



❖ India's Foreign Policy - Determinants, Issues and Challenges

India's foreign policy is shaped by five broad factors viz. geography; strategic culture; India's requirements and goals; global and regional challenges; and resources.

➤ Geography

"India" is the English name of "Hindustan," or the abode of the Hindus, so called by invaders for whom 'Hindus' were the people living beyond the first major natural barrier, the river Sindhu or Indus. Blessed with abundant water, sunshine and fertile land, protected by the seas to the south, virtually impassable mountain ranges to the north, thick forests to the east and deserts to the west, India was a self-contained, self-satisfied and rich civilization (sonay ki chidiya) stretching from Punjab and Sindh to the Himalayas, Bengal and the shores of the ocean. India was never an aggressive power since it had nothing to gain by making forays beyond its natural frontiers. Trade and cultural contacts across the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea were mostly peaceful interactions. The only threats and invasions India periodically faced were from marauders from the northwest.

Thus, Indians developed a defensive mindset. They did not craft a strategy to tackle foreign threats. The limited problems of diplomacy and statecraft involved ambitious feuding rulers within the Indian sub-continent. India did not have clearly defined borders. Rather, it had frontier zones – in the northwest, the Himalayas and the northeast. These were left alone, as long as they did not threaten the security of the heartland. Invariably, these zones had as extensive contacts with India as with areas on the other side viz. Afghanistan, Tibet and Burma.

In today's world, India's geography poses three principal foreign policy challenges. One, whereas the modern Indian state requires fixed, determinable borders, the inhabitants of these amorphous frontier zones have traditionally had, and do indeed need, flexible borders. Trying to demarcate a historically non-existent border gives rise to border disputes as, for example, with China. Two, today's political borders of South Asia are artificial. India has been divided in the past, but never so irrationally as it has been since 1947. India's neighbours want to keep their distance from India in order to assert and preserve their sovereignty. Thus they deliberately downplay their interdependence, complementarities and commonalities with India. At the same time, they can ignore neither the tugs of a shared history and culture, nor the compulsions of intertwined economic and social ties. Three, India is boxed in – by Pakistan on the west and Bangladesh on the east. Without their cooperation, India cannot meaningfully extend its overland reach and influence.

At the same time, India is very strategically located in the heart of Asia and dominates the Indian Ocean, which is named after India. It was from India (which the British regarded as 'the jewel in the crown') that the mighty British Empire controlled the whole of Asia. East Africa, the Arab world, Central Asia and Southeast Asia are all within easy reach of India. The main sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean pass very close to India. The Persian Gulf, which is the principal source of exportable global oil and gas, is India's neighbour. Unfortunately, terrorism, fundamentalism, piracy and narcotics production are rampant in areas that surround India.

➤ Strategic Culture

India's strategic culture has been shaped by its history, philosophy and traditions. Centuries of peace and prosperity made Indians complacent and arrogant. India stagnated and ossified. That is why it could be so easily conquered by invaders, both by land and by sea, in the second millennium. Unable to repel these attacks, India's tolerant Hindu rulers typically worked out prudent compromises with invaders. These invaders, as well as their retinue of administrators, traders, men of letters, artisans and



others were assimilated within India's fold and over time became stakeholders in a peaceful, prosperous and pluralistic India.

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, moral behaviour and Satyagraha was rooted in India's moral, ethical and philosophical traditions such as the Vedas, the Ramayana, Mahabharata as well as the teachings of Lord Buddha. Gandhiji's own experiences in South Africa contributed to his understanding that India's freedom was linked to that of other Asian and African colonies. In turn, Gandhiji's thinking influenced Jawaharlal Nehru. Therefore, it is not surprising that the defining characteristics of India's foreign policy in the first few decades after Independence were non-alignment, anti-colonialism, anti-racialism, non-violence, disarmament, and peacemaking.

India indulged in moralistic posturing, and had an air of self-importance and self-righteousness as it strutted on the world stage with lofty statements that did not match its real strength. Multilateral diplomacy acquired an aura beyond its real importance. Indian diplomats became experts in trying to work out compromise positions than to playing hardball to preserve and promote India's national interests. More attention was given to elegant formulations on paper than to the substantive outcome of negotiations. Such attitudes lasted for many decades after Nehru too. It is only under Prime Minister Modi that this deeply ingrained attitude has begun to change. India's foreign policy today is not hobbled by ideology or sentimentalism. India is seeking friends and partners, though not as a supplicant, or as a weak country that can be manipulated.

➤ Requirements and Goals

The primary task of India's foreign policy is to ensure the country's security and territorial integrity, and a peaceful external environment for India. This means having good relations with foreign countries. Foreign policy is not an elitist, esoteric activity that is conceived and executed in a separate silo, disconnected from what's happening within India. It is an integral and critical element of an overall strategy to serve national goals and priorities including social and economic development, and defence preparedness.

That is why today there is greater emphasis on the economic component of India's foreign policy. Globalization and the digital revolution have made trade and other economic interaction, including movement of capital and labour across countries, more important for India's development. Economic liberalization has raised the stakes and the influence of businessmen, industrialists and entrepreneurs in foreign affairs. Foreign policy has to promote trade, create jobs (both in India and abroad), bring in needed civilian and defence technologies and promote inward as well as outward investments. It also has to ensure India's energy security, since India depends hugely on imported oil, gas and coal, as well as many other raw materials and natural resources.

Today, an increasing number of Indians, particularly the younger generation – students, professionals, and businessmen – have global interests. Millions of Indians travel abroad for business, education or tourism. An equally large number of Indian citizens and people of Indian origin live and work abroad. Looking after the welfare of all these groups of Indians is a very important task of Indian foreign policy.