

Changing Indian Foreign Policy

It was night time when we switched the TV on to watch the election result start to come in. I was in the U.S., at my sister's place, a couple of her friends had joined us, food was being distributed and the news was turned up to max. It was chaotic, loud and the anticipation was at fever pitch, kind of like the Indian elections themselves.

Discussing or rather arguing about politics, in our home, is one of our favourite pastimes. Watching or reading news is not only encouraged but something that is expected to be done. But just reading about what is happening in the world doesn't really give you optimal tools to analyse it. I have so many questions that I don't know how to find answers for. I can feel the gaps in my knowledge even if I am just watching fiction that is heavily steeped in politics like the Game of Thrones series. Studying International Relations is helping me to start to plug in some of these gaps. Anyway I was always more interested in reading international news as it was more about the wider reaching implications rather than a dramatised rendition of who said what, which is what many times domestic news ends up being.

In his first term of being PM, Narendra Modi took a record number of foreign trips around the globe and as most things done by Modi this was met with equal enthusiasm and skepticism by the nation. I did not know what to think at that time but now I would like to revisit the topic, especially keeping in mind recent events with China and Pakistan, and understand how India's standing in the international arena and its foreign policy has changed with Narendra Modi at the helm.

Back in 2014, when Narendra Modi first took command, he implemented 'Neighbourhood first' and 'Act East' policies as he believed that peace and stability of India's South Asian neighbours would help his development agenda. His focus being more on trade deals than on geopolitical initiatives.

Now here we are in 2020, we are amidst a tense standoff with China with war threatening to erupt at any moment between the two countries. Nepal has become hostile, redrawn its map and revived border disputes with India. Sri Lanka is leaning towards China helping it with its infrastructural projects in the Indian Ocean. Bangladesh is irked with being singled out in the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). When Afghanistan was undergoing a major transition, India was out of the multi-party talks and Iran had inked deals with China, which it was supposed to do with India. Basically the neighbourhood is in uproar. So, what happened?

India took a hard nosed stance against terrorism and dropped the usage of normative language in giving statements against terrorism. The lack of gap between rhetoric and reality, when opposite is often the case with governments, tied India's hands during Afghanistan's transition. This lack of nuance in speech cost India in forming an important relationship with Tehran, keeping the tense relationship between Islamabad and Tehran in mind. But, the hard lined stance has helped

India to deal with Pakistan in a decisive manner. India has always played defensive to Pakistan's offensive. The abrogation of Kashmir's status in the backdrop of Pakistan's repeated failures to deal decisively with terrorist cells on its soil and India's cordial relations with the world superpowers, has led to Pakistan's receiving no actual support on the Kashmir issue on the world stage.

On the other hand, India's singlehanded redrawing of border has certainly riled up China. But it would be a mistake to blame border problems solely on India, as China's foreign policy is clearly a mess right now. Similarly, border tiffs with Nepal have a factor of Nepalese domestic politics coming into play. As are Bangladesh's problems with us, as the current Indian government wants to use CAA to make India a de facto Hindu homeland.

Even before the Modi government came into the picture, India has been deepening its ties with the U.S. While that relationship has paid dividends in some areas, it has also tied us down in other ones. U.S and Iran's strained relationship has had India moving slowly in the trade deals it had signed with Iran before and eventually losing out to China in the recent Iran-China Belt and Road Initiative deal.

All in all, there has been a paradigm shift in the Indian foreign policy. We have dropped the Non-Alignment party line, have adopted a more aggressive stance against terrorism and have showed willingness to pay the associated cost of taking on Pakistan and China. India's stance on anti-terrorism, commitments to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, courting of various countries including world superpowers, abrogation of Kashmir and trying to manage China's hegemonic tendencies has certainly helped to shift its standing in the international arena. The Nehruvian's idealism has given way to Modi's realism, and only time will tell whether Modi's gamble will pay off or not.

It was late hours of the election day when the TV was switched off, and later still when the mobiles were. The NDA alliance had won the election and the first PM to be born after independence had been chosen. A new order had begun.