Foreign Policy Challenges and Priorities for India

What is the issue?

- The new geo-political developments at the global level poses varied challenges for India.
- In such an unpredictable global environment and with resource constraints, India needs to realign its foreign policy priorities.

What are the new global developments and challenges?

- U.S. President Donald Trump's election and the unpredictability in U.S. policy pronouncements.
- The trade war between the U.S. and China which is becoming a technology war.
- Brexit and the European Union's internal priorities and preoccupations.
- Erosion of U.S.-Russia arms control agreements and the likelihood of a new arms race covering nuclear, space and cyber domains.
- The U.S.'s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and growing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran.
- Besides all these is India's principal foreign policy challenge of dealing with the rise of China.

What is India's redefined neighbourhood?

- As in 2014, in 2019 too Indian PM Modi began his term with a neighbourhood focus, but redefined it.
- In 2014, all South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) leaders had been invited for his swearing-in.
- After the Uri attack in 2016, India's stance affected the convening of the SAARC summit in Islamabad.
- For the second term, leaders from the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries along with Kyrgyzstan was invited.
- This shift highlighted a new neighbourhood emphasis.

Can Pakistan be totally ignored?

- A terrorist attack (Uri) cannot be ruled out and it would definitely attract retaliation.

- But despite good planning there is always the risk of unintended escalation after such attacks.
- E.g. the recent Balakot strike and the downing of an Indian Air Force (IAF) MiG-21
- In the absence of communication channels between India and Pakistan, the U.S., Saudi Arabia and the UAE played a role in this regard.
- They ensured the quick release of the IAF pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, thereby defusing the situation.
- Clearly, the turn of events suggests that it would be better to have some kind of dialogue with Pakistan than outsourcing crisis management to external players.
- In other words, it is not a wise option for India to ignore Pakistan altogether.

What should India's priorities be?

- Translating India's natural weight in the region into influence was easier in a pre-globalised world and before China's assertiveness.
- But today, the process is more complex.
- Relations with countries in India's periphery will always be complex and need calculated political management.
- This is irrespective of how India defines its neighbourhood.
- Given all, it is preferable to work on the basis of generating broad-based consent rather than dominance.
- This necessitates using multi-pronged diplomatic efforts and being generous as the larger economy.
- India also needs a more confident and coordinated approach in handling neighbourhood organisations including –
    i. SAARC
    ii. BIMSTEC
    iii. the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation
    iv. the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative
    v. the Indian Ocean Rim Association
- This strategy should preferably be in tandem with bilateralism, as India's bilateral relations comes with significant advantages.

How can China be managed?

- India largely followed the old policy since the Rajiv Gandhi period, in the context of relations with China.
- This largely focusses on growing economic, commercial and cultural relations.
- On the other hand, differences on the boundary dispute are dealt through dialogue and confidence-building measures.

- It was believed that such measures would create a more conducive environment for eventual negotiations.
- The underlying assumption was that with time, India would be better placed to secure a satisfactory outcome.
- But apparently, the reality has proved otherwise and the gap between the two country was widening.
- This was evident in the Doklam stand-off where the assumption behind the policy followed for 3 decades could no longer be sustained.
- The informal summit in Wuhan seemed to have restored calm but did not address the long-term implications of the growing gap.
- Meanwhile, there is the growing strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China.
- India no longer have the luxury of distance to be non-aligned.
- At the same time, the U.S. is an inconsistent partner and never has it been more unpredictable than at present.
- Given these, how India manages its relations with the U.S. will be closely watched by China and Russia.

What lies before India?

- The harsh reality is that India lacks the ability to shape events around it on account of resource limitations.
- So, employing external balancing to create a conducive regional environment will also require building a new domestic consensus.
- The new challenges require domestic decisions in terms of expanding the foreign policy establishment.
- India needs to ensure far more coordination among the different ministries and agencies than has been the case so far.
- The focus on the neighbourhood and shaping events here is certainly desirable for India to look beyond.
- However, the fact that China too is part of the neighbourhood add to India's foreign policy challenges.

Source: The Hindu

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