

Beyond Non-alignment: S Jaishankar's Reflections on Indian Foreign Policy

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Summary

A lecture on the evolution of Indian foreign policy by India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, on 14 November 2019 is likely to go down as an important marker in the national and international debate on independent India's international relations. In calling for a serious audit of the nation's foreign policy record, questioning much of the conventional wisdom and emphasising greater risk-taking, Jaishankar provides for a better understanding of the current dynamic shaping Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy, especially Delhi's new self-assurance in engaging the major powers.

Introduction

India's recent decision not to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) highlights an important feature of India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Bold decision-making has marked Modi's departure from the traditional caution and ambivalence that used to be the hallmarks of India's foreign policy. The boldness is not just about style, but has also involves some major decisions of substance. From the military confrontation with China in the Doklam plateau in the eastern Himalayas to the rejection of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and from changing the constitutional status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir to confronting the challenge of cross border terrorism from Pakistan, Modi has chosen to break the mould on foreign policy. Equally important has been Modi's willingness to shed the past hesitations about the United States (US) and the West. Together, these changes underline the surprising evolution of Indian foreign policy since the advent of Modi at India's helm in the summer of 2014. These moves, coupled with more energetic diplomacy, suggest that Modi's tenure could go down as a definitive moment in India's slow but certain emergence as a major power.

While many analysts have attributed an ideological colour to the foreign policy of Modi, few have explained the mindset and intellectual framework behind it. A recent exposition on the subject by a key member of Modi's cabinet, External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, offers important insights into the thinking behind the current foreign policy of Modi. In delivering the [Fifth Ramnath Goenka Memorial Lecture](#) in Delhi on 14 November 2019, Jaishankar laid out the assumptions and approaches behind the foreign policy of Modi. It also involved framing a historical perspective on independent India's engagement with the world as well as a candid reflection on India's successes and failures in the past. This is not quite common in India's diplomatic tradition for either the political leaders or the senior civil servants to speak about the nation's foreign policy and the state of the world in frank or reflective terms. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was the sole exception to this tradition. His successors have largely focused on staying with conventional wisdom of the

day, rarely taking a self-critical look at India's record or try and publicly assess the transformations unfolding in the world. For that reason alone, Jaishankar's speech is an important milestone in the discourse on India's foreign policy.

Equally important is the fact that few others in the present establishment may be as well equipped to speak about India's foreign policy in the manner that Jaishankar did. The External Affairs Minister is widely believed to have the full confidence of Modi. As Ambassador to China from 2009 to 2013, Jaishankar is reported to have had substantive interaction with Modi, who then visited Beijing frequently as the Chief Minister of Gujarat. Then, as the Ambassador to the US in 2014 and 2015, Jaishankar was instrumental in organising Modi's early visit to the US in the fall of 2014, planning the expansive engagement with the diaspora and, above all, ensuring that the Barack Obama administration took a positive view of the new Indian prime minister and lifted the sanctions it had imposed on him in the wake of 2002 riots in Gujarat.

Modi had picked Jaishankar to serve as foreign secretary, who leads the bureaucracy in the external affairs ministry, and is the nation's top diplomat. Modi also gave him a rare three-year tenure as the head of the Foreign Office. Jaishankar was directly associated with most major decisions in the foreign policy domain by the Modi government between 2015 and 2018. It is also believed that, even after his retirement, he was regularly consulted by Modi. After he returned to power with a bigger mandate in May 2019, Modi surprised Delhi and the world in choosing Jaishankar as his external affairs minister.

The Ramnath Goenka Memorial Lecture was the formal address in India by the new foreign minister and, unsurprisingly, attracted widespread attention. While many welcomed it for its emphasis on realism, some scholars argued that it did not go far enough in the direction of [realism](#). Others [questioned](#) many of the assessments of the external affairs minister. However, there is no question that the speech facilitates a discourse on foreign policy that is less metaphysical and based on a concrete framework that an incumbent government puts forward.

Questioning the Dogma

The very title of the lecture, "Beyond the Delhi Dogma: Indian Foreign Policy in a Changing World", underlined the external affairs minister's willingness to go beyond the ordinary. At the very outset of his speech, Jaishankar underlined the importance of recognising that, at the current juncture in world affairs, "many of our long-held assumptions no longer hold true." "If the world is different, we need to think, talk and engage accordingly. Falling back on the past is unlikely to help with the future", Jaishankar insisted. After identifying the many transformations sweeping today's world, Jaishankar argued that "the real obstacle to the rise of India is not anymore the barriers of the world, but the dogmas of Delhi".

He dismissed much of the domestic criticism of Modi's foreign policy by pointing out that "most agents of change encounter the accumulated 'wisdom' of the entrenched, or the passionate argumentation of the polarised". He also pointed to the traditional weaknesses of the Indian foreign policy discourse. "Form and process are often deemed more important

than outcomes". He claimed that his government's diplomatic innovation is "challenging the past practices and static narratives".

In emphasising change, Jaishankar does not forget the importance of continuity. The steady elements of Indian foreign policy, according to Jaishankar, are "a persistent striving to expand space and options. Not an end in itself, foreign policy is the means to ensure greater prosperity at home, peace on the borders, protection of our people and enhancing influence abroad. Obviously, our national strategy to realise even the more constant goals cannot be static in an evolving world. We know that well, having seen the world move from bipolarity to unipolarity and now to multipolarity." The external affairs minister added "changes in strategy also need to cater for greater capabilities, ambitions and responsibilities. And most of all, for changed circumstances. In approaching such a world in transformation, we must recognize that assumptions need to be regularly revisited and calculations frequently revised."

Beyond Non-alignment

While the speech touched on many issues, past and present, in India's foreign policy, this essay focuses on the question of non-alignment that has long defined the Indian foreign policy brand. It was inevitable that Jaishankar had to address the widespread criticism that Modi had broken away from the Nehruvian legacy of non-alignment. Whether one agrees with this criticism or not, there is no question, the biggest single successful transformation has been in India's engagement with the major powers. Equally important has been his determination to shatter the notion that India will never get too close to the US and, more broadly, the West. To be sure, India's relations with the US began to improve under successive governments in the new millennium. However, it was Modi's boldness that ended India's traditional ambivalence towards America. As he told the US Congress in the summer of 2016, India's "historic hesitations" about the US are now over.

Modi has intensified India's defence relationship with the US, supported the American construction of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical theatre and revived the Quad – the four-way engagement with the US, Japan and Australia. There has also been significant improvement in relations with other Western powers such as Britain, France and Germany. Modi also ended India's traditional neglect of the Commonwealth and the European Union. All this amounts to nothing less than a confident re-engagement with the West – not as a junior partner of the West, as Leftist critics allege, but on India's own terms. Nor is it about containing China, as many observers believe.

Even as he takes India close to the West, Modi has insisted on maintaining as close a relationship as possible with Chinese President, Xi Jinping. Delhi has also refused to abandon its old friends in Moscow. The Modi years have also seen a special focus on developing strategic ties with Europe that has remained neglected in Delhi for decades. Stronger partnership with Japan too has become an important element of Modi's foreign policy. In reflecting the cumulative changes in the current phase of India's great power relations, Jaishankar was unwilling to come up with a single phrase to replace the more familiar idea of 'non-alignment'. "While the previous phases of foreign policy each have a neat description, it is harder to categorise the current one. Part of the challenge is that we are

still in the early phase of a major transition. The contours of even the near future are not yet clear.”

Jaishankar presented different alternatives. “One solution is to anchor it on Indian aspirations and to speak of our goal of emerging as a leading power. The problem is that others tend to take it as a statement of arrival rather than a goal on the horizon. Taking off on non-alignment, it is sometimes useful to speak of multi-alignment. It appears more energetic and participative as compared to an earlier posture of abstention or non-involvement. The difficulty is that it also appears opportunistic, whereas India is really seeking strategic convergence rather than tactical convenience. Putting India first may be another way of capturing a strong and pragmatic policy outlook. This suffers from a comparison with other nations who have chosen to be more self-centered. In India’s case, nationalism has in fact led to greater internationalism. Advancing prosperity and influence may be a fair description but is not exactly a catch word. Perhaps we need to accept that a single phrase may elude us for some time in the midst of global uncertainty.”

While there was no new moniker for Indian foreign policy, Jaishankar was clear about the framework. His emphasis was on “recognising that we were now entering a world of convergences and issue-based arrangements”. This, in turn, was reinforced by India’s “growing sense of its own capabilities. What it has brought out is not just the limitations of others, but the expectations the world has of India. That we have emerged among the major economies of the world is one factor, though admittedly the most important.”

The relevance of India’s talent pool to global technology development is another factor identified by Jaishankar. “Our ability to shoulder greater responsibilities at a time when the world is more reticent is also evident.” Jaishankar also underlined India’s new readiness to embrace multilateralism. He pointed to India’s “willingness to shape key global negotiations, such as in Paris on climate change”.

In concluding his tour d’horizon, Jaishankar argued that “India’s diplomatic agenda has broadened considerably, as indeed have its partners in those endeavours. We share with the international community the objective that a multi-polar world should have a multi-polar Asia at its core. And to ensure that, India needs to follow an approach of working with multiple partners on different agendas. Obviously, they would each have their importance and priority.”

The self-awareness, as a rising power, did not also mean, India was about to give up its equities in the so-called developing world or “global South”. Contrary to the widespread impression that India is no longer interested in cultivating the developing world, the foreign minister underlined his government’s “investment of greater resources in development partnerships with countries of the South”.

In the [conversation](#) with this author that followed, Jaishankar expanded on the notion of India as “South Western power”. “You often get asked whether you are a Western power or an Eastern power because they think of their bipolarity as the only criteria in the world to differentiate between countries. The fact is, there may be an east-west criteria, but there is a north-south criteria as well. When you look today at the big international negotiations,

you realise whether it is trade, whether it is climate change, whether sometimes it is just sheer politics, a lot of countries in the south actually look to India.”

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