Playing on Geopolitical Chessboards

Foreign Policy

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- The **BRICS-BIMSTEC** meeting in Goa this month, that immediately followed the annual India-Russia Summit (also in Goa), during which India pursued a robust, even aggressive, foreign policy.
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- Given the several changes in direction — and departures from past policies and practices — taking place, there is perhaps scope to debate whether this amounts to a redefining of India's foreign policy.
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- Hence, giving a new direction to the country's foreign policy demands careful consideration and assessment of all relevant aspects.
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- **Systemic, national and decision-making factors must determine foreign policy choices**. Maintaining coherence and balance is also a vital aspect.
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- It would seem, however, that this kind of exercise has yet to be undertaken, even as shifts in policy have been effected.
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- Multilateral fora have today become indispensable to the conduct of international diplomacy.
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India - NAM

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- With non-alignment giving way to **strategic alignment**, organisations such as NAM may seem outdated. But it still resonates with many Third World countries.
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- It also offers an alternative platform for putting forward a different

viewpoint. It would, hence, be premature to pronounce the death of NAM.
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- The Indian Prime Minister's decision to skip the NAM Summit in Venezuela may well hasten its end, but does not take away from the fact that NAM still has some relevance and India could still utilise NAM to counter newer challenges such as China's not **so 'peaceful rise'.**
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India- SAARC

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- India is the most important country in South Asia, and India was the progenitor of the idea of a primarily economic grouping of countries of South Asia.
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- Admittedly, SAARC has been on **'life-support'** for much of the period, but had begun to display a new vigour and dynamism recently.
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- India had also shown a willingness to adopt an asymmetrical and non-reciprocal approach towards other SAARC members which had gone down well with these countries.
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- To undermine SAARC due to the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan may well be an instance of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'.
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BIMSTEC, BCIM vs SAARC

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- Propping up bodies such as BIMSTEC and BCIM in place of SAARC is hardly the answer, and could even prove counterproductive.
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- The China factor is all too predominant here, with almost every country (other than India) under China's influence, having been **wooed with financial and other inducements.**
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- China is hoping to further consolidate its position through its One Belt,

One Road initiative which has been warmly welcomed by all these countries, the sole exception again being India.
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Changing ties

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- Undoubtedly, India’s foreign policy has to evolve in keeping with the changes and shifts taking place across the globe. Permanence in relations, and consistency in alignments, is not a signal virtue in the world of the 21st century.
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- For instance, **India-U.S. relations today are at an all-time high**. This was hardly the case a decade and a half ago. On the other hand, the ‘all weather’ India-Russia relationship is today nowhere at the same level as it was even a few years back.
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- India may be only partly to blame for this, as **Russia has been looking at diversifying its options for some time.** It had moved closer to China and has achieved a degree of strategic congruence to counter U.S. moves in Asia.
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- The China, Russia and India triangle thus heralds a situation where two sides, China and Russia, have grown much closer to each other, with India in danger of losing out in this process.
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- The **China-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination, as also the recent Russia-Pakistan military exercises,** even though on a limited scale and a subtext of this, only demonstrate the growing strategic ambiguity in our neighbourhood and in Asia as a whole.
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China's March

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- China’s ‘not so peaceful rise’, alongside its growing economic and military muscle, its growing strategic congruence with Russia, and a further tightening of its links with Pakistan pose a pre-eminent challenge for India

in the competition of influence in the region and beyond.
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- It may have other graver implications as well. The One Belt, One Road initiative and the new Maritime Silk Route/Road also have the potential to negatively impact India and Indian initiatives in Asia.
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Way Ahead

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- As India aspires to become a leading power, these are real matters for contemplation and action.
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- It would be a mistake if India were to waste away its energies by viewing regional and world developments through a **very narrow prism, viz., terrorism.**
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- There are far bigger and larger issues at stake that demand attention. Most important would be highlighting India's capabilities to accelerate economic growth during a period which marks the demise of globalisation.
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- India could also bring to the attention of the rest of the world its tremendous **'human assets'** that can power the country as the world transits to an incredible future, viz., the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
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