

## Needed, a map for India's foreign policy

**In the backdrop of setbacks, especially in the neighbourhood, the country has to reconsider its diplomacy's trajectory**

Not long ago, India was seen as a natural rising power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. It was the de facto leader of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It has historical and cultural ties with Nepal. It enjoyed traditional goodwill and influence in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. It had made investments worth billions of dollars in Afghanistan and cultivated vibrant ties with the post-Taliban stakeholders in Kabul. It had committed itself to multilateralism and the Central Asian connectivity project, with Iran being its gateway. It was competing and cooperating with China at the same time, while the long border between the two countries remained largely peaceful.

Cut to the present. India is perhaps facing its gravest national security crisis in 20 years, with China having changed the status quo along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the western sector in its favour. The border saw violent clashes last month, leading to fatalities for the first time in 45 years. SAARC is out of joint. Nepal has turned hostile having adopted a new map and revived border disputes with India. Sri Lanka has tilted towards China, which is undertaking massive infrastructure projects in the Indian Ocean island. Bangladesh is clearly miffed at the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. When Afghanistan is undergoing a major transition, India is out of the multi-party talks. Iran has inaugurated a railway link project connecting the Chabahar port, on the Gulf of Oman, to Zahedan (which India was to have constructed) without India. How did we get here?

Specific reasons can be found for these setbacks. Also, foreign policy need not be static. There will be ups and downs depending on the changes in policy as well as the changes in global politics. But what makes the current downturn serious is that there is a relative decline in India's smart power, especially in the neighbourhood and the extended neighbourhood, which demands a deeper perusal of the foreign policy trajectory itself. And when we dig deep, three problems can be found which are more or less linked to this decline — a closer alignment of policy with the U.S. line, coupling of foreign policy with domestic politics and hubris.

### **The U.S. line**

India's official policy is that it is committed to multilateralism. Even after India started moving away from non-alignment, which it calls irrelevant in the post-Cold War world order, New Delhi maintained that strategic autonomy would remain the bedrock of its policy thinking. But there has been a steady erosion in India's strategic autonomy, which predates the current government. When India started deepening its partnership with the United States (which was a historical necessity), New Delhi began steadily aligning its policies with U.S. interests. The case of Iran is the best example. The agreement to develop the Chabahar port was signed in 2003. But India, under pressure from the U.S., was moving slowly, despite the fact that the project offered India an alternative route to Central Asia bypassing Pakistan. India voted against Iran at the United Nations; scuttled an ambitious gas pipeline project and cut down trade ties drastically. After the Iran nuclear deal was signed in 2015, India immediately stepped up oil purchases and expanded works at Chabahar. In 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi travelled to Tehran and signed a trilateral connectivity project with Afghanistan and Iran. But when U.S. President Donald Trump pulled the U.S. out of the Iran deal in 2018 and reimposed sanctions on the country, India toed the U.S. line, bringing down its oil imports to zero.

This dilly-dallying to the tunes of policy changes in Washington co-existed with India's deepening defence and military ties with the U.S. Washington wants India to play a bigger role in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific region to contain China's rise. While India has been cautious of becoming an ally, it has steadily deepened military-to-military cooperation in the recent past — the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) is one example. These developments probably altered Beijing's assessment of India. The border aggression at different points on the LAC could not be a localised conflict; it is part of a larger strategic move, initiated by the top brass of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). One of the reasons for the shift could be Beijing's assessment that India has already become a de facto ally of the U.S. The forceful altering of the status quo on the border is a risky message as much to New Delhi as it is to Washington.

### Domestic politics

At least two decisions taken by the government mainly keeping its domestic audience in mind have had foreign policy consequences. First, the passing of the CAA. The official narrative has been that India is offering citizenship to the persecuted minorities of select countries in its neighbourhood. There were two problems. One, this is regionalisation of the domestic problems of the countries in India's neighbourhood, some of which are its long-time friends. These countries are genuinely upset with India's move. Two, Muslims, including those sub-sects persecuted in neighbouring countries, were by design excluded from the citizenship programme. This drove new wedges between India and the countries that had a Muslim majority and were friendly to India in the neighbourhood. Forget Pakistan, which is a traditional rival. Bangladesh took offence at the CAA and the National Register of Citizens (from which the government has temporarily backed off) and the political rhetoric in India against the "termites" from other countries. Bangladeshi media reported recently that the Indian envoy in Dhaka had tried to fix an appointment with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for four months but did not get one. There were anti-India protests even in Afghanistan.

Second, the abrogation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. This was another popular move among those who form the support base of the ruling party. But it led to the suspension of fundamental rights in the Kashmir Valley for a prolonged period that damaged India's reputation as a responsible democratic power and gave propaganda weapons to Pakistan. The move did not help India quell militancy either as the Valley continues to see violence nearly a year after the decision. More importantly, the change of status quo in Jammu and Kashmir, including the bifurcation and reduction of the erstwhile State into Union Territories, could be another factor that prompted the Chinese to move aggressively towards the border in Ladakh.

### The perils of hubris

Misplaced confidence does not do good for rising powers. Great powers wait to establish their standing before declaring that they have arrived. The Soviet Union started acting like a superpower after it won (with allies), the Second World War. China bided its time for four decades before it started taking on the mighty U.S. Since the 1970s, its focus has almost entirely been on its economic rise. India should learn from at least these modern examples. If it did, it would not have used high-handedness in Nepal during the country's constitutional crisis and caused a traditional and civilisational ally to turn hostile. The updated political map which India released in November rubbed salt into the wound on the Nepal border.

To address the current crises, India has to reconsider its foreign policy trajectory. It is a big power with one of the world's biggest militaries. It is a natural naval force in the Indian Ocean. It does not lack resources to claim what is its due in global politics. What it lacks is strategic depth.

1. **map** (noun) – plan.
2. **backdrop** (noun) – situation, scenario, context.
3. **setback** (noun) – problem, difficulty, issue.
4. **neighbourhood** (noun) – surrounding country.
5. **diplomacy** (noun) – international politics, foreign affairs, foreign policy.
6. **trajectory** (noun) – direction, route, path/way.
7. **de facto** (adjective) – Latin, literally 'of fact'; existing, actual, effective.
8. **ties** (noun) – bond, association, relationship.
9. **goodwill** (noun) – friendliness, cooperation, understanding.
10. **cultivate** (verb) – seek the friendship of, seek the favour of, try to win over, try to get someone on one's side, .
11. **stakeholder** (noun) – a person with an interest in something.
12. **multilateralism** (noun) – a method of coordinating relations between ( a group of) three or more countries.
13. **gateway** (noun) – a place considered as an entrance/access to other places.
14. **cut to** (verb) – come to; move to (another scene).
15. **perhaps** (adverb) – maybe, possibly.
16. **gravest** superlative adjective of **grave** (adjective) – terrible, awful, alarming, gloomy.
17. **status quo** (noun) – the present situation, the current state, the existing state of affairs.
18. Line of Actual Control (LAC) (noun) – the de-facto (effective) border between India and China. The LAC is a 4,057-km border running through three areas-Western (Ladakh, Ladakh (Kashmir)), middle (Uttarakhand, Himachal) and eastern (Sikkim, Arunachal).

19. **in one's favour** (phrase) – to one's benefit/advantage.
20. **fatality** (noun) – death, casualty, mortality/loss.
21. **out of joint** (phrase) – In a disordered state; in an inauspicious state.
22. **hostile** (adjective) – unfriendly, aggressive, opposed, inimical, averse.
23. **revive** (verb) – renew, revitalize, fortify, strengthen.
24. **tilt** (verb) – move, change, incline, lean.
25. **undertake** (verb) – begin, start, launch into, embark on.
26. **miff** (verb) – displease, annoy/irritate, offend/upset.
27. **undergo** (verb) – go through, experience, engage in.
28. **transition** (noun) – change, transformation.
29. **static** (adjective) – unchanged, fixed, constant.
30. **ups and downs** (phrase) – unpredictability, instability, uncertainties.
31. **downturn** (noun) – decline, setback, blow/upset.
32. **relative** (adjective) – some, reasonable, considerable, a fair degree of.
33. **smart power** (noun) – In international relations, the term smart power refers to the combination of hard power and soft power strategies.
34. **soft power** (noun) – soft power is convincing & effective power deriving from attraction and imitation and be based on intangible (non-physical) resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions (Courtesy: E-International Relations (E-IR)).
35. **hard power** (noun) – hard power is coercive power executed through military threats and economic incentives and based on tangible resources such as the army or economic strength.
36. **perusal** (noun) – reading, scrutiny, inspection, study, examination.
37. **dig deep** (phrase) – to make a lot of effort with one's (physical, mental or financial) resources.
38. **couple** (verb) – combine, integrate, connect, incorporate, link.
39. **hubris** (noun) – excessive pride, feeling of superiority/arrogance, self-confidence.
40. **irrelevant** (adjective) – immaterial, unrelated, not germane, unimportant/insignificant.
41. **the Cold War** (noun) – The Cold War was a state of political and military tension after World War II between powers in the Western (Capitalist) Bloc and powers in the Eastern (Soviet) Bloc.
42. **world/global order** (noun) – the arrangement of power and authority that provides the system for the conduct of diplomacy and world politics in relation to the entire world. An international-relations term describing the distribution of power among world powers.
43. **strategic autonomy** (noun) – strategic autonomy is defined as the ability to set priorities and make decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal (resources/funds) to carry these through – in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone.
44. **bedrock** (noun) – core, basis/base, foundation.
45. **erosion** (noun) – destruction, deterioration, decline, weakening.
46. **predate** (verb) – happen at a date earlier than (something).
47. **deepen** (verb) – increase, enhance, boost, strengthen.
48. **necessity** (noun) – (essential) requirement, prerequisite, indispensable thing.
49. **bypass** (verb) – circumvent, avoid, dodge.
50. **scuttle** (verb) – (intentionally) cause something to fail.
51. **ambitious** (adjective) – aspiring, purposeful, desirous; formidable.
52. **cut down** (phrasal verb) – reduce, decrease, lessen.
53. **step up** (phrasal verb) – increase, boost, augment, scale up.
54. **trilateral** (adjective) – involving three nations/parties/groups.
55. **pull out** (phrasal verb) – withdraw, leave, get/move out.
56. **sanctions** (noun) – action taken, or an order given to force a country to obey international laws by limiting or stopping trade with that country, by not allowing economic aid for that country, etc (Courtesy: VOA Learning English).
57. **toe the line** (phrase) – do things as per someone else's expectations; to adhere to the expectations/rules; meet/conform to a standard.
58. **dilly-dally** (verb) – waste time, delay, linger.
59. **tune** (noun) – adaption, adjustment (to a particular purpose/situation).

60. **probably** (adverb) – most likely, in all likelihood, all things considered, perhaps.
61. **aggression** (noun) – hostility, belligerence, combativeness, warmongering, hawkishness.
62. **top brass** (noun) – very important person/people (of high military rank).
63. **People's Liberation Army (PLA)** (noun) – People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the armed forces of the country of China and Communist Party of China (CPC). It is one of the largest military forces in the world.
64. **bear/keep in mind** (phrase) – take into account, be mindful, remember/consider.
65. **consequence** (noun) – result, outcome, effect; ramification, repercussion.
66. **narrative** (noun) – a representation of a particular situation; portrayal/account.
67. **persecuted** (adjective) – oppressed, victimized; troubled/suffering.
68. **regionalisation** (noun) – it can be defined as intensification of intra-regional social and economic interactions.
69. **sub-sect** (noun) – a subordinate division (of a section).
70. **drive a wedge between** (phrase) – separate, divide.
71. **take offence at** (phrase) – be offended, get upset, be annoyed, be miffed.
72. **back off** (phrasal verb) – retreat, withdraw, draw back.
73. **rhetoric** (noun) – the art of speaking or writing effectively & persuasively or impressively (but, often lacking substance); bombast, loftiness, hyperbole/extravagant language.
74. **termite** (noun) – an insect that eats & destroys wood.
75. **envoy** (noun) – diplomat, consul, ambassador.
76. **abrogation** (noun) – abolition, repeal, cancellation (of a law/agreement).
77. **valley** (noun) – a low area between hills or mountains typically with a river running through it.
78. **prolonged** (adjective) – continuous, lengthy, extended, protracted.
79. **propaganda** (noun) – dissemination/spreading of information.
80. **quell** (verb) – crush, stifle, suppress, end.
81. **militancy** (noun) – belligerency, combativeness, contentiousness/defiance.
82. **bifurcation** (noun) – division of something into two branches or parts.
83. **erstwhile** (adjective) – old, previous, former, then.
84. **perils** (noun) – dangers, difficulties.
85. **misplaced** (adjective) – misguided, ill-advised, ill-judged.
86. **bide one's time** (phrase) – to wait calmly for a good opportunity to do something; be patient, stand by, hold back.
87. **take on** (phrasal verb) – compete against, oppose, challenge/confront.
88. **mighty** (adjective) – strong, powerful, influential.
89. **high-handedness** (noun) – heavy-handedness, autocracy, dictatorship, tyranny, absolute power, totalitarianism.
90. **constitutional crisis** (noun) – it is defined as a situation when a country's constitution is not able to clearly resolve an issue/problem/conflict in the function of a Government at its disposal.
91. **rub salt into the wound** (phrase) – to make an unpleasant situation even worse.
92. **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.
93. **due** (noun) – right.
94. **strategic depth** (noun) – it is better obtained by shaping relations through engagement and by adding depth to a country's economic capacity.