

Reimagining India's Role

Harsh V Pant

India's rising global profile is reshaping New Delhi's approach to its major partnerships in the changing global order. India is charting new territory in its foreign policy, predicated on the belief that, rather than proclaiming non-alignment as an end in itself, India needs deeper engagement with its friends and partners if it is to develop leverage in its dealings with its adversaries and competitors.

Though foreign policies of major powers do not change dramatically with changes in government, Indian foreign policy vision has been evolving rapidly since this government came to power in May 2014. This evolution is only natural for a nation that is rising in the global power hierarchy. External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar articulated this vision of Indian foreign policy in a speech he gave last year in November in which he challenged the "dogmas of Delhi." Jaishankar noted that India was at present standing at the "cusp" of change with "more confidence" and argued that "a nation that has the aspiration to become a leading power someday cannot continue with unsettled borders, an unintegrated region and under-exploited opportunities. Above all, it cannot be dogmatic in approaching a visibly changing world order."

For a strategic community which continues to tell the world about the consistency in Indian foreign policy and how effective that has been in the pursuit of Indian interests, Jaishankar's speech stands as a profound corrective. When he says that "the balance sheet for India's



foreign policy after seven decades presents a mixed picture," he is underlining the fact that consistency can be overrated in foreign policy.

It's not that such a critique has not been made of Indian foreign policy in the past, but the fact that it is being made by an insider, as someone who has been a part of Indian foreign policy establishment for the past several decades and now stands at the acme of decision-making, should inevitably lead to greater debate.

Jaishankar has managed to convey a seriousness of purpose in his speech which has been lacking in official Indian pronouncements. He

could do this as well as question key policy decisions of the past primarily because of the political shift in the country with the ascendance of the centre right. Indian foreign policy is changing and will continue to evolve not only because the global environment is changing more rapidly than ever but also because India is changing. It is this changing India that made it possible for Jaishankar to deliver the kind of speech he delivered and it is this changing India which will force our policymakers to shed "the dogmas of Delhi."

Winning an even bigger mandate in 2019 than its first electoral victory

The author is Director, Studies and Head of the Strategic Studies Programme at Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi. He is also Director (Honorary) of the Delhi School of Transnational Affairs, Delhi University. Email: harsh.pant@kcl.ac.uk

in 2014, the Government was ready to launch an ambitious agenda in the realm of foreign and national security. The unusual selection of an ex-diplomat in the powerful position of India's external affairs minister rather than any party heavyweight shocked many. The appointment reflected the concern about the global turbulence through which Indian foreign policy must navigate and need for an experienced hand. A former foreign secretary with several key ambassadorial postings including China under his belt, Jaishankar not only underscores the priority the PM attaches to foreign policy, but also to professionalism rather than orthodoxy.

This need became pertinent in August 2019 when the Government took a momentous step in domestic politics with serious foreign policy implications. Article 370 via Clause 3 was suspended that had allowed Jammu and Kashmir to enjoy autonomy. The state of Jammu and Kashmir has been bifurcated into two union territories: Ladakh without a legislature; Jammu and Kashmir with a legislature. Though the Government had long signalled its intention on this front, the move was dramatic both within and outside India.

On the wider foreign policy front, India has been busy courting major powers and reaching out to various parts of the world. Signs emerged that India's ties with the United States were passing through a difficult phase after the Trump administration determined that New Delhi had not provided



assurance of providing "equitable and reasonable access" to US markets. In June, the Trump administration then terminated India's designation as a beneficiary developing nation under the key Generalized System of Preferences trade program. India responded by imposing retaliatory tariffs on 28 US products including almonds and apples. This came a year after announcing tariffs to counter the US increase in steel and aluminum tariffs and withdrawal of duty-free benefits to Indian exporters.

Nonetheless, the Prime Minister visited the United States in September, 2019, joining Trump in a joint rally organised by American-Indian groups. The goal was to reduce trade tensions with India's leading export partner. He conveyed to Washington that New Delhi is ready to engage with the United States substantively in a spirit of give and take. The visit managed to reverse the relationship's decline by reassuring Donald Trump even as the PM reached out to the wider international community on Kashmir. After this visit, the rhetoric towards

India softened considerably even as he visited India in March, 2020.

Apart from this, New Delhi has engaged with multiple partners and actors in the international system in an attempt to develop strategic relationships that can enhance India's profile and further its global interests. This is as much applicable to India's neighboring states in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region as it is to the wider Indo-Pacific and Middle Eastern states. India's ties with the European nations are also growing at a time when the European Union is willing to enhance its geopolitical footprint.

India's rising global profile is reshaping New Delhi's approach to its major partnerships in the changing global order. Though sections of the Indian establishment still want to reinvent non-alignment under ever new guises, New Delhi is showing signs of pursuing strategic autonomy separately from non-alignment. This separation is overdue in India's foreign policy, and the country stands to benefit from leveraging partnerships rather than shunning them. India is charting new territory in its foreign policy, predicated on the belief that, rather than proclaiming non-alignment as an end in itself, India needs deeper engagement with its friends and partners if it is to develop leverage in its dealings with its adversaries and competitors. India is today well-positioned to define its bilateral relationships on its own terms without ideological crutches. □

