Reframing India's Foreign Policy Priorities

What is the issue?

With new developments likely in international relations for 2021, here is a look at its dimensions and relevance for India.

What are the recent developments in international relations?

- Leadership change in the United States is perhaps the most awaited change.
- But it is unlikely to bring about a major power shift in the international arena.
- Even before the changeover, and despite the promise of a Biden presidency to invigorate the U.S.-Europe axis, Europe has only revived its China links.
- It has concluded in principle the negotiations for an EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.
    - This is an indication that Europe values its economy more than its politics.
- Many countries are likely to seek closer economic relations with China now. This would be a challenging aspect in India's relations.
- Major changes are afoot in Eurasia and West Asia which could lead to significant shifts.
- Russia is beginning to display greater interest in the affairs of countries on its periphery.
    - Together with strengthening ties with China and reaching an entente with Turkey, this seems to signal reduced interest in countries such as India.
- In West Asia, the Abraham Accords, leading to a realignment of forces in the Arab world, have sharpened the division between the Saudi Bloc and Iran-Turkey.
- The situation has not reduced the risk of a confrontation between Iran and Israel. This poses problems for India, since both have relations with it.
- Meanwhile, China demonstrates a willingness to play a much larger role in the region, with plans for a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with Iran.
- Saudi Arabia could find 2021 challenging, with a Biden Administration taking charge in Washington.

What does a stronger China signify?

- China is the only major country which had a positive rate of growth at the end of 2020.
- Its economy is poised to grow even faster in 2021.
- Militarily, China has further strengthened itself. It now seeks to dominate the Indo-Pacific Ocean with its announcement of the launch of its third aircraft carrier in 2021.
- Simultaneously, it is seeking to strengthen its military coordination with Russia.
- In effect, China's position across Asia is, if anything, stronger than in 2020.
- India cannot expect any Chinese concessions in Eastern Ladakh, until India 'makes amends'.

Is India isolated?

- As far as the above developments are concerned, at the start of 2021, India seems to be isolated.
- No breakthrough in Sino-Indian relations has, or is likely to occur, and the confrontation between the armed forces is expected to continue.
- India currently plays no significant role in West Asia. India-Iran relations today lack warmth.
- In Afghanistan, India has been marginalised as far as the peace process is concerned.
- India's charges against Pakistan of sponsoring terror have had some impact globally.
- But it has further aggravated tensions between the two neighbours.
- In the process, this also helped Pakistan to cement its relations with China.
- While hostility between India and Nepal appears to have reduced lately, relations continue to be strained.
- In all, as India-China relations deteriorate, India's neighbours are not averse to taking sides, increasing India's isolation.
    - India's foreign policy objectives are to widen its sphere of influence, enhance its role across nations.
    - It strives to make its presence felt as an emerging power in an increasingly disruptive global system.
    - But India's voice and counsel are seldom sought, or listened to at present due to some changing perceptions.

What are the changing perceptions?

- Indian diplomats conduct their activities with a high degree of competence, but they are possibly hampered by other factors.
- The kind of policy choices India has adopted in the recent period has possibly altered the perception of India in certain quarters.

    - E.g. India's closeness to the U.S. has resulted in the weakening of its links with traditional friends such as Russia and Iran
- There is possibly a shift in balance of power in the region in which India is situated.
    - The rise of China, and the enlarging conflict between the two biggest powers in Asia, compels many nations to pick sides in the conflict.
- A less obvious, but perhaps more relevant aspect, could also be that India's foreign policy suffers from an ideational vacuum.
- It is not the sharp decline in the economy, problems caused on account of the pandemic, or the growing polarisation in values across nations and societies.
- It is instead more due to India's inability or failure in the ideational realm that lies at the root of our foreign policy inadequacies.

Where all has India missed?

- Currently, India remains isolated from two important supranational bodies of which it used to be a founding member.
    - These are the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
- Efforts to strengthen newer institutions such as the BIMSTEC have hardly been successful.
- India has opted out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (a majority of Asian countries are members).
- It has also failed to take advantage of the RIC (Russia, India and China grouping) even as relations with Russia and China have deteriorated.
- On the other hand, India's foreign policy imperatives, across Asia and South Asia in particular, seem to be a mixture of misplaced confidence -
    - excessive confidence (as in the case of Nepal)
    - a lack of understanding of the sensitivities of neighbours such as Bangladesh and long-time friends (such as Vietnam and Iran)
    - according excessive importance to the policy needs and pressures of nations such as the U.S

What is the way forward?

- India will serve as the president of the powerful UN Security Council for the month of August 2021.
- If it is to make a real impact, it must be seen to possess substantial weight to shape policies, more so in its traditional areas of influence.
- As part of the ideational restructuring of India's foreign policy, apart from competent statecraft, India urgently needs –
    i. adoption of prudent policies
    ii. pursuit of realistically achievable objectives

iii. a demonstration of continuity of policy, irrespective of changes in the nature of the Administration

- These may be time consuming, but are a surer recipe for success in attaining foreign policy objectives.

Source: The Hindu

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