

Indian Diplomacy in 2009 Watershed or Hyperbole?

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In 2009, India's diplomacy and foreign policy was a mixed bag with equal blend of the positives and the negatives. This essay looks into the major achievements and failures during the last year.

INDIAN DIPLOMACY IN 2009: MAJOR TRENDS

The following sub sections analyse the major trends in the Indian Diplomacy in the year 2009.

Pakistan

2009 began in the backdrop of 26/11 and with the handing over of the 26/11 dossier to Pakistan and the subsequent denial by Pakistan of the evidence presented therein. India did not succumb to Pakistan's doublespeak and kept the diplomatic stance despite clear efforts to provoke India. Lack of transparency in Pakistan's legal process and its internal political instability is delaying the process and this situation is likely to continue as an attempt to divert the attention from the issue. History will judge India's wisdom on the dossier diplomacy; as of now these seem to be the right steps vis-à-vis the terrorism emerging from Pakistan because the dossier diplomacy exposes the hitherto cosy relations between the various state agencies of Pakistan regarding terrorism.

The next big moment was the Sharm-el-Sheikh joint statement between India and Pakistan. The loosely drafted text allowed Pakistan to divert attention from India's concerns to its political advantage and to the diplomatic embarrassment of India. The joint statement generated a lot of heat as Pakistan used the wording of this declaration to embarrass India on the ethnic unrest in Balochistan. The Baloch reference in the declaration was intended to be the recognition of the issue but ended up being used as an evidence of India's recognition of its involvement in the region and for justifying the human rights violations in the region by the

Pakistani armed forces. While the domestic political debate in India about the Declaration was about the diplomatic miscalculations, it must be remembered that Pakistan has got into the habit of using the meetings with India as Public Relations events in order to cry foul about India's intentions and actions.

Other Countries in South Asia

In Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai won the election amidst the allegations of fraud that could have rocked the process and have certainly weakened the democratic process as such. There was another bomb blast outside the Indian Embassy in Kabul in October 2009 that killed 18 innocent Afghan civilians and injured 83 others. Fortunately, the precautionary measures taken after the July 2008 blast saved the Embassy and the Indian diplomatic officials. This blast was clearly against the growing Indian presence in Afghanistan, where India has a dual responsibility of continuing the rehabilitation and strengthening of governance and at the same time of assuring Pakistan that the Indian presence in Afghanistan does not create an existential threat for Pakistan. However, India must be equally vocal in arguing that it will not allow Pakistan to view Afghanistan as its strategic backyard to the detriment of the Indian interest. The roots of all this, of course, lie in the issue of the civil military relations inside the Pakistani state.

In Sri Lanka, the Rajapaksa government wiped out the LTTE in a bloody conflict, which India watched closely and, equally importantly, silently. This issue seemed to surface in Tamil Nadu during the electoral process but did not prove to be a dominating factor. India's offer of a rehabilitation package and various bilateral visits seemed to drive home India's concern. India should further encourage the rebuilding of the war torn areas and help in the rehabilitation of the ethnic Tamil population without dictating the political processes. The recent developments though should worry India. The rift between the Rajapaksa brothers and

the former Army Chief General Sarath Fonseka does not augur well for the peace process as more and more evidence regarding the war crimes comes to the light.

United States

As the first state guest of President Obama, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh highlighted India's importance for the United States as a rising power. India is situated between the US partner in the War on Terror on one hand and its economic partner and biggest competitor on the other. India took time to understand the foreign policy shift under Obama and there are enough sceptics to his ideas inside India.

India has to work even closer with Obama than with his predecessor; first to build the trust, which seems have been done by now and second to play a meaningful role in Afghanistan, as Obama plans to withdraw the American troops in the years to come. When the Obama-Wen joint statement mentioned the assurance towards the increasing role of China in South Asia, it had rattled a few minds in New Delhi's diplomatic circle. India's engagement with Obama must aim to assert India's strategic space in South Asia and ensure that India does not become a pawn in the great US-China game until India develops decisive capacity as an independent player.

China

China remained the major focus for India for its alleged acts of intrusions across the disputed border and its other activities that were against India's national interests like protesting against the Asian Development Bank's loan for projects in Arunachal Pradesh. Another irritant was the visa case for the residents of Jammu and Kashmir and the plans to divert the Yarlung Tsangpo. There seems to be some consensus that China's growing strategic confidence seems to have given it more reasons to prick the Indian leadership and test its reactions for such provocations. While India raised its concerns in the appropriate channels and rebuked on a couple of occasions, such instances should also be analysed in retrospect to check

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inter-institutional coordination inside the country and ensure that no loose ends exist. In the future, India will have to engage more with China in order to raise the stakes for such acts.

China objected to Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang, for it feared that this trip, taking place in the backdrop of the ethnic riots in Xinjiang, could be used to promote similar activities inside Tibet. New Delhi allowed the Dalai Lama to undertake this trip without relenting under the Chinese pressure. Even if there are reasons to argue that the trip was undertaken at the behest of the United States, India used the moment to project its religious diversity and tolerance vis-à-vis China. The embarrassing moment was in not allowing the media to cover the event after accepting its applications for permits for visiting the region.

India understands that its interests in China are contradictory. It views the China rise phenomena with caution but enjoys China's company in raising the ante in the international forums. The Brazil Russia India China (BRIC) Summit in Yekaterinburg and the Brazil, South Africa, India, China (BASIC) group in the Copenhagen summit are the examples of the positive trends in the India-China relations. Interest based multilateralism where contradictory interests can come together on the basis of particular concerns can take India's interests forward in a much better manner than bilateral negotiations. This trend is likely to continue at various levels as one will see the expansion of parallel multilateral dialogues in the days to come.

Climate Negotiations

While there are many trying to project the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen as India's entry to the big league, the larger picture remains somewhat different. The worrying factor is that India will have to start from scratch to regain the confidence of the G 77. There is no reason to celebrate the 'success' of Copenhagen accord as the Copenhagen process is the potential burial of the Kyoto Protocol by the admission of the Prime Minister's envoy himself. If India has to enter the big league by leaving aside its trusted allies in G77 then its rise to power status is nearly meaningless. What would power, after all be, if there are no supporters for the ideas about the world order emerging from India?

Defence Policy

India launched its first nuclear powered and nuclear capable submarine, Arihant, in 2009. Arihant completes India's nuclear triad with the possession of land based, airborne and sea based delivery systems and gives strength to India's no

first use doctrine as far as nuclear weapons are concerned. Similar developments in space technology give India a competitive advantage as far as national security is concerned. The major achievement was the launching of RISAT II for improved reconnaissance capabilities, useful in halting the cross border infiltration and proving it in an undeniable manner. The Chandrayan mission put India in the elite league of countries having conducted similar missions. It also showcased the success of joint space programs, which are going to increase in the days to come. The next big step of India's space policy in 2010 is expected to be the use of indigenously developed Cryogenic Engine in the upcoming Geosynchronous Launch Vehicle (GSLV) launch. Importantly, the successful launch of cryogenic engine based GLSV would also showcase India's progress from the early 1990s as it is the bedrock of India's claim to a power status.

II PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: A NEW BEGINNING?

India used public diplomacy effectively throughout 2009. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh used the meeting with Pakistani President Zardari, first after 26/11, on the sidelines of SCO Summit in Yekaterinburg to drive home his concerns. On another occasion, he spoke of the sustainability of the Indian way of development as being inclusive, tolerant and plural in a clear reference to China. It's timing, after Obama recognised the Chinese role in South Asia, was equally important.

Moreover, through the year, the use of the social networking portal, Twitter, by one of the ministers in the government, attracted a mixed reaction. While some of his messages were quite offensive, the use of electronic media as the means of communication is bound to increase in the days to come. It offers an excellent opportunity for the policymakers to test the waters before implementing the policy. It can also be used against the rigidity of the procedures that ails the functioning of the government itself. This space is bound to get more interesting in the days to come.

III INTERNAL CHALLENGES IMPLICATIONS ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

The general elections in 2009 gave a strong verdict to the UPA with the Congress increasing its share, while smaller and ideologically different parties becoming numerically and politically weaker. As a result, the UPA-II government was expected to be more confident than its predecessor was. However, this did not reflect in any bolder policy shifts. What should worry the

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observers though is the fact that the non democratic left wing forces are gathering momentum inside the country even as the democratic left lost much of its sheen in 2009.

There is also greater domestic pressure on the country's foreign policy posture. It is not just in terms of limiting the scope of the governmental activities because of the domestic pulls like in the earlier era but the domestic developments, economic growth and political processes are pushing for a proactive foreign policy. For example, the anti-Australia sentiments in the wake of the alleged racist attacks against the hapless Indian students. This is a welcome change because it shows that India's domestic economic and social capabilities are guiding India's global leadership ambitions and not the other way round.

III CONCLUSIONS

As the realpolitik around India change and India's interest become multidimensional, it will have to reflect in the diplomacy that is bound to become more complex and multilayered. It is clear the era of the 'bilateral relations' is nearly over. As a rising power, India will have to look for more than immediate interests from the other country when it deals with it. It is already happening in the sense that the Indian proximity to US helps its cause in Pakistan, its relations with the small Indian Ocean states help it look at its larger strategic interests in the region. The danger here is that the other countries, particularly smaller ones, should not be left feeling used for India's interests. On the other hand, India must ensure that no other country is using economic engagements to the detriment of India's strategic interests; China's growing bilateral ties in South Asia for example.

On Pakistan, India finds that it has not been easier to negotiate with the new democratic government because of its weak foundations. The spate of attacks on the Pakistani defence establishment is cause of great concern for India. India will have to watch closely as to how the surge in Afghanistan affects the terrorism and subsequently the regime in Pakistan especially after the recent violence in which two terrorists were killed in Srinagar.

In the future, India must try to strengthen SAARC, especially since Afghanistan's membership allows SAARC to expand its scope of activities. India must use the changed geographical map of the organisation to push for ways that demand India's pre-eminence and to reduce the fears of India's predominance. SAARC can become an important mechanism for addressing and cooperating on the non traditional issues like H1N1 which are going to be critical for the South Asian region in the days to come. Moreover, the member states would find easier to cooperate on the non-traditional security issues than they have been on the traditional security issues. The operationalisation of the SAARC University, expected to take place in 2010, should be a good occasion to reinvigorate the regional process.

2010 should see the flurry of inbound and outbound visits to continue. The most important of those would be President Obama's acceptance of an invitation to visit India in the second half of the year. The tone of that visit will be decided by the developments in the Af-Pak region and the extent to which interests of the two countries converge on it. Progress on the financial crisis and stabilisation of the US economy will be critical for India and India should work towards some important joint development agreements that would be mutually beneficial before the visit. The progress in the Copenhagen process that leads to the next round of negotiations in Mexico City in November-December 2010 will be the outside factor that determines the tone of the Obama visit to India. Before that, the Indian President and External Affairs Minister are slated to undertake separate visits to China after the relations were thawed following the Copenhagen bonhomie. These visits could be crucial in setting the tone of the bilateral relations right given the backdrop of the turbulent 2009. The Delhi Commonwealth Games could be a great occasion to showcase Delhi and India but the picture is far from perfect as of now.

Diplomatically, 2009 was the year of the positives and the negatives. Positives being the strengthening of the India-US relations based on the progress on the India-US Civilian Nuclear Deal under the Obama administration. India's fuel supply agreements with other countries including Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Canada and Namibia were equally important. India's stand on the Sri Lankan war and on the alleged racism in Australia was just as positive. Shram el Sheikh was the highlight of the negative while India's approach to Copenhagen Summit can still be put as one of the grey areas since it can go either way depending on how it is followed up in the days to come. The India-China relationship is a story of contradictions and remains precarious as

such. Afghanistan and Iran are the issues where one feels that it's a story of what could have been.

Looking at a larger picture though, this year should be seen as a benchmark in the Indian Diplomacy because we have seen never before debates over the foreign policy issues. Be it about Sharm el-Sheikh, Australia or Climate Change, one sees the picture of India that is gradually changing and adapting to the different roles that the world demands of it due to India's rise. On the whole, the entire report card of the year gone by appears to be tilting towards the negative and as such reflects the lack of a long term perspective. A negative report card also suggests that more is expected of India in the days to come and the world is watching it very closely.

It needs to be seen how a rising India balances its requirements and responsibilities within the circumstances that are offered from time to time even as it engages with the world on more and more issue areas. A bold and confident diplomatic style will help India in achieving this objective. In that sense, 2009 should and would be looked at as a year of wasted and half-baked opportunities. India will be able to rise in power only if it is able and willing to act in a manner that is paradigm setting.

It is perhaps time that India started taking proactive steps instead of waiting for the appropriate moment to act. In the days to come, India must be willing to carry forth its diplomacy without being apologetic about the shift from its traditional methods and rationales and also without being overtly precautious about the unintended circumstances. One is not advising rash and negligent policy here but a calculated and nuanced shifting of paradigm of the overall policy. India would gain much more by learning from its own mistakes than by playing a wait and watch game. As a rising power, India will have to take this risk as "with great power comes great responsibility!"

Views expressed are author's own.



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