NEW DIRECTIONS IN INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY: QUEST FOR GLOBAL POWER STATUS

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the new wave of economic globalization had extensively affected the global political and economic order that compelled states across the globe to revisit their foreign policies in the early 1990s. Even India had to restructure and reorient its foreign policy in the post-cold war years. New Delhi had discarded its ideational commitments of the past and got engaged in a vigorous debate about the principles underlying the country’s foreign relations. Indian policy makers had demonstrated an extraordinary level of maturity by gradually disassociating itself from the non-alignment and adopted a pragmatic foreign policy that essentially focussed on enhancing its national interests. In this backdrop, the present paper aims to focus on the origin, dynamics and the implications of India’s new foreign policy strategy in the post-cold war years with special emphasis on the strategies New Delhi has framed to counter major challenges in order to achieve global power status.

India’s foreign policy in the post-independence years was inspired by the ideals and vision of the leaders of its independence movement. Distinguished Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose and few others were largely responsible for providing the philosophical and intellectual foundations of India’s foreign policy strategy and directions. Some of its major tenets were articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, at the Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi in March 1947. (Dubey: 3) India’s foreign policy from the very beginning systematically combined its national interests with the broader objective of establishing a just and equitable world order. It was deeply anchored in the ideals of truth, non-violence, tolerance, the notion of global governance and the world as a single family of human kind.

During Nehru’s tenure, India attempted to play a role in the arena of global politics well beyond country’s material capabilities through the pursuit of a mostly ideational foreign policy. Indira Gandhi - who succeeded Lal Bahadur Shastri – moved away from Nehru’s policy, though partly, and advanced towards a more pragmatic approach. Sumit Ganguly stated that during Nehru’s era, India’s political institutions were largely underdeveloped and therefore had very limited impact on the foreign policy making process. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, however, put aside the institutional limitations as she centralised authority and relied mostly on her instincts and a coterie of individuals to manage the country’s foreign relations. (Ganguly 2015: 2) Rajiv Gandhi did not depart much from his predecessor’s policies and moved in the same directions and thus he had very limited contributions in the foreign policy arena. It was only at the end of the cold
war – when India’s economic and defence capabilities increased – that India started to enjoy the global recognition which it had been striving since independence. (Ganguly 2015: 2) Thus, the old world order marked by the Cold War soon collapsed that paved the way to new configurations. Thus, the post-cold war years witnessed the birth of pragmatism in respect of India’s foreign and domestic policies. At the domestic front, socialist economic policy that continued for about four decades since independence - culminated in a severe balance of payments crisis – had been abandoned in favour of neo-liberal model. Gradually, idealised conceptions of India’s society, polity and role in the world were mostly discarded and New Delhi moved away from Nehruvian framework, though not fully.

The post-Nehruvian framework produced a greater interest in international institutions that could legitimise India’s emerging great power status, a more positive approach to relations with the United States and, most importantly, self-sufficiency in nuclear matters. A couple of factors facilitated New Delhi’s new engagement with the West (Mohan 2015: 132): (a) India’s economic reform programmes introduced in early 1990s opened a new space for New Delhi’s commercial engagement with the West. India’s steady economic growth from 1990s into the new century raised the possibility that New Delhi might embrace a more ambitious international role and thus it might finally become able to be recognised as a major power in the near future; (b) the disappearance of the Soviet Union compelled India to reinvent its major power relationships. India also started moving away from its policy of non-alignment. Thus, Indian foreign policy since early 1990s has been characterised by pragmatism and a willingness to do business with all countries across the globe. (Malone and Mukherjee “Polity, Security and Foreign Policy in Contemporary India”) This particular development provides a new orientation in India’s engagement with the outer world.

**Structural Transformations in India’s World View**

For about four decades since independence (1947), India was positioned on the periphery of global politics resulting in minimal or no influence on major issues affecting the international system. Non-alignment was used by New Delhi as the best means to promote issues like third world solidarity and nuclear disarmament to make its presence felt on the international stage. The arena of international politics was largely dominated, guided and controlled by the major powers that determined the trajectory of global politics. Things started moving in a newer directions in the post-cold war years because of India’s meteoric rise in terms of economic strength and military capacity. (Kothari: 3) Soon India moved closer to the centre of global politics.

Indian policy makers in the post-cold war years demonstrated extraordinary maturity by way of discarding non-alignment and adopted a pragmatic foreign policy focussed
on bolstering the country’s domestic material capabilities (for the first time since independence) and enhancing its own interests. (Ganguly 2015: 5) India initiated a process of engagement with the United States and at home followed a liberal economic order. At the domestic front, New Delhi abandoned the conservative model of economic development that had stifled growth and had failed to make any significant headway in poverty alleviation. It sought to forge a number of regional free trade agreements. As a consequence, India enjoyed a growth rate of around 7 percent since mid-1990s which in turn enabled the country to spend more on defence. At present, India has emerged as the world’s largest arms importer. The growth in defence spending also saw a spurt in India’s naval capabilities and reach. (Ganguly 2015: 5-6)

In the post-cold war years, a debate has been generated around Nehru’s ideas on independent foreign policy, non-alignment, and third world solidarity. In view of the transformed domestic and external environment, Indian leaders and policy makers had to reinterpret Nehru’s ideas to suit the new political context that had confronted it. It was indeed a very daunting task since the new leaders could neither denounce Nehru completely nor they could carry on with his ideas in totality. Policy makers had to continually improvise and refashion India’s foreign policy to match with the new developments. Thus there had been tensions between the imperative of the new and the resistance of the old ideas on how to conduct foreign policy, more particularly with the arrival of the present BJP govt. to power. The fear of the new and the fondness of the old continue to be reflected in all aspects of Indian diplomacy – from engaging with the United States to strategy towards its neighbours and so on.

The abandonment of many of the cold war era concerns reflected the ability of Indian policy makers to take cognizance of the shifts in the global order and thereby reorder the country’s foreign policy priorities to address new needs. India also chose to establish full-fledged diplomatic relations with Israel. However, Indian policy makers, despite their efforts, could not bring about fundamental changes in their relations with two principal adversaries, Pakistan and China. (Ganguly 2015: 5-9)

As far as foreign policy strategy is concerned, there has been important transition on multiple fronts in India’s world view during last two and a half decades.

First, there has been transition from consensus on building a “socialist society” to building a modern capitalist society. The socialist ideals 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 as the period of early 1990s witnessed the fall of the mighty Soviet Union – the veritable symbol of socialism – the foundation of the Indian model of state
socialism began to crumble. In the backdrop of globalization, radical changes were induced into India’s economic strategy that generated abundant new challenges and opportunities on the domestic and foreign policy front.

Second, In view of above-stated developments, there has been overall transition from the past emphasis on politics to a new emphasis on economics in the making of foreign policy. Fareed Zakaria and many others viewed the post-cold war international system as ‘a world of reduced danger as economics triumphs politics.’ But India had by that time already fallen much behind China in terms of economic development. In the absence of socialist strait jacket, India had to compete with other emerging markets across the globe. India started seeking foreign direct investment and access to markets in the developed world. The slow but steady economic reforms generated economic growth that provided the basis to transform India’s relations with the major powers. Economic growth of India since 1990s provided her the much needed self confidence that it could ride through the inevitable international reaction to it. New Delhi sent a message to the international community that a country of its size and economic potential could not be isolated any longer.

Third, there was a fundamental shift in India’s stand from being a leader of the ‘Third World’ to the realization of the potential that India could emerge as a great power in its own right. During cold war period, India viewed many of the international and regional security issues through the prism of the third world and anti-imperialism. In the present context, while the rhetoric on the third world remained popular, the policy orientation in India’s external relations increasingly focused on India’s national interest. India gradually re-strategized its foreign policy with in a neo-realist framework.

Fourth, in the post-Soviet years, India discarded the ‘anti-western’ political impulses that were so pre-dominant in its world view that shaped Indian diplomacy and foreign right up to 1991. New Delhi became more committed to western political values outside the Euro-Atlantic world in sharp contrast to its earlier stand. During cold war years – when NAM was at its peak – a strong anti-western posture had crept into India’s foreign policy supported by both, the left and the right wings. In fact, the sudden demise of the USSR and the coincidental rise of China’s as a great power compelled India to break the decades old anti-western approach to foreign policy. In this backdrop, New Delhi’s relations with major powers underwent radical transformation. India started maintaining a fine balance (till date) in its relations with traditional partners like Russia on the one hand and the major powers like US, China, Japan and West Europe. The up-gradation of its relations with China – despite several irritants - since the early 1990s has been one of its biggest achievements of India’s new foreign policy. Today China has emerged as India’s single largest trading partner, surpassing the United
States. India during the tenure of Atal Bihari Bajpayee (1999-2004) had also put in strong efforts to find political reconciliation with Pakistan, though with no positive outcome. This apart, India and Japan have steadily expanded the basis for political and economic cooperation and they have been speedily moving towards developing a strategic partnership.

Finally, at the theoretical level, there was a transition – from idealism to realism - in India’s foreign policy in the 1990s. During the post-independence period, India’s foreign policy was primarily guided by the principles of idealism, based on the values nurtured by the leaders of India’s freedom struggle movement. Although Nehru demonstrated realism on some fronts, especially in India’s immediate neighbourhood, the public articulation of India’s foreign policy had largely evolved within the framework of idealism. Foreign policy analysts are however divided on the point whether really India conducted its foreign policy within an idealist framework. In August 1970, Mrs. Gandhi told a Congress seminar that the problems of developing countries could be faced “not merely by idealism, not merely by sentimentalism, but by very clear thinking and hard-headed analysis of the situation. C Raj Mohan argued that non-alignment was never a purely ‘idealistic’ policy, but arose from India’s desire to assert a separate identity that was to play a leadership role in world affairs, exploit differences between the US and USSR, thereby to improve its bargaining power. (Bajpai and Pant: 1-24).

Since 1990s, India could no longer sustain the presumed idealism of its foreign policy. Much like Deng Xiaoping, Indian leaders began to emphasize on power politics. 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 decades, India remained ambiguous about its non-civilian nuclear program. In spite of a successful nuclear devise test in 1974, India refused to follow through with the nuclear weapon project. This policy was reversed in the later part of 1990s. 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 according to which the Bush administration agreed to change its domestic non-proliferation law and revise the international guidelines on nuclear cooperation in favour of India. In other words, the scale and scope of the changes in India’s foreign policy in the post-cold war years had been noteworthy.

**Foreign Policy Dynamics: Challenges before India Today**
India in the post-cold war years have been facing numerous challenges, discussed below, which needs to be addressed carefully in order to establish itself as a responsible global player/power.
First, India has been busy in addressing the most important sources of insecurity i.e. unresolved territorial question with China and Pakistan which involve deemphasizing territorial nationalism. The fact is that if New Delhi is able to resolve territorial disputes with Beijing and Islamabad, it would fundamentally alter India’s security environment. It is quite disturbing to note that India’s national security and territorial integrity have been disturbed for about last six decades resulting in New Delhi becoming more sensitive while dealing with China and Pakistan. Plethora of literature have focused on India’s territorial disputes with Pakistan and China. Kanti Bajpai in his article entitled: “Five Approaches to the Study of Indian Foreign Policy” underlines the fact that literature on Indian foreign policy has largely been dominated by writings on India’s relations with Pakistan, China and the United States. (Bajpai 2015: 21-34) These relations have been conflict ridden over a very long time. These conflicts, according to Bajpai, can be broadly understood in terms of five common approaches (Bajpai 2015: 21-34): (a) unresolved quarrel around sovereignty; (b) alliance dynamics; (c) power asymmetries; (d) differences in political values; and (e) domestic politics. It would however be difficult to say which would be the best interpretative approach to understand India’s protracted quarrels. Any one of the above could account for India’s conflicts.

Sumit Ganguly who also shares similar views, like Kanti Bajpai, has argued that if India wants to play a major role in world affairs, policy makers in New Delhi would have to focus on two fronts: (i) It would be necessary for India to fashion a long term strategy to deal with Pakistan, a country with which it has long been at odds. The central question – the status of Jammu and Kashmir – continues to bedevil their relations; and (ii) India would also be required to formulate a coherent policy to deal with the PRC. Apart from the unresolved border dispute, New Delhi is increasingly wary of China’s growing presence in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar which needs to be addressed with utmost care and attention. (Ganguly 2014: 421-422) Regarding Pakistan, the moot point is how will the rivalry with Pakistan end? T V Paul suggests that only outright Indian preponderance will terminate the conflict. When the power disparity between the two countries become very large, Pakistani elites may be forced to consider détente if not complete termination of the quarrel. If India then offers Pakistan cooperation and security guarantees, South Asia may turn the strategic scenario around. Paul’s analysis might well be extended to the India-China case as well, though this is not a feasible scenario. (Bajpai and Pant: 13-14). Manjari Chatterjee Miller argues that both India and China, operating through the lens of post-imperialism ideology, had a strong unrelenting approach to territorial sovereignty. This could be viewed as imperialistic behaviour on the part of India and China. (Bajpai and Pant: 13-14) Consequently, the border quarrel looks to be a protracted one and difficult to be resolved amicably.
Second, in view of the fact that India becoming the permanent member of SCO in 2017, New Delhi will have to rethink its traditional stand on China becoming full-time member of SAARC. India’s unilateralism in South Asia is increasingly being replaced by a multilateral approach. Already India has supported the participation of China, Japan and the US as observers in the SAARC. Given this situation, the author is of the opinion that China’s entry into SAARC could help mitigate regional tensions among SAARC members to a greater extent. This apart, it would also give a big boost to economy of the SAARC countries.

Third, the biggest strategic challenge facing India today is systemic. India has been desperately trying to figure out its position in the international system that is in a state of flux. The complexities facing India are enormous. The debate about the nature of the post-cold war international system has been going on for quite some time. Scholars on the whole accept that the United States is the dominant power in the world today. There are however differences with regard to how far ahead the United States is relative to other states and how long this dominance will last. Also there is some question whether the United States is clearly ahead in all dimensions of power. (Pant: 2)

Christopher Layne has argued that the victory of the United States in the cold war resulted in a uni-polar world order. The US however tried to maintain its hegemony through benevolence rather than coercion. William Wohlforth has claimed that not only is the international system unambiguously unipolar but also that it is more peaceful and durable because no state can seriously challenge the US in any domain of power – military, economic, technological and cultural. It means the US is the only “comprehensive global superpower”, according to la Brzeninski. (Pant: 4)

Joseph Nye, took a slightly different position, argues that it is the transformation in the nature of power - from hard power to soft power - that gives the US unique advantages in the present international system. With its political leadership and strategic vision, he claims, the United States can maintain its hegemony in world politics. For Huntington, it is a “uni-multipolar” system, where a single superpower, the US, exists with several major powers, and this system will lead to a clearly multi-polar system in the coming years. Thus the international system is heading towards uncertainty. According to a realist understanding of global politics, multi-polar systems are inherently unstable because they generate uncertainty and make it difficult for states to draw lines between allies and adversaries, thereby causing miscalculations. (Pant: 5) It is in this broader global and regional strategic context that India has been trying to fashion its foreign policy strategy. While some scholars suggest that India has become a client state of the United States, India has been very careful to cultivate other major powers as well. BRICS is one such example.
In fact, India has emerged as an important element of future balance of power in the world. It is being pressed to make choices between one and other great powers alliance on specific issues. China, Russia on the one hand and US, Japan, Australia on the other. C. Raja Mohan shows that a number of strands of strategic thinking emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War – some favouring bandwagon with the US, some seeking to balance against the US, some urging an alliance with China and Russia etc. He concludes that the idea of alliance building, at least in a soft sense has ingrained into Indian thinking. (Pant: 7) In this backdrop, it is obvious that India will have to work hard to make its presence felt in the arena of global politics.

As far as the present international order is concerned, there is in fact strategic pluralism in India today. There are in fact three schools of thought to assess India’s foreign policy strategy: (a) Nehruvians, (b) Neo-liberals, & (c) Hyper-realists. All of them however share one common ground i.e. the anarchic nature of the international system. Nehruvians prefer negotiated settlements to international disputes [Stephen Cohen shows that Nehruvianism survived in India in various forms – from classical Nehruvianism to ‘militant Nehruvianism’ (Indira Gandhi and others) to a post-Cold War Nehruvianism which opposed uni-polarity and champions multi-polarity. (p. 7)]; neo-liberals think that the prospects of economic gain would make for peace; and hyper-realists argue that military power and force are ultimately the only way to promote India’s national interests. Kanti Bajpai suggests that India’s foreign policy since 1990 appears to be closer to neo-liberals than the other two.

Fourth, India is still beset with a host of burdens that it must shed before it can realize its great power potential. The domestic constraints that India confronts are multidimensional in nature. India faces substantial rural and urban poverty; its infrastructure remains highly uneven; it faces a reviving Maoist insurgency; and the quality of its institutions and their efficacy are highly uneven. Then there are challenges of religious extremism and terrorism. (Ganguly 2014: 421-422) The gap between India (urban part) and Bharat (rural part) needs to be bridged to a maximum extent.

**Conclusion / Findings:**
Apart from the West, The post-cold war years witnessed India making a determined effort to connect with its extended neighbourhood in South East Asia, Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the Middle East. India’s renewed engagement with these regions / countries could be viewed with in a new framework based on economic relations and energy diplomacy rather than the traditional notion of third world solidarity through NAM. As far as India’s engagement with surrounding regions is concerned, soft power diplomacy has worked well. India’s relationship with the Islamic world is being
deepened on the basis of economic and commercial cooperation and energy security. TAPI seems to be a reality now. In fact, the end of the cold war and the subsequent launch of economic reforms provided New Delhi the opportunity to recast its regional relations.

Today, India is regarded as the cultural superpower. Very few countries in the world can match the rich history, culture and civilization of India that creates unparalleled interest and appeal for India abroad. Independent and free media and a strong civil society all contribute to India’s soft power. India’s values of non-violence and peace and the use of these methods in its struggle against colonialism continue to inspire generations of leaders all over the world. This apart, India’s exponential economic growth and innovation and leadership in information technology have admiration the world over. India’s entertainment industry and Bollywood have given India an edge over many other countries in the world and have enhanced India’s image. Indian music, dance, fashion and art also add its soft power base. Large and influential Indian diaspora is another important aspect that adds the domain of its soft power capability. Public diplomacy division plays a vital role in this context. The positive side of the story is that India has huge soft power advantage over authoritarian China and its state-controlled media. Soft power diplomacy has so far worked well but the point is that smart power would be more suitable for India in the present international scenario. So far New Delhi has failed to work on this point.

India has moved from its traditional emphasis on, according to C Raja Mohan, “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. Consequently, tension between “power and principle” would remain an enduring one in the India’s foreign policy strategy.

In the words of Kanti Bajpai: “India’s foreign policy has been marked by ambivalence. On the one hand, its deepest and finest instincts have been internationalist and cosmopolitan – there is substantial body of Indian international thought, from Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore to Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and beyond. On the other hand, partition and war, at the time of India’s entry into international society, scarred its foreign policy psyche, leaving it unable to transcend narrow, gnawing anxieties over sovereignty. India is not the only post-colonial state to be so deeply enmeshed in…” Economists call it a ‘low level equilibrium trap’ – a policy stance that is stuck in managing protracted conflicts, often with considerable deftness.
Great power ambition under the present government led by Bharatiya Janata Party got a major boost. Lots of assertiveness in the foreign policy directions – Economic growth has surpassed China – China faces economic down turn. Virtually India has emerged as the fastest growing economy in the world. India’s position in the BRICS has been strengthened. But still we have a long way to go. Security Council reform is essential but difficult. Given this situation smart power approach is the best option before India today.

Rohan Mukherjee and David Malone very rightly pointed that India is fast emerging as an important player in regional and international arenas. However, there is other side of the coin too. India continues to be beset by a number of security challenges, both internally and externally. Further they argue that although economic diplomacy does at present serve India well in projecting power internationally, achieving great power status in the future will rest on the resolution of key political and security challenges. In fact, its pluralism, diversity, democratic practices (however chaotic at times), and multicultural make-up, all are internationally viewed as elements of strength rather than weakness, as proof of resilience rather than fragility.

Today, we are living in a post-globalised era which has been marked by the return of power politics in economic relations. Because of horizontal and vertical spreads of nuclear weapons, states are by and large unwilling to use military force. Economic relations are being de-liberalised and turned into a weapon of geopolitical struggle. In short, the early twenty first century has become an era of geopolitical anxiety and uncertainty. (Blackwill 2016). This development is very much likely to undermine the process of globalisation and lead to re-nationalisation or regionalisation of many economic regimes where economic considerations will play a greater role in matters of security. (Karaganov: 464) In this backdrop, the rise in India’s economic profile coincided with changes in the global distribution of power. India will have to work hard and reorient its foreign policy approach to suit herself in the new post-globalised world order. At present India is the only country in the world that has the potential to catch up with China and possibly even surpass it. (Khilnani: 696) New Delhi has already made a good beginning by way of becoming full time member of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) and getting actively involved in infrastructure building in Central Asia, Afghanistan etc. but it will have to travel a long path. Too much honeymooning with the United States may not produce the desired outcome in view of the fact that political, military and economic standing of the US across the globe is on the wane. A balanced foreign policy approach towards US, Russia and China would be the best option before India.
Under the presidency of Donal Trump, US-China ties would be – as trend shows – fraught with tension. In this backdrop, India is likely to be more pro-active in its engagement with Asia. However, the hard fact is that India’s modest economic footprint in Asia cannot be compared with China Therefore, New Delhi will have to focus on building productive security relationships with a host of countries like the United States, Japan, Australia, Vietnam and so on. (Bagchi: 8) What is noteworthy is that India has already started moving in this direction with an eye on building alliances and thereby projecting itself as a leading power in Asia with in a neo-realist framework.

Finally, in order to enjoy a global power status, India will have to shoulder global responsibilities for effectively dealing with certain major challenges like climate change, international terrorism, refugees issue etc. in a far more coordinated manner with the major powers. The other aspect is that despite having a broad consensus among the Indian political elites about the overall direction of its foreign and security policies, important differences however remained that needs to be addressed.

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