India’s Foreign Policy 2021: From Selective to Universal Engagement

Why in news?

Though the COVID-19 situation was not compatible for travel, high-level meetings on sensitive matters and protocol, the remarkable hyper activism of Indian foreign policy will be the legacy of 2021.

What were the reasons for the increased activism in the Indian diplomacy?

- Geopolitics has turned upside down by the pandemic (Taliban takeover in Afghanistan)
- Periodical elections brought new main characters to the centre stage (The change from President Donald Trump to President Joe Biden and the consequent changes in U.S. policy)
- The volatility of the economic and political changes across the world (India suddenly became the epicentre of the tragedy which gave it the honor of being the pharmacy of the world)

What were the priorities in 2021?

- **Chinese aggression-** The biggest preoccupation of 2021 was the effort to get China to disengage in areas in Ladakh.
- Dialogue, military preparedness and economic pressure met with limited success.
- **Afghanistan crisis**- Afghanistan crisis became forefront with the Taliban’s takeover in Kabul.
- Bringing some civility to the Taliban in Kabul became a high priority in the face of a Pakistan-China-Taliban axis with some support from Russia and Iran.
- Priority was given to Afghanistan and anti-terrorism rather than Chinese expansionism.
- **Climate change**- India threatened to stand out of the line on the matter of net-zero emission target years, but was put into pressure to commit more on promoting renewable energy and phasing down of coal.
- **United Nations reform**- India gave particular importance to its presidency of the UN Security Council in August 2021 which was chaired by the Prime Minister.
- Regarding UN reforms, India’s focus is on the expansion of the Security Council.
- **Democracy-** The charges of India being only a part-democracy also demanded attention but the Prime Minister asserted that India is the “mother of democracy”.
- **Myanmar issue-** The Foreign Secretary’s visit to Myanmar to engage the military junta at a time when Aung San Suu Kyi and other opposition leaders are in prison expressed India’s readiness to engage those in power to explore possibilities of friendship and co-operation.
- The intention is to prevent China from having a field day in Myanmar.

What made Indian diplomacy hectic during 2021?

- In 2021, Indian diplomacy was characterised by a readiness to deal with friends and foes alike.
- From selective alignment, India moved to universal engagement, even to the extent of

convening meetings with antagonists.

- Engagements with the U.S. went beyond familiarisation with increased commitment to **Quad** and acceptance of **AUKUS** and formation of the '**Western Quad**', with the U.S., Israel and the UAE.
- The engagement with China at the level of commanders and diplomats was intense, and ministerial interaction continued even when China tore up many fundamental agreements.
- Major agreements were signed with Russia, despite the American threat of **CAATSA** against S-400 missiles.
- India attended a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting and a meeting of Russia, China and India which demanded high-level personal involvement at the senior levels.
- Because of the unique geopolitical situation, India gave particular importance to its presidency of the UN Security Council in August 2021.
- In UNSC, India brought global issues of particular importance to the agenda of the month and significant inputs were provided during discussions on issues like maritime security, peacekeeping and anti-terrorism for active consideration in the future.

What were the major challenges?

- **China's case-** The extraordinary efforts made by India have not been fruitful in the case of China.
- China has not shown willingness to disengage in Ladakh and withdraw to the previous positions behind the Line of Actual Control.
- President Xi Jinping cannot afford to show any sign of weakness in his external and internal policies at this critical time.
- **Afghanistan's case**- The stubbornness of the Taliban and its tendency to endanger its own people for the purity of faith has been the concern.
- The international community is already moving in the direction of rescuing the regime by providing humanitarian assistance even without any change in the repressive regime.
- India has a formidable challenge in Afghanistan, regardless of its open and universal engagement with all.

Reference

1. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/from-selective-to-universal-engagement/article38094454.ece

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