

India's Place in the League of Nations: Transforming Paradigms

In conversation with **Kanwar Sibal**, former Foreign Secretary, Government of India

With China moving into the ranks of middle-income countries, India is now arguably the world's most important developing country. However, on the basis of its physical size, economy, demographics, growth prospects, military resources, and some areas of technology (including nuclear and space tech), it is on par with many advanced nations. Few nations have had a greater civilisational influence on human history than has India. On current trends, India will become a pole by itself in an increasingly multi-polar world. For now, though, it has not fully achieved the status that it legitimately deserves. It is not a permanent member of the UN Security Council, nor a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group – in both cases, largely owing to Chinese resistance. Not many realise this, but India still remains under sanctions in terms of dual-use nuclear/space technologies, so certain doors are still closed to it.

Some believe that India's foreign policy framework – as well as the results it achieves – has scope, or indeed need, for 'improvement'. This is a mistaken perception. In international relations, there is simply no control over many of the outcomes: no single body decides what the global order will be, or how bilateral relations will play out. Nor are there courts to enforce accountability across nations. On top of everything, the paradigms can sometimes shift

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quite dramatically – such as when communism collapsed, and new complexities came to embroil India, which had previously insulated itself by practising non-alignment. Moreover, as a large and growing power, India is no longer in a position – even if it ever was – to subordinate itself to a larger alliance or collective entity. Instead, it needs to forge its own destiny. Thankfully, there is in India today a new confidence and willingness to do so.

SETTING THE CONTEXT: AREAS OF VULNERABILITY

To understand India's foreign policy context, one must understand the major vulnerabilities it faces – more, perhaps, than any other large country. For one, it has unsettled borders with two important, nuclear-armed neighbours, creating complications along boundaries that span 3,700 kilometres. While it has managed so far to avoid serious conflict, this is a constant pressure point. The net result is that despite various agreements and confidence-

building measures, India has had no option but to raise, at enormous cost, two extra mountain divisions and one brigade division, and to position jet fighters close to the Tibet border. Meanwhile, Pakistan's continued claims on Kashmir, and its close collaboration with China, including on the USD 46 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is a



source of tension. China's position in this regard – undertaking a massive economic project in disputed territory – is entirely contrary to its approach to Arunachal Pradesh, where it protests even the hint of ADB or World Bank funding for infrastructure. Moreover, given how unstable and terror-hit Pakistan is, there is no other way to view the CPEC but as a project with huge geopolitical implications, and which will further China's hegemonic ambitions, potentially at India's cost. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would, for the first time in history, allow a single power to potentially dominate both the Asian land mass and the Indian Ocean, and it is CPEC that will serve as its connecting point.

Another major vulnerability is India's dependence on arms imports.

Protecting India's interests will be about being friends with as many countries as possible, and to the extent possible



Being the world's largest or second-largest importer of weapons is not a matter of pride, but ignominy, given the challenges India faces, and the fact that without a strong industrial defence base, it can never have a truly independent foreign policy. At the same time, the country's energy dependence – over 70 per cent of its oil and gas, rising in the next few

years to 80 per cent, is imported – is a constraint, forcing India to ensure stable bilateral relations with oil-exporting countries, and to also work towards their internal stability. At a more general level, the larger issue of terrorism affects India. Islamic State has been countered for now, but its ideology persists. India has, for years, been a major victim of terror, and the rise of extremism all the way from Morocco to Pakistan is a serious threat. In this respect, the policies of Western countries, especially the US, continue to ignite fires. (The decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital, for instance, will have a backlash that will spread through the Islamic world, and is ill advised at a time of such instability.) Finally, India has neighbours who have grown used to playing the external card – and



especially the China card – against it. In Nepal, China has built a strong presence on the ground, while Bangladesh procures all its defence equipment from the Chinese. Sri Lanka has become a hub for the Maritime Silk Route, and is clearly trying to achieve the best of both worlds. The Maldives, meanwhile, has signed an FTA with China quite out of the blue, and this will have wider repercussions.

GUARDING INDIA'S INTERESTS: BALANCING A COMPLEX WEB OF RELATIONSHIPS

In this context and very simply put, the best way to protect India's interests is to be friends with as many countries as possible, to the extent possible. It has drawn much closer to the US, especially on defence, building a relationship of mutual trust that has been tested over a long period. America has a history of imposing sanctions, including on India, and is prone to lobbying, but there is sufficient strategic convergence for the relationship to continue to strengthen and deepen. India has also grown closer to Japan, underpinned by a shift in military thinking, as well as economic and technological considerations. For a time, India resisted including Japan in its Malabar naval exercise, uncomfortable with the idea that this would move it towards a US-led alliance. Today, however, the trilateral dialogue has moved ahead considerably, including on a political level. Australia, too, is getting roped in, for now at the Foreign Secretary level. China's rise is the common concern for these four countries, and the attempt is to signal that any overtly aggressive policies will be challenged. Hopefully, this will place some restraint on the Middle Kingdom.

At the same time, India has managed, despite deteriorating relations with both countries, to deepen its dialogue with Russia and China. It also participates in BRICS and in the Shanghai

Unlike in the past, the NDA is standing up to China, but there is broad continuity in terms of the relationship with America and Japan



Cooperation Organisation (SCO). In some ways, these platforms allow India greater room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis the US. On the other hand, relations have improved beyond recognition with the Gulf countries, and especially the UAE. (The joint statement issued after PM Modi's visit there was surprisingly blunt, with a whole paragraph on terrorism that clearly targets Pakistan.) With Saudi Arabia, as well, there is a distinct shift for the better, though India will need to be careful not to get drawn into the ongoing Shia-Sunni struggle in the region. India also continues to maintain strong ties with Iran, despite US sanctions (which impose certain constraints on trade), and is actively involved

in developing the Chabahar Port, which may eventually provide an overland route into Afghanistan. There is, moreover, a new impetus on developing a North-South Corridor linking India to Russia through Iran and Central Asia. In a remarkably deft feat of foreign policy-making, India has managed, while strengthening its ties to the Gulf, to shore up its relations, particularly in defence, with Israel.

SIX KEY RELATIONSHIPS:

China: China's conduct in the South China Sea, particularly its defiance of international law and willingness to intimidate small countries, are signals for India. After all, what China does there, it will do to India as well – something it has already made clear in Doklam, and by making incursions into, and claims over Indian territory. Unlike with previous governments, though, the NDA is standing up to China, such as by openly opposing the BRI. Together with Japan and the US, it issued a joint statement highlighting the BRI's lack of transparency, weak adherence to international financial norms, and the issues of impinging on sovereign rights that it raises. This has influenced thinking in Europe, where the EU has also

Foreign Policy Goals – A Checklist for India

- Make the best of the current situation: be more confident in the conduct of foreign policy
- Maximise the US relationship, but don't support America's mistakes (of which there are many)
- Strengthen ties with Europe, especially France
- Stay close to Russia, because the defence and energy relationship is very important; expand the (currently limited) economic relationship. Pursue the North-South Corridor with vigour
- Maintain a position in Afghanistan, and help stabilise the Gulf
- Strengthen the Navy, and focus on India's Eastern Seaboard
- Ramp up connectivity projects in East India
- Keep engaging China, but make sure you don't become economically dependent on it
- Show no anxiety about the dialogue with Pakistan
- Strengthen the cyber-security framework: Digital India will mean greater vulnerability

refused to fully endorse the BRI, citing a lack of reciprocity.

The United States: Looking ahead, the Indo-US relationship will hinge to a great extent on the China factor. Plainly, America sees China as a threat, particularly in the Western Pacific, and wants India to help stem its naval ambitions both there and in the Indian Ocean. Yet, while there is a clear maritime vision, there is no real support for India on the existing land-border issues. The US favours a bilateral solution, but has been silent about Arunachal Pradesh and Doklam, as also about the CPEC and China's presence in Gwadar Port. America wants to bring India into an anti-China naval alliance, but has simultaneously brought China into the 'quad' that is handling the Afghanistan issue. Thus, the US relationship will need to be carefully calibrated, and India will need to be cautious not to either put all its eggs in this one basket, or allow itself to become an instrument of US policies in the 'half-containment' of China. Given the complexity of Sino-US ties, including their deep financial inter-linkages, 'full containment' is not an option. (Further complicating things is the seemingly excellent chemistry between Mr Trump and Mr Xi, someone with whom the US President thinks he can 'do business'.) From a defence technology standpoint, Mr Trump says that India will be treated on par with allies like Europe, but the actual transfers so far have been marginal. For its part, India will have to take care not to allow itself to be treated merely as a market for US F-16 or F-18 fighter jets. On inter-operability issues, too, it will need to tread with caution. In sum, while the bilateral understanding is strong, the US will have to do far more to put some 'meat' into the relationship.

Russia: American policy has pushed Russia into China's arms at India's expense. Earlier if India and Russia would balance China in the trilateral dialogue, today,

There is a mis-perception that India has mismanaged its relationship with its smaller neighbours. In fact, this needs to be a two-way street



as a subordinate power, Russia increasingly sides with China. At the same time, India has to contend with the fact that Russia views its own closer ties with the US with suspicion. The key will be to engage more closely with the Russians, convincing them that neither this, nor the strains with China, is related to them. After all, both sides have invested heavily, over a period of 60 years, in the relationship, and at critical moments, Russia has backed India both militarily, and in terms of diplomatic support in forums like the UN.

Japan: Originally pushed towards India by the common threat of China, Japan has shown that it can be a very good partner, financially, politically, and on technology. Shinzo Abe also has a strong affinity for India. On the flip side, Japan remains the biggest investor in China, and it does have some points of convergence with the BRI. Thus, there may be limits to which it is willing to partner with India, particularly in dealing with China.

Pakistan: There have been ups and downs in the relationship with Pakistan, but arguably, India is today doing the best it can under the circumstances. In plain terms, there is no need to initiate a structured dialogue at this stage, because doing so would mean giving Pakistan a platform to discuss Kashmir. Unless India is willing to make concessions in this regard – which

it clearly should not – there is no point in talking. Further, not only has Pakistan gone back on the Shimla Accord, but it also continues to use terror as an instrument of state policy, and has helped 'mainstream' people like Hafiz Saeed. In any event, it is not that there is no dialogue between the countries – in fact, there is constant communication at the diplomatic level, and, through back channels, between the NSAs.

India's smaller neighbours: There is a false assumption, including in the media and among politicians, that India has mismanaged its relations with its smaller neighbours. To a large degree, it is really circumstances – including a hostile China and Pakistan, and the fact that the smaller countries have played up this card – that may be to blame. Further, it is wrong to believe that it is only the larger country's prerogative to drive the relationship, or that any large country will have 'friendly' or 'stable' relations with smaller countries. (No small country will appreciate the characterisation that it has entered the larger one's 'political orbit'.) The reality is that any large nation – whether America (with Latin America), China (with everyone but Pakistan and perhaps Laos), or Russia (most of its neighbours) – is likely to have problems with its neighbours. To that extent, a country's rise as a regional or a global power is in no way tied to it first 'stabilising' its neighbourhood. India has taken many steps particularly in the recent past to prioritise its relationships with the neighbours. How this plays out in the future is dependent on a host of factors, not all of which can be driven by India. ■

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