



Roadmap for India's Geopolitical Recalibration

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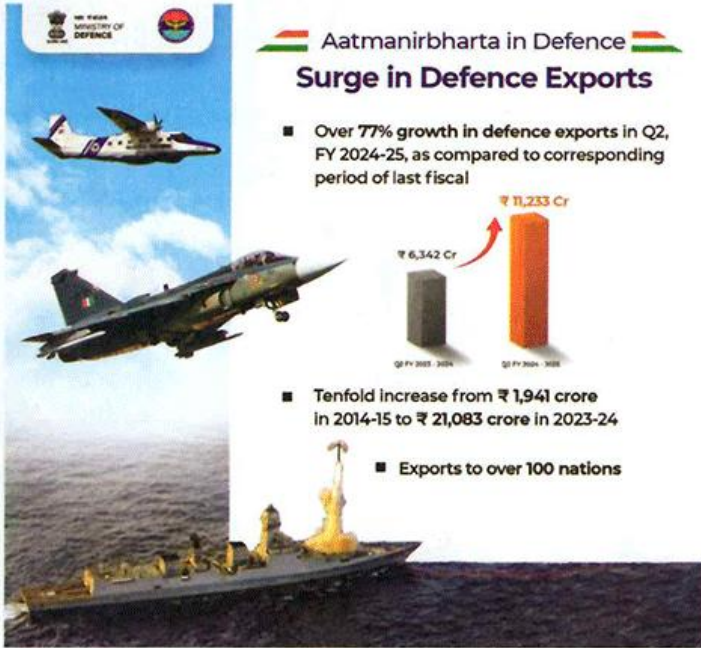
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One can aver that India's foreign policy is dynamic and is anchored in a distinctly Indian civilisational milieu of dharma (duty) and *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family). India has emerged as a credible voice of the Global South with the ability to straddle the North-South and East-West divides. The multilateral order's failure to preserve peace, prevent wars, or bring conflicts to an early end has encouraged the trend towards multi-alignment and hedging through strengthened bilateral partnerships and mini-lateral groupings. Despite its obvious blemishes, it is not necessary to curate a new global order. A fundamental reordering would presuppose wars and devastation on a magnitude as yet unseen.

Even as uncertainties continue, India will usher in 2025 with greater confidence in its external engagements.

International relations stand at a crucial juncture. The multilateral order represented by the United Nations and Bretton Woods has not met the evolving requirements of changes in the balance of power. The global community today is confronted with

the spectacle of a United Nations Security Council in stasis, with major powers ranged against one another. The multilateral order's failure to preserve peace, prevent wars, or bring conflicts to an early end has encouraged the trend towards multi-alignment and hedging through strengthened



bilateral partnerships and mini-lateral groupings. In Globalisation 2.0, regional and middle powers are gaining greater agency through strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, and issue-based partnerships with contending powers.

India is not a permanent member of the UN Security Council despite having all the attributes of a responsible major power. It is the world's most populous democracy. It is recognised for its contributions to peacekeeping operations as well as vaccine support during the pandemic to countries around the world. With the fastest-growing large economy in the world, India has emerged as a credible partner for many.

India's vision has frequently been articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Some of the key elements are (1) focusing on rapid and inclusive economic growth and improvement in social indices and gender equality, (2) strengthening India's defence and security capabilities in order to protect sovereignty and territorial integrity, maintaining a stable periphery, building border infrastructure and promoting development in remote parts of India; and (3) cooperating with partner countries, especially on critical and emerging technologies, to improve India's productivity and manufacturing capabilities and enabling India to integrate itself better in global value chains (GVC).

This vision is predicated on developing a consensus at three different levels to facilitate India's high-growth trajectory—internally, regionally and globally. Many attendant aspects of India's foreign policy, such as its use of domestic events

to engage the international community, as evident in the Vibrant Gujarat Summit, its 'Neighbourhood First' policy and its global initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga, International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, flow from its civilisational impulse to create synergy, convergence and harmony.

India's G20 Presidency was a watershed moment in its external engagement. It coincided with a number of major conflicts and contradictions. By 2023, the politics of the origins of the pandemic had been overtaken by a protracted war in Ukraine that threatened to wreck the G20 process. India and China were ranged against one another along the Line of Actual Control following the bloody incident in Galwan in 2020. And the lid had blown off a long-festering conflict in West Asia with the Hamas attacks on Israel in October 2023 and the retribution that followed in Gaza. Against all odds, India successfully concluded its G20 Presidency with a consensus document that brought unlikely players around a common table to commit their energies to economic development and the achievement of the UN's 2030 SDG goals.

India succeeded in steering the international community's focus back on core developmental challenges during its G20 Presidency. India has expressed its readiness to share its best practices



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- EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar
At BRICS Outreach Session



in healthcare, disaster management, digital public infrastructure and much else with countries of the Global South.

One can aver that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy is dynamic, driven by his personal energy and vision, and anchored in a distinctly Indian civilisational milieu of dharma (duty) and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family). India has emerged as a credible voice of the Global South with the ability to straddle the North-South and East-West divides. PM's visits to Moscow and Kyiv in quick succession in July and September 2024, respectively, underscored India's image as a country that stands for peace. In both capitals, his message was consistent: that this is not an era of war, that solutions cannot be found on the battlefield, and that differences should be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy.

PM Modi, in effect, has provided the world with a truly kintsugi moment. If the protracted wars in Ukraine and Gaza can be resolved through dialogue, the geopolitical fractures could heal over time and enable the international community to refocus its energies on the urgent challenges of our times, particularly economic recovery and climate action. India's wisdom is proverbially like the vein of gold that runs through the kintsugi of global consensus, making it more resilient.

2024 has tested India's mettle on multiple fronts. Differences with China along certain friction points in the border areas lingered on, even as

dialogue continued at the level of the foreign ministries and the armed forces. Eventually, India's patience, perseverance and resolute stance, both in negotiations and in terms of the ground positions, led to a thaw. The breakthrough agreement to restore patrolling along the Line of Actual Control as it prevailed before the incident at Galwan in June 2020 is a significant achievement. The armed forces will now take stock of the new understandings reached and verify their implementation in a step-by-step manner. They will also have an opportunity to review the existing protocols and confidence building measures (CBMs) and address the infirmities that led to the clashes. PM Modi's ability to address an impasse with China against all odds is yet another indication that India is also capable of 'walking the talk' when it comes to advocacy of peaceful settlement of disputes.

Clearly, the relaxation of tensions and restoration of status quo ante paved the way for the recent meeting between PM Modi and President Xi Jinping on the margins of the recent BRICS Summit in Kazan. Restoration of high-level dialogue between India and China has also opened up the possibility of both sides working on the next steps for resuming bilateral engagement in other sectors. The slew of issues includes the question of direct flights between the two countries, the stationing of journalists, the visa regime for tourism and entrepreneurs, and more fundamentally, the future role of Chinese technologies and supply chains in India's Atmanirbhar Bharat in manufacturing.



During India's G20 Presidency, ECSWG successfully reached consensus on matters of climate and environment. One of the longest communiques negotiated with a high success rate thus far under India Presidency with agreement on 95%.



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India's relations with Pakistan remain stagnant and adversarial due to Pakistan's unwillingness to eschew terrorism. The democratic elections in the UT of Jammu and Kashmir have opened a new chapter in the development of the region, with Article 370 of the Indian Constitution having been consigned to history notwithstanding the passage of a resolution in the Jammu & Kashmir assembly seeking its restoration.

If Pakistan were to desist from using terrorism as an instrument of state policy, it is yet possible to give meaning to the sentiment that India and Pakistan should bury the past and live together as good neighbours. Even as Prime Minister Modi's government has adopted a firm policy of 'zero tolerance' for terrorism and linked the resumption of dialogue to a change in Pakistan's behaviour, it has also kept the door open for Pakistan to realise a better destiny in tandem with India and other nations in South Asia.

India's Neighbourhood First Policy is aimed at promoting economic development and prosperity in a wider region. Changes in neighbouring countries are inevitable over time. They are a result of idiosyncratic political, economic, and social dynamics driven by their own circumstances. They will throw up fresh and often unanticipated challenges that will have to be suitably tackled.

India's relations with the Maldives are back on an even keel following the visit of President Muizzu to India in October 2024. In the Maldives and elsewhere in the extended neighbourhood, the Indian option for infrastructure, connectivity and capacity building is gaining ground as compared to the alternatives on offer. The political churn in Bangladesh is a reason for concern, especially the treatment of the Hindu minority and the potential for further radicalisation and spillover across a porous border. It is in Bangladesh's interests to heed India's sensitivities, including in regard to illegal migration and the internal security challenges faced by India in the Northeast.

Prime Minister Modi's emphasis on 'a human-centric approach in our collective quest for a bright global future' in his remarks at the 'Summit of the Future' held at the United Nations in September 2024 will hopefully lead to greater introspection at the global level. The disarray in multilateral structures, especially the UN Security

Council, is not tenable. The politics of domination are rejected today by the smallest of nations. Building deterrence against arbitrariness and coercion is necessary but detracts nations from developmental goals.

Despite its obvious blemishes, it is not necessary to curate a new global order. A fundamental reordering would presuppose wars and devastation on a magnitude as yet unseen. It could lead to a new set of victors and vanquished, as was the case when the United Nations was founded in 1945 in the aftermath of the Second World War. If the world were to heed India's call for genuine reforms of the United Nations and its affiliated multilateral institutions, the existing Rules Based International Order (R BIO) could find greater acceptability and become more effective in meeting contemporary challenges.

The advent of a fresh Trump presidency in the United States will bring renewed opportunities and some challenges for India. On the plus side, President Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi have a very good rapport, which augurs well for the relationship. Going by President Trump's first term, there is a convergence between the two countries on key security challenges, including terrorism, critical supply chains and disruptions in the Indo-Pacific. This convergence is likely to deepen. On the other hand, India will have to carefully skirt any renewed focus on levying tariffs on Indian exports and demands for lowering tariffs for US products. There are bound to be some rumbles on the question of H1B visas and tighter US immigration policies. Joint exercises between the armed forces and defence cooperation seem well consolidated and will continue to provide the bedrock for the strategic partnership. If President Trump succeeds in bringing the wars in Ukraine and Gaza to an end, it will free India of the burden of having to justify its 'strategic autonomy' to contending parties.

Even as uncertainties continue, India will usher in 2025 with greater confidence in its external engagements. India's dynamic and pragmatic foreign policy plays a key role in its rising stature on the global stage. Working in close tandem with key strategic partners, especially the US, while maintaining stable relations with neighbours, especially China, is at the heart of the matter. □

(Views are personal)