

India's Foreign Policy in Evolving Geopolitical Scenario

Major General BK Sharma (Retd)[®]

Abstract

At a juncture, when a buoyant India is well on its transition from a balancing power to a leading power, unprecedented geopolitical developments are unravelling at a fast pace in our strategic neighbourhood and beyond. The three strategic shocks viz, COVID pandemic, Talibanisation of Afghanistan, and Ukraine crisis have impacted globalisation and the world order, with ramifications for India.

Introduction

The ensuing strategic environment is characterised by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (VUCA). There is a new 'Great Game' in manifest in Eurasia and the Indo Pacific, with risks of its expansion to other strategic frontiers such as Arctic Region, technology, trade, cyber space, outer space, and cognitive space. We are witnessing a growing trend of multi-domain warfare that combines politics, economy, diplomacy, military, technology, and other elements of national power; multitude of means; state players, non-state actors, military and non-military, linear and non-linear, kinetic and non-kinetic. They are applied seamlessly across the spectrum of conflict and up the escalation ladder. The lines between classic state to state wars and peace are blurred by grey zone conflicts. In the spiralling contestation, we see revamping of the US led Euro-Atlantic alliance, NATO, East Asian security alliance, QUAD and AUKUS on one hand, and China and Russia strategic embrace on the other. It has put middle level and small powers on the horns of dilemma, causing them to hedge, align, and rebalance their strategic interest vis-a-vis, the contending behemoths. Ironically, international institutions, particularly the UNSC, have become virtually dysfunctional in conflict prevention

[®]Major General BK Sharma, AVSM, SM & Bar (Retd) is the Director, United Service Institution (USI) of India. He specialises in strategic net assessment, scenario building, and strategic gaming.

and management. Historical animosities, conflicting core interests, presence of volatile flash points, dangerous military posturing amid deepening strategic mistrust and the lack of conflict prevention mechanisms collectively heighten the chances of military confrontation and at the peril of global peace.

India's strategic security environment too is in ferment. It continues to face collusive hybrid threats from Pak-China nexus and mounting politico-economic instability in South Asia. The evolving strategic scenario demands a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of strategic environment and its impact on India's national strategy and foreign policy. India ought to be a pre-eminent player in its strategic neighbourhood and a major stakeholder in shaping geopolitical developments in Eurasia and Indo-Pacific Regions.

India's Vision

India strives to be staunchly sovereign, diplomatically autonomous, economically strong, socially cohesive, militarily powerful, culturally vibrant, at the forefront of science and technology, pragmatic & influential in international relations, confident and satisfied society in pursuit of dignified peace & tranquility in a multipolar world. At the heart of India's national interests lie the well-being of its citizens, national image, and influence. For accomplishing these lofty goals, it is paramount to develop Comprehensive National Power (CNP) and configure it to promote national interests. However, India's comprehensive national development is predicated on a stable strategic environment. Therefore, the principal goal of India's foreign policy is to successfully navigate the complex strategic environment in the quest of positioning India at a prominent place in the comity of nations.

Strategic Horizon Scan

From a realpolitik perspective, India recognises that behavior of states will continue to be driven by social Darwinism, where there are no permanent friends or foes. Only national interests, survival of the fittest paradigm, and balance of power will rule the roost with a looming risk of falling into Thucydides' trap. We are living in a world where 'Pax Americana' has lost its sheen; gone are the days of unipolarity, preemption and American universalism. We are witnessing the rise of China, resurgence of Russia in

Eurasia and growth of middle level powers like India. The contours of new diffused and poly-centric world order are becoming dark. Black Swan of Covid pandemic has impacted the momentum of globalisation, disrupted supply chains, induced economic shocks, and caused a fortress mentality in nation states. The US debacle in Afghanistan led to victory of jihadi ideology and impacted balance of power in Eurasia. The Ukraine conflict has deepened the chasm between the US led west and the Russia-China strategic alignment, further on the other hand, impacting the balance of power in Eurasia and Indo-Pacific. The ensuing Cold War or strategic brinkmanship is characterised by the following attributes:

- There is contestation over ideology between liberal democratic world vis-a'-vis other models of governance. Powerful states are vying for domination of locations in the Indo-Pacific, Eurasia, Arctic, outer space, cyber space and cognitive space, monopolises resources such as energy, water, food, rare-earth metals, semiconductors, and microchips; using these as tools of strategic coercion.
- Contestation over technology such as Artificial Intelligence, 5G/6G, cyber, big data, block chains, robotics, autonomous vehicles, hyper velocity vehicles, space and counter space technologies.
- Weaponisation of economy by the US and European Union has disrupted global financial system leading to rise of inflation, food crisis, creation of alternate economic blocs, trading system, and diversification of manufacturing hubs and supply chains.
- Multi – Domain wars and grey zone conflicts have become a new normal with lines between declared and undeclared wars becoming amorphous, thus, compounding security-insecurity dilemmas.
- Arms race, forward military posturing and dangerous maneuvers are fraught with risks of accidental flare ups exacerbated by strategic mistrust and hyper nationalism. A series of miscalculations or propensity to up the ante in Ukraine conflict is fraught with risks of nuclear brinkmanship. Likewise, Taiwan is fast emerging as the most volatile flashpoint between the US and China, with potential for

escalating into a major war that will engulf other countries and damage global peace and security.

- The Arctic Region, due to its abundant natural resources, has emerged as a new strategic frontier.¹ With the melting of ice, harnessing of energy resources and minerals, operationalisation of the Northern Sea Route has become a reality. The strategic geography of Arctic puts Russia in a dominating position as an anchor of Arctic outreach. China too proclaims itself as a Near Arctic State and is building its capacities to fructify Polar Silk Road and is collaborating with Russia for the commercialisation of Arctic resources. These developments are deemed inimical by the US led Western alliance. The Ukraine conflict has made the Arctic Council and other collaborative initiatives virtually defunct. On the contrary, the voices from US and NATO for expansion in the Arctic to balance are getting loud and shrill.

Tenets of India's Foreign Policy

India's world-view is informed by the philosophy of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*'; a phrase found in ancient Sanskrit scripture implying that the world is a family. India, ipso-facto, is a strong exponent of globalisation and multilateralism. India, the 75 years since its independence, has embarked upon a mission of '*Viksit Bharat*' (Advanced India)- a cherished national rejuvenation mission to be achieved by the middle of 21st century.² It essentially entails attainment of CNP based on development, deterrence, diplomacy and strategic communication. Our strategic security and foreign policy goals are geared at upholding sovereignty, territorial integrity, socio-political stability, economic security, resource security, environmental security, technological self-reliance and credible defence capabilities. All these are to be achieved taking a 'whole of government approach' and building synergy between hard power, soft power, dispersed power (diaspora) and coordinated power-blending into sharp and smart power. The strategic guidelines articulated by Prime Minister Modi are demonstrated through slogans such as National Ambition and Regional Aspirations (NARA), '*SabkaSaath Sab kaVikas and Sab kaVishwas*'³ (it means growth for all, taking all along and by taking in confidence) and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). India aspires to develop into a 3 trillion-dollar economy in the next few years

and become self – reliant in technology through *Atamnirbhar* (Make in India) and Digital India programmes. India seeks to diversify its energy and technology imports, achieve a carbon neutral status by 2070, and promote 'International Solar Alliance'. India firmly believes in strategic autonomy, practiced through multi-vector foreign policy, primacy of international institutions, their reforms; rule based international order, and multilateralism. India is against zero sum game, use of force, and hegemony. India has shed off its pacificism and has become explicit, and assertive, in articulating and protecting its core interests. Its foreign policy focus manifests in its Neighborhood First Policy, Connect Central Asia Policy, Look West Policy, Act East Policy, becoming an important vector in the concert of middle-level powers, thus, balancing its interests between the contesting big powers. India's participation in QUAD and at the same time being a member of G20, SCO, BRICS, RIC, and ASEAN plus constructs is indicative of its propensity for regional multilateralism.

Foreign Policy Challenges and Opportunities

India's growth and development have been impacted by the Covid pandemic, inter alia due to lockdowns, disruption of supply chains, hike in fuel and food prices, impediment in trade and FDI. Despite these encumbrances, India ranks as the 5th largest economy in the world and has an impressive GDP growth of 6.5 to 7 percent.⁴ However, to achieve the mark of 5 trillion US dollar economy, India has to grow at 9 percent or more.⁵ Therefore, India needs to assiduously work to enhance its industrial output, boost its trade and ensure unimpeded energy imports. On the positive side, India's huge consumer market makes it a favourite for foreign countries.

The most formidable threat India faces today is from Pakistan-China strategic nexus that seeks to change status quo at the contested borders and undermine India's strategic security. China's aggressive actions, since May 2020, to change the status quo at the LAC have severely damaged Sino-Indian relations. Another area of concern for India is to balance China's forays in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. Under the rubric of China's much touted BRI, it is developing CPEC in Pakistan (through the Indian Territory in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir), building China-Nepal Economic Corridor, China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and

dual use infrastructure in the littorals of Indian Ocean. China, through its charm and cheque book diplomacy, seeks to induce a gravitational pull in India's strategic neighbourhood and alter the balance of power in its favour. The balancing of Pakistan-China collusion and China's growing influence in India's strategic neighbourhood poses a challenge but also offers opportunities for India to reinvigorate its ties with the neighbouring countries.

India's lack of direct geographical connectivity with Central Asia is complicated with the obstinacy of Pakistan, Talibanisation of Afghanistan, and geopolitics of Iran, owing to economic sanctions imposed on Tehran by Washington. These geopolitical developments have dampened the prospects of operationalisation of Chahbahar, Zaranj-Delaram axis, INSTC, energy corridors connecting Central Asia with South Asia or for that matter, implementation of Ashgabat trade agreement. There is a risk of Afghanistan becoming an epicentre of terrorism which will give a fillip to cross-border terrorism. Another challenge India faces is the extension of CPEC from Peshawar to Kabul and possible creation of Pakistan – China condominium in Afghanistan that would seek to marginalise India. On the positive side, there is some thaw in India and Taliban regime to establish a minimum functional relationship to render humanitarian assistance to Afghan people. India is assuming a centre stage in 'Troika plus dialogues' for building peace and security in Afghanistan. India is fully cognisant of the fact that given its economic heft, size of market, and IT prowess, New Delhi gains salience in the regional geo-economic integration.

India's strategic interests in West Asia evolve around energy security; India imports about 2/3rd of its energy requirements from the West Asian countries. Also, India must balance its interests between Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran and checkmate Pakistan's nefarious agenda at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Recently, India's relations with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have significantly improved. Nonetheless, a new Islamic bloc that comprises Pakistan, Turkey, and Malaysia needs deft diplomatic handling. India also needs to take extra measures to balance growing influence of China in the region. India must be extra vigilant on the import of Wahabi ideology and radicalisation of Indian diaspora. India has joined a new West Asian (Quad)-US, UAE, Israel and India. This

grouping is essentially aimed at economic cooperation albeit with misgivings from some quarters which need to be allayed through diplomacy.

Another significant foreign policy challenge for India is to balance antagonistic big power relations. India's strategic autonomy precludes New Delhi to join any military alliance or strategic partnership that is inimical to another country or group of countries. Traditionally, the west has perceived India closer to Soviet Union / Russia. These perceptions are accentuated, with India actively participating in SCO, BRICS and RIC forum. The security dilemmas that are particularly stemming from Pak-China hybrid threats make it incumbent for India to resort to external balancing in the Indo-Pacific and to balance an assertive China. India's participation in QUAD, signing of foundational agreements with US, Japan, France, UK, and Indonesia should be seen from that perspective. It needs to be acknowledged that India is too huge country to fall under the tutelage of another country or be prompted in its strategic choices it makes in pursuance of its national interests.

The Eurasian heartland has recently witnessed unprecedented geopolitical developments that have impacted the balance of power in the region. Ensuing Ukraine conflict has plunged the world in the throes of heightened confrontation between the West on one side and Russia -China's strategic nexus on the other. India and Russia are endowed with a very robust and specialised privileged strategic partnership that has withstood the vagaries of geopolitics. Russia's embroilment in Ukraine has implications for India. India-Russia trade has crossed \$15bn since 2018.⁶ Over 60 per cent of Indian military inventory is of Russian origin,⁷ especially with respect to fighter jets, tanks, helicopters and submarines, while several major deals are in the pipeline. Russia's embroilment in Ukraine conflict and consequential economic sanctions imposed on Moscow will have implications on the procurement of \$5.43bn deal, S-400 air defence systems, modernisation of frigates, induction of nuclear-powered submarines, AK 202 assault rifle project, VeryShort-Range Defence Systems, spares for Brahmos, R-27 Air to Air Missiles, and modernisation of AN 32 transport aircraft fleet. Likewise, import of fossil fuels under Rupee-Rouble exchange may have attendant repercussions as far as India's western strategic partners are concerned. India and Russia need strategic patience and deftness in mitigating these challenges. India and Russia have crafted well-

defined areas of collaboration and adopted a well-coordinated approach, as enunciated in the 'Eastern Economic Forums' declarations, particularly those made on the eve of Mr. Modi's visit to Vladivostok,⁸ and addresses delivered during annual forums 2019, 2021 & 2022 and President Putin's visit to India in December 2021. Mr. Modi has alluded Vladivostok as Sangam (confluence) of ideas, people and trade.⁹ India's recently pronounced 'Act Far East Policy' and 'Arctic Strategy' are in sync with President Putin's strategy for development of Far East. Mr. Modi's speech at Eastern Economic Forum on 09 Sept 2022 is indicative of the same- *"India is keen to strengthen its partnership with Russia on Arctic issues. There is also immense potential for cooperation in the field of energy. Along with energy, India has also made significant investments in the Russian Far East in the areas of pharma and diamonds"* PM said.¹⁰ In a welcome development, India has pledged a one billion dollar line of credit and espoused collaboration for the development of Far East.¹¹ Specific areas of collaboration are identified as under: -

- Expansion of bilateral trade to US \$30 bn US dollar by 2025, it being co-terminus with India's intent to grow into a 5 trillion US dollar economy in the next few years.
- Energy imports, off shore drilling, infrastructure development of ports, railways, and airports.
- Operationalisation of Northern Sea Route and its connectivity with India through Vladivostok-Chennai corridor on one side and through integrated waterways with INSTC in which Chabahar is sought to be included.¹² The most important decision is to make these routes as green corridors by easing out trade barriers and custom rules adopting e-commerce model.
- Collaboration in ship building, supply and construction of polar vessels.
- Russia's participation in *Atamnirbhar Bharat* Initiative (self-reliant India).
- India – Russia Military Technical Cooperation 2021-2031 offers more promising prospects to boost defence cooperation¹³ Defence trade between the two countries has crossed \$15bn since 2018.

- Arctic research and climate change and its impact on monsoons, global warming of the two cold regions in Himalayas. Sharing of Arctic knowledge of indigenous communities living in the two cold regions.
- India's assistance in terms of provision of skilled manpower, maritime navigation and satellite mapping of the Arctic resources.
- Issues such as search and rescue and insurance of vessels.

Conclusion

India is at the cusp of transiting from a balancing to a leading power. It seeks a peaceful internal and external security environment for its comprehensive development. However, the evolving geopolitical scenario that is rife with contestation and mistrust poses strategic and foreign policy dilemmas for India. However, India has to develop her CNP and strategically configure it to promote its sharply defined national interests. India needs multi-vector engagement with strategic partners across the geopolitical divide. India's foreign policy has to be nimble-footed to steer its interests through the choppy waters of VUCA environment. As far as Indo-Russia relationship is concerned, the history bears testimony to the fact that our bilateral relations have stood the test of time. The two countries have traditionally remained aligned in their world-view and macro-strategic issues. The decision to collaborate in the development of Russia's Far East opens a new avenue to deepen and broaden our privileged partnership. The two sides are well poised to strengthen bilateral relations and align their positions at the multiple fora such as G-20 UNGC, SCO, BRICS and such other platforms. Our dialogue process must remain dynamic and progressive to reconcile divergences, mitigate risks and maximise opportunities.

Endnotes

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