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India's New Foreign Strategy

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Introduction:

Most nations and large ones at that do not easily alter their international orientation. States tend to be conservative about foreign policy. Fundamental changes in foreign policy take place only when there is a revolutionary change either at home or in the world. Much as the ascent of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s produced radical changes in Chinese foreign policy, India's relations with the world have seen a fundamental transformation over the last decade and a half. A number of factors were at work in India. The old political and economic order at home had collapsed and externally the end of the Cold War removed all the old benchmarks that guided India's foreign policy. Many of the core beliefs of the old system had to discard and consensus generated on new ones. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the new wave of economic globalization left India scrambling to find new anchors for its conduct of external relations. This paper is examines the origin, dynamics and the implications of India's new foreign policy strategy.

Most Indians agree that its first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had defined a unique foreign policy for India at the very dawn of its independence. Despite many critics of his world view, a broad national consensus had emerged around Nehru's ideas on independent foreign policy, non-alignment, and third world solidarity. Since the 1990s, though, the challenge for the Indian leaders has been to reinterpret Nehru's ideas to suit the new political context that had confronted it. The new Indian leaders could neither denounce Nehru nor formally reject Nehru's ideas, for that would have invited serious political trouble. Yet they had to continually improvise and refashion India's foreign policy to suit the new requirements.

This has not been easy. The tension between the imperative of the new and the resistance of the old ideas on how to conduct foreign policy is real and is unlikely to end in the near future. The fear of the new and fondness for the old continue to be reflected in all aspects of Indian diplomacy from engaging the United States to an optimal strategy towards the smallest of the neighbors. The "new" foreign policy of India is indeed work in progress. Yet it is not difficult to see that the direction of Indian diplomacy has changed substantially since the end of the cold war amidst internal and external impulses.

Structural Changes in India's World View

Underlying India's current foreign policy strategy are a set of important transitions in India's world view. Not all of these were articulated self-consciously or clearly by the Indian political leadership. A few of those changes stand out and are unlikely to be reversed. The first was the transition from the national consensus on building a "socialist society" to building a "modern capitalist" one. The socialist ideal, with its roots in the national movement, had so dominated the Indian political discourse by the early 1970s, that a Constitutional amendment was passed in 1976 to make the nation into a "socialist republic". But 1991 saw the collapse of the Soviet Union, the veritable symbol of



socialism, and the edifice of India's state-socialism began to crumble. Adapting to the new challenges of globalization now became the principal national objective. The change in the national economic strategy in 1991 inevitably produced abundant new options on the foreign policy front.

Implicit in this was the second transition, from the past emphasis on politics to a new stress on economics in the making of foreign policy. India began to realize in the 1990s how far behind it had fallen the rest of Asia, including China, in economic development. With the socialist strait jacket gone, and the pressures to compete with other emerging markets, Indian diplomacy now entered uncharted waters. In the past, foreign aid was so symbolic of Indian diplomacy that sought to meet the government's external financing requirements as well as developmental needs. India was now seeking foreign direct investment, and access to markets in the developed world.

The slow but successful economic reforms unleashed the potential of the nation, generated rapid economic growth and provided a basis to transform its relations with great powers, regional rivals Pakistan and China, and the neighborhood as a whole. A third transition in Indian foreign policy is about the shift from being a leader of the "Third World" to the recognition of the potential that India could emerge as a great power in its own right. While independent India always had a sense of its own greatness, that never seemed realistic until the Indian economy began to grow rapidly in the 1990s. In the early decades of its independent existence, India viewed many of the international and regional security issues through the prism of the third world and "anti-imperialism". The 1990s, however, brought home some painful truths. There was no real third world trade union, that India believed it was leading. After a radical phase in the 1970s, most developing nations had begun to adopt pragmatic economic policies and sought to integrate with the international market. Much of the developing world had made considerable economic advances, leaving the South Asia way behind. While the rhetoric on the third world remained popular, the policy orientation in India's external relations increasingly focused on India's own self interest. There was a growing perception, flowing from the Chinese example, that if India could sustain high growth rates it had a chance to gain a place at the international high table.

The 1990s also saw India begin discarding the "anti-Western" political impulses that were so dominant in the world view that shaped Indian diplomacy right up to 1991. Rejecting the "anti-Western" mode of thinking was the fourth important transition of Indian foreign policy. As the world's largest democracy, India was the most committed to Western political values outside the Euro-Atlantic world. Yet the Cold War saw India emerge as the most articulate opponent of the Western world view. A strong anti-Western bias crept into Indian foreign policy supported by the left as well as the right and underwritten by the security establishment. The disappearance of the Soviet Union and China's rise as a great power demanded that India to break the decades old anti-Western approaches to foreign policy.

Conclusion :

Finally, the fifth transition in Indian foreign policy in the 1990s was from idealism to realism. Idealism came naturally to the Indian elite that won independence from the British by arguing against colonialism on the basis of first principles of Enlightenment. The new leaders of India had contempt for "power politics". They believed it was a negative but



lingering legacy from 19th century Europe that had no relevance to the new times of the mid 20th century. India tended to see its role in world politics as the harbinger of a new set of principles of peaceful coexistence and multilateralism which if applied properly would transform the world. Although Nehru demonstrated realism on many fronts, especially in India's immediate neighborhood, the public articulation of India's foreign policy had the stamp of idealism all over it. Since the 1990s, India could no longer sustain the presumed idealism of its foreign policy. India had to come to terms with the painful reality that its relative standing in the world had substantially declined during the Cold War. Much like Deng Xiaoping who prescribed pragmatism for China, the Indian leaders began to emphasize practical ways to achieve power and prosperity for India.

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