized economic relations and energy diplomacy rather than the traditional notion of third world solidarity through the non-aligned movement. The Cold War and India's insular economic policies in the first four decades had undermined India's standing to the East and West of its neighbourhood and prevented New Delhi from ensuring its much vaunted importance in the Indian Ocean littoral. But India's new economic and foreign policies have given India a real opportunity to realize the vision of Lord Curzon, the British viceroy at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of Indian leadership in the region stretching from Aden to Malacca. After

decades of neglecting economic and political regionalism, India is now an active participant in various regional organizations from the East Asia Summit to the African Union.

During the 1990s Indian diplomacy had to develop a new strategy to deal with the Islamic world. Even as it renewed its engagement with Israel, that was kept at arms length for decades, India also sought to redefine its policies towards key Islamic countries. The reality of a large Islamic population—nearly 150 million today-- had always been an important factor in India's foreign policy. In the past it merely meant supporting various Islamic causes. But today, the relationship with the Islamic world is being deepened on the basis of economic and commercial cooperation, energy security and cooperation in combating religious extremism and terrorism. This gave an unprecedented depth and breadth to India's ties to the Islamic world since the end of the Cold War.

#### IV. Long Term Implications

The innovations in India's foreign policy strategy since the early 1990s has resulted in the happy situation of simultaneous expansion of relations with all the major powers, growing weight in Asia and the Indian Ocean regions, and the prospect of improved relations with important neighbours. Given its impending relative rise in the international system, India is bound to be confronted by a number of challenges. First the new focus on the importance of power is not without problems. Despite being marginalized in recent years, the imperatives of idealism and moralism have not completely disappeared from India's foreign policy. Since 1991, India has moved from its traditional emphasis on the "power of the argument" to a new stress on the "argument of power". Given its noisy democracy, India cannot build domestic political support to foreign policy initiatives purely on the argument of power. It would continue to need a set of values and norms to justify its actions on the world stage. As a consequence the tension between "power and principle" would remain an enduring one in India's foreign policy strategy.

Second, increased power potential will mean that India would have to take positions on major international issues and regional conflicts. In recent years, New Delhi has either avoided or merely substituted them with generalized slogans. Just as Beijing is



being pressed to become a “stake-holder” in the international system, New Delhi too would come under greater pressure to stop being a “free rider”. In other words, India would have to often find ways to limit the pursuit of “national interest” in order to contribute to “collective interests” of the international system.

Third, as India emerges as an important element of future balance of power in the world, it would be pressed to make choices in favour of one or the other great powers at least on specific issues. The absence of great power confrontation in the last few years has allowed India the luxury of converting the slogan of “non-alignment” into an “independent” foreign policy. But amidst potential new rivalries among the U.S., China, Europe, Russia, and Japan, New Delhi would be compelled to make often wrenching political choices. While India making potential alliances with one or other major powers cannot be ruled out in the future, as a large country, India would remain loath to limit its freedom of action through formal alliances.

Fourth, the demands on India to contribute to order and stability in its immediate and extended neighbourhood would dramatically increase in the coming decades. This would in turn draw India deeper into great power rivalries in various regions and the internal conflicts of smaller countries. Use of military force, either unilaterally or under multilateral mechanisms, could also become frequent. Meanwhile the India, like China, is increasingly turning towards other developing countries for stable supply of energy and mineral resources, giving growing amounts of economic assistance, providing arms and military training, and seeking long-term naval access arrangements. A rising India would, then, be no longer remain immune to the many tragedies of great power politics. Finally, India, like other great powers before it, is also in the danger of falling a victim to ultra-nationalism and an over-determination of national interest. Tempering nationalism and balancing ends and means are two challenges that come inseparably with a rising power potential on the world stage.

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