India's Foreign Policy Challenges

What is the issue?

Beyond the domestic issues, India faces the same challenges as before in its relations with the rest of the world, which need attention.

What are the key areas of India’s foreign policy?

- **India and China** - The Asian superpower - China's - economic and geostrategic ambitions will continue to shape India’s responses.
- It may influence everything from India's relations with the neighbourhood to the US and Russia in the West and ASEAN and Japan in the East.
- Despite the [Wuhan meeting](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018_Wuhan_summit) and the cooling of Doklam standoff's tensions, many differences remain, but new opportunities too.
- China is now keen to build bridges in the region and elsewhere, given its pressure of economic slowdown along with the US trade war against it.
- There is now a need for a new arrangement to replace the strategic framework formulated in 1988 during Rajiv Gandhi’s visit.
- It served both countries well for three decades but is now under strain.
- The new framework should have -
  - respect for each other’s core interests
ii. new areas of cooperation like counter-terrorism and maritime security and crisis management

iii. a clearer understanding of each other’s sensitivities

iv. settling or at least managing differences

v. a strategic dialogue about actions on the international stage

India and Pakistan - The rhetoric, especially on the Indian side, is becoming increasingly communal.

So the bilateral engagement is likely to remain trapped by the need for the countries to be alive to the domestic audiences’ demands.

India is still doubtful of the Kartarpur corridor decision, with concerns on secessionism in Punjab.

There may be more small gestures to keep a minimum engagement going.

But there is less likely to be a thaw in India - Pakistan relations for the foreseeable future.

Agreeing to maintain the ceasefire on the LoC would be the easiest way to restore some calm.

Also, India’s insecurities from the consolidation of China-Pakistan economic and security ties through the CPEC (China-Pak Economic Corridor) need focus.

India and the Taliban - The US’s recent pull out of troops from Afghanistan, has caught President Ashraf Ghani off guard.

It furthered the impression that the Trump administration was desperate to make concessions to the Taliban.

Iran and Russia too, which consider themselves stakeholders, are likely to be concerned about this.

Russia has tried to keep India in the frame through New Delhi’s “non-official” participation in the Moscow process, but the future of that process is
The challenge would be for India to stay relevant in Afghanistan, with the recent developments in Taliban issue.

**Neighbours** - India is driven by the vision of itself as the self-declared “regional superpower”.

But this is being undermined by the smaller countries in South Asia.

They are deciding to leverage China’s ambitions in the region, particularly the Indian Ocean, to their own advantage.

India has tried to fight China's expansion by backing those political parties and leaders in these countries whom it sees as being more “pro-New Delhi”.

E.g. as in Sri Lanka and the Maldives

However, as New Delhi has realised, even pro-India leaders in these countries do not like to take India's domination.

In Nepal, India's promises to speed up long-pending projects have not yet succeeded in reversing the damage done by the 2015-16 economic blockade in support of the Madhesis.

Bhutan too does not want more development assistance from India.

It wants more trade and investment for employment, and to wean away the country from its singular dependence on hydropower exports to India.

Much of India’s problems in the neighbourhood have arisen from viewing these countries through a security prism in which China looms large.

The key for India in the future will be to discover how to make and remain friends with these countries.

**India and Trump’s US** - India has found much to celebrate in the Trump administration.

His open stand against Pakistan for doing nothing to rein in terrorist groups is a welcome thing for India.

Signalling the growing strategic convergence, the two countries signed **COMCASA** (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement)
recently.

- This is to facilitate interoperability between their militaries, and sale of high-end technology.

- Trump also hailed India as a key player in a free and open “Indo-Pacific” over the China-dominant Asia-Pacific.

- However, on the downside is -

  i. US protectionism on the trade front
  
  ii. US visa rules hurting Indian professionals
  
  iii. US’s collision course with Iran impacting India’s oil purchases

- Iran’s issue could also adversely affect the operability of Chabahar port which India has built as an alternative route to trade with Afghanistan.

- Also, concerns with India’s purchase of the S-400 air shield system from Russia that could attract US sanctions remain.

- For Indian foreign policy, the challenge would be to keep pace with the rapid changes everywhere amid the political fluidity at home.

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