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Change and continuity in India's foreign policy

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Abstract:

The year 1990 marked a paradigm shift in India's foreign policy with the demise of the Soviet Union and sudden end of cold war bipolar politics leading to a unipolar world order under US hegemony. It unleashed many new and unseen forces which led to India's foreign policy undergoing a radical and paradigm shift in the vastly changed socio-political milieu of global politics. It generated cataclysmic changes in the global politics and India's foreign policy had to constantly evolve itself to keep in sync with the changing world situation and at the same time, protect and promote its strategic national interests.

This paper explores various intertwined strategic, political and economic nuances to showcase that post-1990; India is more grounded to reality and better prepared to face the challenges posed by shifting alliances in contemporary global power equilibrium. This has favored the normalization of hitherto antagonistic relations with neighbours, greater involvement in regional and global groupings and institutions and a greater focus on issues that matter for country's defence. It has learnt to free itself from past idealistic and normative overtones and deal with changing dynamics of global politics with a sense of hard-nosed realism. It has been gradually evolving, developing greater substance while in the process rediscovering its true potential.

Keywords: Foreign policy, post cold war era, pragmatism, economic diplomacy, strategic autonomy, paradigm shift.

Introduction: India's foreign policy has till date travelled a journey of more than seven decades and is still going strong. Despite facing formidable challenges on both domestic as well as external fronts, India has managed to play its cards well and succeeded in securing its vital national interests at the same time. This paper makes an attempt to establish that India's foreign policy has been evolving progressively and learnt to deal with friends and foes alike with pragmatism and prudence. In the process, it has had to respond to the emerging new challenges and opportunities. As a fast moving nation, the primary tasks for India's foreign policy has been to ensure that India engages with the rest of the world to safeguard and augment its national interests and strategic priorities and at the same time not

compromise with its vital principles and objectives. The present world order is undergoing momentous and profound changes accompanied by significant transformations in the global power equations such as the shift in the centre of gravity of economic power to the Trans-Pacific from the Trans-Atlantic region and the gradual emergence of a multipolar world order. This is accompanied by a significant rise in the international political interest in India. The world, since the end of cold war bipolarity has witnessed extraordinary turmoil and large scale restructuring of interstate and intra state relations in the post cold war era that have largely impinged upon India's Foreign policy.

1990's marked a watershed moment for Indian foreign policy with the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of cold war confrontation giving way to emergence of a new multipolar world order reflecting new power configurations. Domestically, too India had to undergo metamorphic changes as dictated by an unprecedented balance of payments crisis which necessitated structural reforms in the Indian economy. The beginning of the 21st century ushered in a new era of prudence and pragmatism for India evident in both domestic and international sphere. There was a growing sense of hard-nosed realism which was reflected in the growing flexibility and accommodativeness in the foreign policy formulations of India coupled with a better appreciation of the role of power in conducting International Relations. India shed its non aligned and anti-Western bias and prejudices in favour of a realistic foreign policy. In stark contrast to the earlier years during which India mainly took a high moral ground in foreign affairs, post-1990 India was more grounded to reality and better prepared to face the challenges posed by shifting alliances in contemporary global power equilibrium. This favored the normalization of hitherto antagonistic relations with neighbours, greater involvement in regional and global groupings and institutions that could protect and promote its vital national interests, a positive approach to other regional and global powers and greater focus on issues that concerned India's core national interests.

India's foreign policy in a changing world order: The journey of India as a nation from 1947 till present day, both in terms of its foreign policy and domestic politics, can be seen as a transition from Idealism under Pt Nehru, through a period of Hard Realism to economically driven pragmatism today.¹ The initial years in the post independence phase was a period in which India's foreign policy stance was characterized as being too much idealistic and moralistic. As a result of the incoherence that was evident on some occasions, Indian foreign policy has often been criticized of becoming largely reactive in nature. It was criticized at home and abroad for lacking vision and a unified strategy for India's role in the world.²

Since attaining her independence, India has proclaimed her friendliness to all nations, emphasized her desire to have permanent commitment towards none and always endeavored to maintain logical neutrality in the face of power alignments and cold war. Even in the post cold war scenario, India still remains non-aligned in the sense that there has been no conscious change in foreign policy regarding joining any military bloc/power.

In the light of the momentous changes taking place in the world today, especially with the ushering in of new forces precipitated by the end of cold war bipolarity, collapse of East Europe and emergence of liberalization and globalization, India's foreign policy has been reshaping and reorienting itself to adapt and respond to the emerging challenges and opportunities to keep in sync with the changing situations.³ The recent years have witnessed a juxtaposition of the influence exerted by the domestic and global variables on India's foreign policy and positions in the post-cold war period. In the post cold war era of political instability and burgeoning economic crisis, Indian foreign policy was a virtual prisoner of domestic compulsions. There is a perceptible shift in Indian foreign policy perceptions that India's foreign policy has now been based more and more on pragmatism and flexibility. The difference in India's foreign policy stance in the post cold war era is the reduced stress on the ideological factor in its foreign policy language. Time was when J.L. Nehru thought of 'avoiding foreign entanglements by not joining one bloc or the other' as the key idea of non-alignment.⁴ Now, India still remains non-aligned in the sense that it has no military alliances, but it can hardly avoid foreign entanglements in the changing context. It underlies the fact that nations do not adjust their policies to uphold the historical contents of a concept, rather the concept undergoes a change in context with the evolving policies of nations in changed circumstances. The dynamics of global economic changes have led to an entirely new shift in power variables and perceptions, from the predominance of Geopolitics in the cold war era to primacy of Geo-economics. In the context of geopolitical considerations, India is in search of a new set of Geo-economics.⁵ The insistence for a more definitive and assertive role for itself in the major global and regional multilateral and financial groupings underlines its search for new geo-economic parameters. Insightful overviews of the emerging priorities of India's foreign policy indicate a radical change in perception towards a projection of India's power status. India's response to the global transformation has culminated in complete adjustment and real adaptation to new circumstances in terms of external strategy (in its foreign policy) and in tactics (in its diplomacy). India has the geopolitical assets of a long and high profile role in the world affairs but for a variety of reasons, both domestic and external, it had not been playing a role commensurate to its stature. This was particularly so in the period immediately preceding the end of Cold War.⁶

Shift from Idealism to hardnosed Realism in foreign policy orientations: In the pre-1990 period, India's foreign policy had singularly suffered from the absence of long-term thinking and a holistic approach. It had been adhoc and reactive rather than proactive; it lacked in transparency.⁷ There was no profound analysis of the world situation, no clear definition of the purpose and objectives of India's foreign policy and no awareness of the nature of problems it faced. Indian spokesmen deprecated the arms race, talked vaguely about peace, equity and justice and yet acquiesce in the discriminatory world order. With the ongoing changes in the global milieu, it was realized that India needed to evolve a global vision and a grand theory to realize this goal. India needed to evolve a policy to guide sustained involvement in global issues as an ad hoc approach was no more practically

tenable. In the 21st century, India's shifting alignments in the international sphere and the reworking of its domestic institutions have coincided with astonishing rapidity.

The economic crisis of 1990-91 facilitated adopting hard options that could not be taken up in the past. This allowed India to open up to the world and particularly to South East Asia as a gateway to the larger Asia-Pacific region. This in turn has helped the Indian Economy to integrate with the global economy and enhanced India's position. It is on the basis of this emerging global order that an Indian perspective needs to be shaped. Broadly India's foreign policy continues to be based upon the tenants established in the Nehruvian era, but it has been evolving and exhibiting a new found vigor and vibrancy. There has been a better realization of the role of power, more flexibility in policy, increased realization of the need for pragmatism, a more realistic approach towards security and defence and a greater emphasis on economic cooperation.⁸ In the 1990's, India's multi-pronged external policy is based on a broad domestic consensus and is designed to serve its national interests. International peace and security remain goals of commitment along with the promotion of multipolarity (especially in the post-cold war context).⁹

Indian government's decision to go ahead with the nuclear tests in May 1998 has increased India's prestige and status, thus indirectly improving its net security. India will always be seen as a 'Responsible Nuclear Weapon State' with its No-First Use doctrine.¹⁰ Indian Government needs to learn to use its nuclear status as a bargaining tool to secure its rightful position in the comity of nations. This would help India to elevate itself as a formidable power. India has successfully resisted the coercive measures of international community in the post 1998 phase; reordered the relations with the major powers to its advantage and managed the Kargil conflict with military and political success. India's new diplomatic activism is no longer limited to Big-Power diplomacy. New Delhi also demonstrated the ability to re-engage the extended neighbourhood in the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and the South East Asia that had got disconnected from India for various reasons. And it confidently recast its relations with the immediate neighbours. A decade of vigorously pursued economic reforms had already made India one of the faster growing economies of the world and created a new basis for diplomatic relations with many countries of the world. Many of the post war analyses of the future have talked about the potential of India to become one of the six power centers – besides the US, Europe, Russia, China and Japan. Most point to India's democracy, its rapidly growing economy, its scientific and technological capabilities and its increasing military might as indicators of an emerging power.¹¹ India's actual potential as a global player can not be reached without concerted efforts now simultaneously and in many directions which will convert India's potential to actuality in the first quarter of the 21st century.

India's foreign policy has never been as vibrant and dynamic as it is today. Throughout the cold war era, India was estranged from the West in general and the US in particular. Today, it enjoys very good relationships with not only the United States but also all major western powers. And this has been not at the cost of its traditional friendship with Russia or

any other country, including its partners in Africa, Latin America and Asia. In the Middle East, India has always supported the Arab struggle for Palestine and did not have diplomatic relations with Israel. In recent years, while maintaining support for the PLO, India has opened up and intensified ties with Israel. India also succeeded in maintaining friendly ties with Iran and Iraq and has refused to fall in line with the US policy of ostracism of Iraq. This has helped India in maintaining favorable relations with the OIC. As a result, Pakistani's effort to use the organization of Islamic States against India has proved abortive. India's recent achievements in terms of hard power are obvious. They include the development of a nuclear deterrent, military modernization, rapid economic growth, major advances in areas of high technology and global recognition of India's huge reservoir of young and world class human resources. As the world witnesses the emergence of a new global order from the shadows of the cold war, India will creatively pursue her foreign policy to widen the web of friendly relations with all the nations of the world and endeavour to secure a meaningful role in world affairs. India does not believe that either in Unipolarity or Multiplicity in the world. It believes and supports that a stable equilibrium lies in a cooperative, multicultural world which accommodates the legitimate aspirations and interests of all nations and of the international community as a whole. Today, India's foreign policy has come a long way and is fast shedding the burdens of the past. It is breaking out of the "Third World Syndrome" and free from the ideological baggage of the cold war ideological divide, it is confident and eager to connect with the world in every way. The guiding principle of foreign policy of India today is realism and the pursuit of national interest at all conceivable means. Ideology is on the retreat and pragmatism is the new mantra. Increasingly, India's national interest is in harmony with global well-being. The 21st century looks very bright for India- some might say shining. Prospects for sustained growth are good. India has a large young population, which will be a driving force in its rise.

Ascendency of the role of Economic Diplomacy: The rise of economic diplomacy in the recent years has been visibly palpable in the foreign policy formulations of India. India's economic performance has been improving significantly over the years and has become a focal point on which the foreign policy rests itself. Economic growth is a good thing for India and from a foreign policy perspective, economic prosperity is now seen as the key to India's attainment of great power status and the driving argument behind India's current world view. Economic diplomacy provides a way for India to harness global opportunities for fostering economic growth and development in the country. It also acts a pathway to great power status. In addition, economic diplomacy can also provide a channel of cooperation with potential competitors. By entering into economic relationships with major powers, India can progressively build up its own institutional capacity to develop and execute a grand strategy globally. Trade and economic cooperation has become the cornerstones of India's relations with the world and India has no ideological pretensions in doing business with China, Israel, Russia, US, Brazil, South Africa, West Asia and South and South East Asian countries. It has kept its options open and not allowed political considerations to adversely affect trade and commerce ties. 'Good economics is Good

Politics' and so India has unleashed its latent forces to promote economic cooperation and trade links with all regions of the world.¹² As a result of this realization, India is currently engaged in promoting economic development in Africa, securing oil fields in Central Asia, investing in infrastructure developmental projects in Afghanistan, promoting trade and cooperation with the US, entering into Strategic Partnerships with Japan and Russia and acting as Israel's biggest arms markets at times.¹³

For India, interaction with the major energy producers of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, as well as with the Tiger Economies of Southeast Asia is no longer constrained by a cold war framework. Indian strategists are learning how to function successfully in this expanded region of influence, developing new bilateral ties and exploring multilateral arrangements that will link South Asia to adjacent regions. India's reputation is also undergoing an important change and India's leaders have tried to balance the demands of an active foreign policy with the domestic political pressures. In recent years, there seems to be a new effort to resolve the realism-idealism conundrum and to determine priorities in Indian Foreign Policy. It is essential that India learn to bridge the gap between idealistic inclinations and realist compulsion. This will make India a more credible country, improve the quality of debate within the Indian foreign policy community and make India a more predictable state, that would put its voice with a more definitive and categorical assertion in the global arena. This is letting a new realism and dynamism creep into India's foreign policy thinking.

Challenges for India's Foreign Policy ahead- a SWOT analysis: Indian foreign policy in the post Cold war phase has been steadily acquiring realistic paradigms to secure its rightful position in the global arena. India's policy of deepening engagement with other nations have further broadened the prospects of closer and more multifaceted relationship with the rest of the world and this narrative provides a context of trust for dealing with sensitive regional and global security issues such as non-proliferation and terrorism. It is a result of recent successful maneuverings that today India's voice is heard with much greater respect and its views are trusted with seriousness. With the changing times, the terms and reference of India's foreign policy has been undergoing a transformation and the practice of diplomacy has evolved in new directions and magnitude. India in the post cold war years has increasingly drawn the attention of the world by its astounding success and impressive economic growth and development. The size and population of India is now complimented by sufficient economic progress as to guarantee it a place commensurate to its stature in the global stage. India's economic significance has lent weight to the country's international profile and growing stature in world affairs. India has made its appearance at the world stage as a major actor offering a developmental model that has been successful and has achieved sufficient economic weight to matter significantly in the world economy.

These shifts in India's foreign policy manifested themselves in various ways, including better relations with China, a greater political resolve to solve the vexatious border disputes with China and Pakistan, India's Look East and Act East Policy aimed at re-orienting and

improving relations with South East Asian nations, the nuclear tests at Pokharan, India's growing relationship with Israel and enhanced political dialogue and Energy diplomacy with West Asian countries, growing proximity with the US in the nuclear missile defence programme, support for US invasion of Afghanistan, the Indo-US Nuclear Agreements in 2005 and 2008 and India's vote against Iran in the IAEA. All these instances give credence to the fact that Indian foreign policy in the 21st century is characterized by a pronounced shift towards pragmatism and assuming realistic dimensions shedding its normative and idealistic overtones which was so discernible in the foreign policy thinking in the earlier years. There is a willingness and propensity to do business with all.¹⁴ The global balance of power has been shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific with the consequent rise in power of China and India. India is now expected to bear global responsibilities and is increasingly being viewed as much more than a mere South Asian Power. India indeed has come a long way with one of the fastest growing economies in the world, a responsible nuclear power state with a robust and vibrant democracy and excellent human right track record. India has started to exhibit a self confidence which is an evident proof of its growing capabilities. Its regional and global aspirations are rising and today it has no inhibitions in displaying a masculine and aggressive image in its foreign policy that was inconspicuous by its absence earlier. The foreign policy makers in India are focused towards shaping and reshaping a foreign policy that is commensurate with its growing stature and potentiality in the comity of nations and at the same time, protect and enhance India's core national interests in the international arena.

To any discerning observer, the transformations that have taken place in India's foreign policy are momentous and revolutionary. As a consequence, India's foreign policy has very carefully evolved itself to adapt to the changed and evolving structure of the global order and not allow idealistic overtones and moralistic postures to impair its bilateral and multilateral relations with the global comity of nations. The test of India's new and dexterous diplomacy will be defined by its ability to contain the differences and build upon the possible areas of cooperation with other nations¹⁵ - friends and foes alike.

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