India's Foreign Policy Challenges

What is the issue?

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Beyond the domestic issues, India faces the same challenges as before in its relations with the rest of the world, which need attention.

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What are the key areas of India’s foreign policy?

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- **India and China** - The Asian superpower - China's - economic and geostrategic ambitions will continue to shape India’s responses.
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- It may influence everything from India's relations with the neighbourhood to the US and Russia in the West and ASEAN and Japan in the East.
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- Despite the Wuhan meeting and the cooling of Doklam standoff's tensions, many differences remain, but new opportunities too.
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- China is now keen to build bridges in the region and elsewhere, given its pressure of economic slowdown along with the US trade war against it.
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- There is now a need for a new arrangement to replace the strategic framework formulated in 1988 during Rajiv Gandhi’s visit.
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- It served both countries well for three decades but is now under strain.
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- The new framework should have -
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i. respect for each other’s core interests
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ii. new areas of cooperation like counter-terrorism and maritime security and crisis management

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iii. a clearer understanding of each other’s sensitivities
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iv. settling or at least managing differences
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v. a strategic dialogue about actions on the international stage
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- **India and Pakistan** - The rhetoric, especially on the Indian side, is becoming increasingly communal.
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- So the bilateral engagement is likely to remain trapped by the need for the countries to be alive to the domestic audiences' demands.
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- India is still doubtful of the Kartarpur corridor decision, with concerns on secessionism in Punjab.
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- There may be more small gestures to keep a minimum engagement going.
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- But there is less likely to be a thaw in India - Pakistan relations for the foreseeable future.
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- Agreeing to maintain the ceasefire on the LoC would be the easiest way to restore some calm.
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- Also, India’s insecurities from the consolidation of China-Pakistan economic and security ties through the CPEC (China-Pak Economic Corridor) need focus.
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- **India and the Taliban** - The US's recent pull out of troops from Afghanistan, has caught President Ashraf Ghani off guard.
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- It furthered the impression that the Trump administration was desperate to make concessions to the Taliban.
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- Iran and Russia too, which consider themselves stakeholders, are likely to be concerned about this.
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- Russia has tried to keep India in the frame through New Delhi’s “non-official” participation in the Moscow process, but the future of that process is uncertain. Click here to know more.
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- The challenge would be for India to stay relevant in Afghanistan, with the

recent developments in Taliban issue.
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- **Neighbours** - India is driven by the vision of itself as the self-declared “regional superpower”.
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- But this is being undermined by the smaller countries in South Asia.
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- They are deciding to leverage China’s ambitions in the region, particularly the Indian Ocean, to their own advantage.
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- India has tried to fight China's expansion by backing those political parties and leaders in these countries whom it sees as being more “pro-New Delhi”.
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- E.g. as in Sri Lanka and the Maldives
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- However, as New Delhi has realised, even pro-India leaders in these countries do not like to take India's domination.
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- In Nepal, India's promises to speed up long-pending projects have not yet succeeded in reversing the damage done by the 2015-16 economic blockade in support of the Madhesis.
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- Bhutan too does not want more development assistance from India.
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- It wants more trade and investment for employment, and to wean away the country from its singular dependence on hydropower exports to India.
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- Much of India’s problems in the neighbourhood have arisen from viewing these countries through a security prism in which China looms large.
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- The key for India in the future will be to discover how to make and remain friends with these countries.
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- **India and Trump’s US** - India has found much to celebrate in the Trump administration.
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- His open stand against Pakistan for doing nothing to rein in terrorist groups is a welcome thing for India.
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- Signalling the growing strategic convergence, the two countries signed COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) recently.
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- This is to facilitate interoperability between their militaries, and sale of high-

end technology.
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- Trump also hailed India as a key player in a free and open “Indo-Pacific” over the China-dominant Asia-Pacific.
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- However, on the downside is -
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i. US protectionism on the trade front
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ii. US visa rules hurting Indian professionals
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iii. US's collision course with Iran impacting India’s oil purchases
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- Iran's issue could also adversely affect the operability of Chabahar port which India has built as an alternative route to trade with Afghanistan.
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- Also, concerns with India’s purchase of the S-400 air shield system from Russia that could attract US sanctions remain.
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- For Indian foreign policy, the challenge would be to keep pace with the rapid changes everywhere amid the political fluidity at home.
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Source: The Indian Express

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