

Indian Foreign Policy in the Times of the Pandemic

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The current international environment is challenging. We are living through the greatest shock to the international system since the Second World War. What began as a health emergency has expanded into an economic disruption, a geo-political shock and a social challenge of unprecedented magnitude. How we deal with these immense difficulties—and whether we are able to transform some of them into opportunities—will influence our future trajectory as a nation.

We will celebrate the 75th year of our independence in 2022. We have traversed a remarkable journey during these seven decades. The challenges we have faced as a nation, both external and internal, have been and will continue to remain formidable. We do, however, have a list of achievements that is both considerable and impressive.

India is a nation on the move. It is evolving and progressing along multiple axes at a very rapid rate. The fundamental challenge facing Indian foreign policy is to ensure that India engages with the international community in a manner that is both consistent and responsive to contemporary realities. In other words, our foreign policy has to be one of continuity and change. The current international environment is particularly challenging. We are living through the greatest shock to the international system since the Second World War. What began as a health emergency has expanded into an economic disruption, a geo-political shock and a social challenge of unprecedented magnitude. How we deal with these immense difficulties—and whether we are able to transform

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economy, and therefore our material well being, is plugged on to global supply chains. We are a powerhouse in the services sectors. We look at the world as a borderless economy with an interlinked marketplace.



India is therefore committed to globalisation. We believe, however, that the pandemic has demonstrated the deficiencies and the limitations of its existing form. It is driven by a purely economic agenda. The Prime Minister in his address to the G-20 has said that globalisation should advance the collective interests of all humankind and should be based on fairness, equality and humanity. It should be a human-centric process.

India has been a constructive actor in developing an international system that is human-centric. We have worked together with partner countries in sharing our developmental experience. We have undertaken humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief operations over a geographical area spanning from the Pacific to the Atlantic. We have assisted a number of our friends and partners during the current pandemic. We have been a net security provider.

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We have catalysed the emergence of international organisations with constructive, forward-facing agendas such as the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure.

We do not live in a moral vacuum. India's aspirations are not just material in nature. We believe not just in "Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam"-

the world is one - but also in the principle of "Nishkama Karma", that good needs to be done for its own sake.

Our efforts to shape global thinking and project our perspectives have continued through the pandemic. The Prime Minister has participated in G20 and NAM virtual summits, the Global Vaccine Summit, and the High-Level Segment of United Nations Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC), and convened a virtual meeting of South Asian leaders.

India has been at the forefront of digital diplomacy during the current crisis. In addition to the summits listed earlier, India has had virtual summits with Australia and the European Union. We have participated at the Ministerial level in BRICS, SCO and RIC meetings. The Prime Minister and External Affairs Minister have conducted over 150 digital and virtual meetings during this period. We have





been agile in our efforts in continuing our foreign policy operations.

Our most important foreign policy objective is captured in our concept of 'Neighbourhood First'. It underlines the renewed primacy we attach to neighbouring countries to comprehensively upgrade and strengthen our relationships. Ties with our neighbours receive the greatest attention as reflected in frequent high-level exchanges; significant improvements in connectivity, economic integration and people-to-people contact; and special focus on neighbouring countries in India's development partnership program. We have demonstrated our commitment to working in South Asia, including during the pandemic, and in the sub-regional BIMSTEC frameworks inter-alia through continuous high-level engagement and through economic and connectivity initiatives.

Look East has been upgraded to Act East under which ties with ASEAN countries are being strengthened through improvements in road, maritime and air connectivity with a special focus on connecting our northeastern states to these countries. We have a growing dialogue with ASEAN through multiple channels and rapidly growing multi-sectoral linkages with ASEAN members. We

remain actively engaged in other formats such as the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting (ADMM) Plus.

In the last five years, Think West – our outreach to the Gulf and West Asian countries – has become an increasingly important pillar of our foreign policy. Our engagement with Africa, both in political and economic terms, has also intensified. There have been 34 outgoing visits to African countries at the level of the President, the Vice President and the Prime Minister. Over two-thirds of India's Lines of Credit in the past decade have been offered to African countries.

Our commitment and our engagement with our key bilateral partners continue apace.

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India-US relationship has been elevated to a Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership in recent years. Our engagement is deep rooted, marked by regular high-level dialogue; cooperation in multilateral, plurilateral and global platforms; and a diverse and substantial bilateral agenda. Defence, security and counter-terrorism are important pillars of our partnership. Growing trade and investment in both directions, collaboration in R&D, innovation, healthcare, and space are also crucial components of our agenda. Our Strategic Energy Partnership with the US has emerged as an important contributor towards our energy security.

The European Union is an important friend with whom we have a many layered and vibrant relationship. The 15th India-EU Summit held in July 2020 showcased the firm resolve and vision of the two sides towards realizing a multi-faceted partnership. The commitment is ingrained in the "India-EU Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025" issued after Summit.

Our relationship with Russia has not only deepened in traditional areas of cooperation like defence, space, nuclear, science and technology etc., but has expanded to include non-traditional and new areas of cooperation like energy, investments and cooperation between states. This year marks the 20th year of India-Russia Strategic Partnership and 10th year of 'Special and Strategic Partnership'.

We face a number of challenging situations in our immediate neighbourhood. We will work appropriately to resolve these problems. Our capacities and resources are growing and we will always be prepared to adopt the necessary strategies and tactics when challenged.

We are committed multilateralists. India firmly believes that the path

to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity is through multilateralism. We believe that all nations must join hands to address common challenges and achieve common goals. However, multilateralism needs to represent the reality of the contemporary world. India believes that only reformed multilateralism with a reformed United Nations at its centre can meet the aspirations of humanity.

We have a challenging and busy multilateral and plurilateral agenda in the coming years. We will join the UN Security Council for a two-year non-permanent term on January 1st, 2021. We are also due to hold the Presidencies of G20, BRICS and SCO. These are recognition of our enhanced global standing and also opportunities for us to convey our perceptions, our expectations and our priorities.

Countering terrorism is one of our most important challenges. India has suffered and continues to suffer from cross-border terrorism. We have been consistent and energetic in our efforts to seek action against those who control, support, fund and shelter terrorists. Our efforts to isolate terrorists and their sponsors have led to increased global support. Our task is, however, far from complete and we need to ensure that the world follows an undifferentiated and unambiguous approach to terrorism. We also need to ensure that politicisation of global mechanisms such as UN listings is avoided, and that the international community finalises a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.

Indian foreign policy must also contend with non-traditional security challenges in newer domains such as Space, the Cyberworld and in the biological domain.

All crises are followed by periods of growth. This crisis too will create opportunities and we would like to be in a position to benefit from them. One of our foreign

policy priorities is to make India, in the words of the Prime Minister, the “nerve centre of global supply chains”. This is also in line with the vision of ‘Aatmanirbhar Bharat’. Aatmanirbharta is not about seeking self-centred arrangements. It is not about turning the country inwards or about economic isolationism. Its essential aim is to ensure India’s position as a key participant in global supply chains. Through building capacities at home we also intend to contribute to mitigating disruptions in global markets. The network of Indian missions and posts around the world, in consultation with various stakeholders, is identifying export and investment opportunities for our businesses in various countries. Encouraging global business

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entities that seek to diversify their manufacturing locations to consider India is a key foreign policy priority.

India has demonstrated through the current crisis that it is a responsible member of the global community. We believe in taking a far-sighted view that will stand us in good stead in the post-pandemic world. The pandemic produced an explosion in demand for drugs such as Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) and Paracetamol produced in India. We were able to supply, after ensuring adequate domestic stockpiles, large volumes of these drugs to friends and consumers across the world. In the face of daunting logistical challenges imposed by the

lockdown, India provided these drugs and medical supplies to more than 150 countries. Through initiatives such as Operation Sagar, Operation Sanjeevani, the deployment of medical Rapid Response Teams in several countries, the linking of health professionals and the pooling of health capacities, and supply of essential medical products, we reinforced our credentials as providers of net health security and first responders.

We deploy large amounts of resources through development partnerships. It is a practical demonstration of our belief in “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas”. The Indian model of developmental cooperation is comprehensive and involves multiple instruments including grants-in-aid, line of credit and capacity building and technical assistance. It ranges from commerce to culture, energy to engineering, health to housing, IT to infrastructure, sports to science, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance to restoration and preservation of cultural and heritage assets.

Last but not least, providing timely, effective and efficient public services to our citizens and to our Diaspora is a major priority. More than a million Indians have returned to India through the Vande Bharat Mission by land, sea and air. This is the largest such logistical exercise undertaken in the recent past and highlights the ever present requirement of preparing for and responding to contingencies.

The pandemic is leaving a lasting imprint on all domains, including on the way we engage with the world. In this fast evolving environment, Indian diplomacy has shown the necessary agility and adaptability to effectively respond to the emerging challenges, while also cementing India’s credentials as a responsible and constructive member of the global community. □