

## **INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES AHEAD**

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### **INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS**

India completed sixty years of independence on August 15, 2007. India "at sixty" is in a buoyant mood today and more self-assured fortified by the strategic attention that is being paid to her by the global powers. This global strategic attention has been forthcoming now as India has visibly demonstrated in the last decade or so all the characteristics or parameters of a rising power on the global stage.

This global strategic attention has been forthcoming now arising from India's uninterrupted political stability as the world's largest democracy and her noticeable economic progress and sustained rates of high economic growth for more than a decade.

India has also drawn global strategic attention because of her nuclear weapons arsenal, an integrated missile development program with ICBM capabilities, an advanced space program and a million plus Armed Forces combat –tested in virtually every decade in the last sixty years and which also distinguished themselves in United Nations peace keeping and peace building operations worldwide.

Adding to these strengths is India's geo-strategic location which by its peninsular configuration accords her a major role in Indian Ocean security and her long land borders in the North West and East gives India a potential to figure in the strategic calculus of the global powers in relation to Greater South West Asia, Central Asia and South East Asia.

In South Asia, India is the sub-continental power, with other nations of South Asia a fraction of its size and in strategic asymmetry to India's power and potential.

India's strategic strengths as noted above added to her natural attributes of power with which it is richly endowed gives India a well deserved strategic recognition by the existing global powers as at some stage soon ahead India's emergent power could start significantly affecting the Asian power balance and so also the global balance of power.

If the 21<sup>st</sup> century is being viewed as an 'Asian Century' it is not because of China only. India too figures in the reckoning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as an 'Asian Century'.

International observers and analyses have begun reflecting India's increasing global strategic power and relevance. In the United States, a CIA report ranking countries in terms of power ratings has assessed that by 2015, India will have the fourth most "capable concentration of power" after the United States, European Union and China. The same CIA report also views India as the most crucial "swing state" in the international balance of power and contributing to global stability.

A noted European observer has noted that “India will not just be a key player on the world map but will also be instrumental in shaping the rules of the game.”

Presumably, such analyses reflect not only the tremendous reckonable strengths of India but also that these inherent strengths would provide India with strong leverages in the conduct of her foreign policies pursuing the national goal towards emerging as a global power.

India today stands at fateful strategic cross-roads in terms of the foreign policy challenges that await her. India may have arrived at the gates of global power, but to affect an entry into the global power elite, the fundamental foreign policy challenges ahead that would need to be addressed are as follows:

- India’s foreign policies would need to divest themselves of the idealistic moorings of non-alignment and be anchored on ‘*realpolitik*’ determinants as is the requirement of truly global powers including the “Will to use Power” to meet her foreign policy ends.
- Rising powers create strategic unease as the existing status-quo in the balance of power is perceived to be under challenge. Hence India’s foreign policy imperatives of a graduated implementation of its strategic blueprint and an adroit handling and management of its strategic partnerships.
- More notably, a global power and even a global power-in-the making like India need to maintain “strategic autonomy”.
- India needs to zealously guard the imperatives of her strategic autonomy which should connote (1) India’s strategic and foreign policy directions are solely determined by India’s own national security interests (2) India’s foreign policy establishment is not strait-jacketed in taking its cues from foreign capitals in terms of her regional policies, strategic choices and responses to crises situations (3) India’s strategic decisions are so taken as those which both enhance and reinforce her regional standing and as a key global player and further reflecting the dignity and majesty of a truly great power.

The Introductory Observations need to be finally rounded off with a significant observation in that historically no major global power has assisted the build-up or emergence of another global power. So while the existing global powers of today may strategically recognize India as the newest entrant to the ‘Big League’ rhetorically, the strategic realities could be otherwise. India cannot and should not expect that it is going to be an easy ascendancy on the global power trajectory.

India would require not only to build and maintain a separate set of strategic partnerships or relationships with each of the existing global powers, independent of each other, but also take into account the inter-se power equations, rivalries and competing interests of these Big Powers so as to create as much strategic space as possible for herself to ascend the trajectory towards emerging as a global power. It is easier said than done and therein lie India’s major foreign policy challenges ahead.

India's foreign policy challenges ahead present themselves in two dimensions, namely the regional context and global context though strategically overlaps exist. The regional context will be discussed briefly and the attempt would be to focus more on the global context as it is at that level where India in the years ahead would accord prime focus in tune with her national aspirations and impulses to emerge as a global power.

### **INDIA'S REGIONAL FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES IN THE SOUTH ASIA CONTEXT**

Briefly put, the contextual setting in South Asia in which India's foreign policy is to operate and the challenges so posed can be defined by the following strategic realities framework:

- India strategically is the predominant power in South Asia in terms of comprehensive national power, economic strength and human and material resources.
- Pakistan as the regional 'spoiler state' built by the United States and China has despite her nuclear weapons and proxy wars against India has failed to arrest India's ascendancy on the power trajectory.
- Regionally in South Asia, India today is surrounded by failed states or failing states including Pakistan.
- In terms of intrusive strategic presence of external global powers in South Asia, the United States and China are strategic allies of Pakistan. The European Union countries take their cues from the United States in their South Asian policies. China is also tied to Bangladesh by a Defense Cooperation Agreement.
- Russia and India have a time tested strategic partnership, but not a strategic alliance.

India's benign foreign policy approaches in South Asia in the past to build regional cooperation, stability and economic cooperation and integration were stymied by countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Till lately many Western foreign policy analysts stoutly maintained that India cannot aspire for a global power status without solving her problems with her South Asian neighbours, especially Pakistan. They were oblivious to the fact that the problems were not of India's creation but those of the neighbours. India had been tolerant all along in South Asia.

It is my firm belief that as India moves up the ascendant trajectory to global power, the following political dynamics can be expected to operate in India's favor in terms of foreign policy approaches in South Asia:

- Strategic realities would dawn on India's contenders in South Asia that their existing strategic asymmetry differential with India is widening which renders confrontational stances with India futile.

- The external intrusive powers in South Asia would be prompted by changing strategic realities to modulate their South Asian policies to respect India's strategic sensitivities.

This is already in evidence. A Carnegie Report in 2005 listed in its "Action Agenda" Report for the United States as one of the reasons why USA must align with India was that India could stabilize the region littered with failing states and amplifies that "Every state on India's periphery has a need to cope with state failure" and the region with the exception of India is "convulsed by religious fanaticism, illiberal governments, states sponsors of terrorism and economic stasis".

It can therefore, be fairly stated that regionally, the foreign policy challenges ahead in South Asia lie not for India but for her South Asian neighbours to adapt themselves to a strategically and economically resurgent India.

In the final analysis of India's regional foreign policy challenges one would like to observe that India can be expected to persist with her benign policy approaches towards her neighbours but increasingly tempted to let the natural equations of power to operate in South Asia and concentrate its major attention on the management of its foreign policy relationships with the major global power centers. It is in the realm of global power equations where India's real and substantial foreign policy challenges lie ahead.

Therefore, one could now finally turn one's attention to India's foreign policy challenges in terms of managing her relationships with the United States, Russia, European Union and China.

But before attempting an analysis of India's policy challenges that lie ahead with each of these countries individually, a brief survey of the global strategic environment would be pertinent as it is that which provides the contextual setting and strategic realities in which India's foreign policies in the times ahead has to operate.

### **THE GLOBAL STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT: CONTEXTUAL FACTORS AFFECTING INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES**

Very briefly put the global strategic environment as existent today is marked by the following strategic realities:

- The United States continues to be the sole global superpower with unrivalled strategic power and global political influence.
- The United States global predominance image is however taking a beating with its getting strategically bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- The United States strategic predominance is under growing strategic challenge from Russia and China individually and also in strategic unison.
- Russia is in a resurgent mood with a declaratory policy of re-emerging as an "independent global power center" Russia's rich oil and gas reserves with rising

fuel prices has not only facilitated this resurgence but has provided Russia with a potent weapon of using energy as an instrument of political and economic coercion.

- China backed by its stupendous economic resources, sizeable military conventional power and growing strategic punch is for all practical purposes can be considered as a global power. However, China's past aggressive record weighs heavily against her. It raises strategic concerns on her periphery. In United States threat perceptions China is viewed as a power intent on displacing the United States predominance in East Asia.
- China has to contend with two other rising powers in Asia that is India and Japan, both intent on aspiring for global power status. China willingly or unwillingly will have to share the Asian strategic space with India and Japan.
- The European Union is a strong economic and political bloc with a military dimension in the form of NATO. Its strategic policies are closely allied with the United States as part of the Atlantic Alliance. The European Union besides its economic engagement in strategic regions worldwide is also involved in NATO's military creep eastwards as far as Afghanistan.
- In the global power games, energy security is also emerging as an important determinant of big powers foreign policies.

The emerging global strategic environment seems to be predominated by strategic uneasiness amongst the global powers and an air of unpredictability. Minus the congealed lines of military confrontation of the Cold War era, the global strategic order seems to be headed in the same direction.

The United States and the European Union with Japan and Australia in tow seem to be squared off against Russia and China in all the strategic regions of the globe extending from Eastern Europe to East Asia.

In this square off of the major global powers, India stands alone and unattached in any alliance relationship with the global powers fraternity. And therein lies the biggest foreign policy challenge ahead for India, namely, the management of its strategic relationships with the global powers in a manner so adroit that they are not prompted to impede, obstruct or neutralize India's rise to global power status.

With the contextual background having been set, attention can now be turned towards a closer examination of India's foreign policy challenges ahead with each of the major global powers and beginning with the United States.

### **THE UNITED STATES: INDIA'S BIGGEST FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGE**

The United States presents the most significant foreign policy challenge to India's foreign policy planners and would continue to do so. India too would be a challenge to the United States foreign policy planners. The reason is simple. The United States is the world's uni-polar superpower used to prevailing over its friends and allies. India is a

rising power which would prefer a working strategic partnership with USA but without band-wagoning with it.

India and the United States as “Estranged Democracies” stood divided for more than fifty years and at strategic unease with each other due to their differing strategic perceptions both at the regional level and the global level.

In these fifty years of estrangement, India and the United States, however, shared no conflictual record. But, India was at the receiving end from the United States in terms of political and economic coercion, build-up of Pakistan as the regional challenger to India’s predominance and the United States being permissive in letting China build up Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and long range ballistic missiles arsenal.

Prof. Rudolph Lloyd, Professor Emeritus and South Asia expert at Chicago University has candidly observed in 2006 that “For roughly 50 years the United States destabilized the South Asia region by acting as an off-shore balancer” and further that it launched” Pakistan on a 50 year career as the vehicle of America’s practice of off-shore balancing against India hegemony in South Asia”.

The reasons for the United States for doing so were not ideological as both nations were vibrant democracies. The reasons were strategic in that India’s foreign policy of Non-Alignment stood at cross-purposes with the United States global strategic agenda of entangling military alliances during the Cold War. This fixation of the US policy establishment still persists.

The reasons were again strategic when at the turn of the millennium, recognizing the global strategic realities and no longer oblivious to India’s rise on the global strategic firmament, the United States in an out-reach bid to India sought to evolve a “United States-India Strategic Partnership”. India too responded likewise for strategic reasons.

India’s quest for wider strategic partnerships had begun as part of its ambitions to emerge as a global power and the United States was a prime candidate. India had entered the era of pragmatic foreign relations.

In United States – India relations, the turn of the millennium marked the commencement of an euphoric and exciting phase of heightened expectations of each other with a vision and plans of intense engagement to evolve a substantial “US-India Strategic Partnership”.

Retrospectively, it seems that the heightened expectations outstripped the realities of the fluidity that pervades the global strategic environment and significantly that in the United States the best of foreign policy intentions and initiatives could be stymied by the US Congress’s hold on the US foreign policy processes.

The present state of US-India Strategic Partnership can be summed up as follows: (1) India-US military to military contacts, joint training and engagement have considerably increased (2) A Joint US-India Defense Agreement was signed in June 2005 (3) This was

followed by the July 18, 2005 Agreement on cooperation in all fields, the notable centerpiece of this summit was the Indo-US Nuclear Deal (4) The Indo-US Nuclear Deal has yet to be finalized and clearances obtained from NSG and the IAEA. It has run into noticeable political opposition in both countries.

Despite all of the above and the rhetoric that emanates from Washington and New Delhi, it was noticeable by 2005 that the turn of the millennium effervescence in United States – India relations was evaporating and so also the prospects of a substantial strategic partnership in the future.

The reasons once again were strategic and not of India's making. The situation was generated by the United States post 9/11 policies and an avoidable one at that strategically. It again pertained to United States strategic choices in South Asia relevant to Pakistan.

The United States had a choice to make and that was whether the US-India Strategic Partnership could be jettisoned and India's strategic sensitivities could be ignored in favor of reversing gears of ongoing US policies in South Asia.

While no downslide has taken place the dangers of its eventuality have led many a noted US policy analyst to comment on the trend.

One noted scholar has observed that “the momentum in transforming US-India relations appears to have plateaued” and that it is necessary for the United States “to re-ignite the heady processes that drew the bilateral relationship to the heights reached in 2001-2002”.

Another US political commentator has observed that “half-hearted favors and treats won't do. Current US policies declare India a friend but its practices thwart New Delhi's aspirations” and that the US policies “shouldn't be a teeth pulling exercise where New Delhi must repeatedly prove its credentials to gain anything.”

In Indian perceptions these developments have seriously eroded United States credibility in terms of declared policies and intentions. India's hopes for a strategic partnership with the United States envisioned a long term relationship that possibly could propel her towards a global power status and that would position India to meet future challenges to her security both at the regional level and the global level. It was also perceived as a hedge against unforeseen and unfavorable strategic developments in the future.

The sort of insurance or assurances that India probably was hoping for does not seem to have been forthcoming from the United States explicitly.

A sizeable cross-section of Indian political and public opinion stands disillusioned with the merits of US-India Strategic Partnership viewing the torturous processing of the Indo-US Nuclear Deal by the US Congress, United States opposition to India's candidature for Permanent Member of the UN Security Council, US dictates on India's foreign policies towards Myanmar and Iran and the US opposition in WTO debates.

On analysis, it seems that considerable perceptual differences exist between USA and India which can be characterized as under:

- United States and India's differing strategic perceptions on regional and global strategic and security environment
- Perceptions in India that the United States may assist India in emerging as a "key global player" but may not tolerate India's emergence as a "global power"
- United States views India's strategic relevance to US strategic interests only in terms of Indian Ocean security and in East Asia as a heavy weight against China.
- The United States is silent and may not be tolerant of India expanding her influence up to the "Strategic Frontiers" defined by the previous Government.
- India's marked reluctance to be drawn into any "China Containment" Strategy of the United States.
- Perceptions in India that while US Presidents may be well-disposed and genuine in forging a US-India Strategic Partnership, the US Congress's intrusive hold on American foreign policies will always be a dampener and an impediment

The foregoing enumeration should give a fair idea of India's foreign policy challenges in building of a substantial relationship with the United States. More specifically the following could be listed as India's foreign policy challenges ahead:

- India should not allow the evolving US-India Strategic Partnership to slip into a glide path towards estrangement despite differing strategic perceptions.
- Strategic convergences must be explored to add depth to the relationship and in keeping India's strategic engagement with the United States alive. This is a daunting task for India's foreign policy establishment as the United States in the pursuance of her regional and global strategic agendas is not likely to make India's task that easy.
- As a rising power, India must delineate to the United States the "redlines" that must not be crossed in terms of India's strategic sensitivities in South Asia and which could endanger the evolving strategic partnership.

### **RUSSIA: INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES AHEAD**

Russia today is a resurgent former superpower intent on regaining its global pre-eminence and once again emerging as an independent power centre in the global strategic calculus. Russia today, unlike the United States is not bogged down in any strategic quagmires or strategic distractions which could impede or force it to deviate from its strategic goals.

In India's diplomatic history, the Russia-India Strategic Partnership has been the most notable one. Unlike the US-India Strategic Partnership which is an evolving one, the strategic partnership with Russia which is nearly half a century old has been a time-tested and enduring one except for a brief aberration during the Yeltsin years.



Foreign policies of any country are not restricted only to formulation by a nation's foreign policy establishment. Foreign policies also reflect or should reflect public opinion perceptions of a nation's friends or otherwise. In Indian public opinion perceptions, Russia is esteemed as a valued and dependable friend that stood by India during crises in the past when India came under coercive pressures from the United States during the Cold War period.

The state of India's foreign relations with Russia can be briefly summed as follows:

- Russia under President Putin has re-kindled Russia's existing strategic partnership with India.
- Russia and India have strategic convergences on Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia.
- India has a significant dependency on advanced Russian military hardware with military inventories ranging from 65-75% in respect of all three services of its Armed Forces.
- Finally, even up to this date, Russia has respected India's strategic sensitivities and not indulged in creation of "regional spoiler states" in South Asia. Russia accepts India as the predominant power in South Asia.
- Russia supports India's candidature for permanent member of UN Security Council.

However, Russia of late seems to have become sensitive to the present Indian Government's intensified strategic engagement with the United States. India's involvements in the United States sponsored strategic geometries in East Asia have brought forth reverberations from Russia in visible form.

Against this backdrop, India's foreign policy challenges ahead in relation to Russia appear to be:

- Russia provides strategic options and flexibility for India's foreign policies. Strategically, it is imperative that India while evolving the US-India Strategic Partnership does not in any way impinge on the Russia-India Strategic Partnership.
- In relation to Russia, India faces the most difficult strategic challenge of deciding whether a proven and time-tested Russia-India Strategic Partnership can be de-valued in favor of a yet to be tested US-India Strategic Partnership.

Lastly, India's foreign policy establishment has to realize that just as the United States is perceived as essential for India's rise to global power status, so is Russia too equally important for India's rise to global power status.

India needs to maintain "strategic balance" in its foreign policies when it comes to managing the strategic partnerships or strategic relationships.

A multi-polar world is in India's strategic interests as a rising global power as it offers India both foreign policy flexibility and foreign policy options. Russia's re-emergence as an independent power centre would facilitate a multi-polar global strategic configuration.

### **CHINA: INDIA'S MAJOR FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGE AND ENIGMA**

In terms of India's foreign policy challenges ahead, China presents a major challenge and that too an enigmatic one for a whole range of reasons – strategic, political and military. China is not only a strategic enigma for India alone but also presents an enigmatic challenge to the other global powers, namely the United States, the European Union and to some extent to Russia also.

China's recent past has been a conflictual one. At one time or the other in the last fifty years it has the distinction of having been involved in armed conflicts with the United States, Russia and India as the major powers.

China's rise as a global power has been taking place persistently for the last two decades. Its stupendous economic growth has fuelled an equally stupendous growth in its strategic, political and economic clout on the global stage.

China keeps claiming that its rise as a global power is a "peaceful rise" and not fuelled by any aggressive instincts. However the United States and Western powers claim that with its historical record of propensity of conflict and brinkmanship and its significant military modernization and strategic build-up in the absence of credible military threats, China's intentions can only be analyzed as those of a "revisionist power" intent on changing the existing status-quo in the global balance of power.

China entered India's strategic calculus as a major threat perception to India's security in the 1950s itself when China militarily annexed the peaceful spiritual kingdom of Tibet. It brought China militarily on India's doorsteps for over a 2000 km stretch on India's Himalayan borders.

China's unresolved border dispute with India, China's intrusive presence in South Asia by enlisting Pakistan as a proxy destabilizer state against India, China's build-up of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and missiles arsenal of Pakistan and her adversarial policies on India's peripheries and more notably the 1962 Sino-Indian War present a dismal past and a questionable foundation for building solid India-China relations in the future.

China, however, like the United States, was quick to grasp the strategic implications of India's growth as an economic power and her strategic assertion of nuclear weaponisation in 1998. After some hysterical reactions verging on paranoia after India's nuclear weaponisation, China at the turn of the millennium commenced a transformation of her policy approaches and engagement of India.

Today, despite the unresolved border dispute, peace and tranquility generally prevails along the Sino-Indian border. China-India economic and trade relations have grown exponentially from about \$ 2 billion in 2000 to about \$ 30 billion.

China-India relations therefore present a strategic enigma and a contradictory picture when the present optimism and promise of the future of China-India relations is measured and analyzed in relation to the historically dismal past record of conflict, confrontation and mistrust.

Against this backdrop, when today's strategic relations are added of China and India emerging as the only two Asian strategically competing powers for global power status. India's foreign policy challenges ahead in relation to China become that more complex in relation to the following context:

- China is already the only Asian major global power. Strategically it does not take kindly to India's emergent global power and continues to engage in policies designed to confine India within South Asian confines.
- Barring China, the other major global powers view India's emergent global power rise in positive terms as opposed to China's rise which is being viewed as aggressive
- With India's rise to global power status being viewed in preferential terms of the global level, India's strategic importance is likely to grow when viewed as a crucial "swing state" in global balance of power terms.

While India as an emergent global power cannot be expected to follow "China appeasement" policies it still has to contend with a China that is powerful and itself having demonstrated "swing strategies" in favor of nations now seeking India's strategic partnerships.

India therefore, has to devise her foreign policies which strike a "strategic balance" between India's and China's competing strategic interests and India's own aspirations to emerge as a global power which may entail some degree of strategic preferential approaches.

### **INDIA AND EUROPEAN UNION RELATIONS: A PROMISING FUTURE**

In terms of India's foreign policy challenges ahead, the build-up of a comprehensive strategic partnership with the European Union is the least problematic due to the positive perceptions generated about each other. In face the overall picture is optimistic and promising.

India's ascendancy towards global power status has been viewed in positive terms by the European Union. Selected excerpts from official EU documents given below would indicate this:

- Geopolitical importance of India as a regional power is rising.

- Handling the implications of India's rise as a global trade heavy weight and its quest to become a major actor in world affairs has become a key priority for the European Union.
- European Union wants to engage more actively with India on issues of global and regional concerns.
- Political and social stability in India is an important building block for peace and security in Asia.
- Of the non-European economic superpowers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, India is the closest to the European Union.

Imbued with positive perceptions of each others strategic and economic importance, India and the European Union have built up a substantive relationship in all fields and institutionalized their dialogue mechanisms. The following need to be noted:

- India joined a handful of nations to become EU's "Strategic Partner" in 2004. A strategic partnership therefore exists today.
- In 2005, a Joint Action Plan was adopted creating a blueprint for intensified engagement.
- Annual Summit Meetings are now a regular feature.
- EU-India Security Dialogue mechanism established for engaging India on regional and global security issues including terrorism and would proliferation.
- Economically, the EU ranks above USA as India's most important economic partner. EU accounts for 22% of India's exports and 20% of India's imports. Notably EU is the largest foreign investor in India.
- In scientific cooperation, India and EU are engaged in (1) Global Satellite Navigation System (2) International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER)

The point worth noting is that India while actively engaged with the European Union as a single entity also enjoys proximate bilateral relationships with the leading EU members like France, Germany and the United Kingdom.

A vibrant strategic partnership with the European Union provides India the advantages of not only plugging-in with the combined strength of EU in all vital fields such as strategic, political and economic, but also enables India to plug-in into the individual strengths of individual EU countries.

The only challenge that exists in this relationship is to further reinforce this vital and vibrant strategic relationship as it provides greater flexibility and foreign policy options for India.

### **CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

In conclusion, one would like to offer the following observations:

- India has arrived at the gates of emerging as a major global power which recognition stands accorded by the existing global major powers.

- India in the quest for global power status is looking for “Strategic Partners” and associates to propel her into the Big Review League. It is not however looking for “Strategic Patrons” to do so.
- India’s rise to global power status is not being impelled by any aggressive designs or blueprints.
- In India’s own perceptions, India’s rise to global power status should be a natural corollary of her political, economic and strategic strengths and her demonstrated performance of being a responsible player both at the regional and global levels.

India’s foreign policies challenges ahead therefore would revolve around these basics as it seeks both to transform her foreign policy nuances befitting an emerging global power and the adroit strategic management of the existing major global powers in a fine-tuned “strategic balance” to facilitate India’s rise as a positive phenomenon on the global firmament.