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## Modi's Foreign Policy: Nuanced Non-Alignment?

By Santosh Sharma Poudel

### Synopsis

India signed a nuclear and defence deal with Russia during the President Putin's recent visit to New Delhi. India also concluded agreements with Japan, the US and China in an important display of its traditional diplomacy undergoing nuanced change under Prime Minister Modi.

### Commentary

SINCE NARENDRA Modi became Prime Minister, India's foreign policy has gathered some pace. His visits to Australia, Japan and the United States brought the relationships with these countries to new heights with several economic and defence agreements. He had visited the three states proposed by a former Japanese prime minister to form an 'arc of freedom' democratic alliance. While the pacts with Australia were mostly socio-economic, the agreements with Japan and the US covered economic and security interests.

Japan pledged economic assistance worth US\$35 billion over five years and culminated with the Tokyo Declaration of India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership by which the two sides agreed to enhance their defence and strategic cooperation. Similarly, PM Modi's visit to the US was a welcome reset in the relations strained by the Devyani Khobragade issue and the reversal on the US ban for Modi for his alleged involvement in Gujarat in 2002. President Obama and PM Modi resolved to broaden their cooperation in various fields including defence, intelligence, and space exploration among others. President Obama was invited to be the Chief Guest for India's Republic Day, symbolising the mutual regard of the oldest democracy and the largest.

### Relations with non-democratic states

Nevertheless India's foreign policy is not confined by the extension of pan-Americanism or democratic values. During Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to New Delhi recently, India and Russia signed important nuclear and defence agreements. PM Modi referred to Russia as the 'most important defence partner'. During the visit, India agreed to purchase 12 Russian-nuclear reactors to address India's energy needs. They also agreed to manufacture advanced Russian military helicopters in India, which showed the close security relations between them, despite American displeasure at the timing of the deal.

The close defence relationship between Russia and India reflects India's reliance on Russia for advanced military weapons for the most part during the Cold War. Even during the recent Crimean crisis, India was one of the first countries that was supportive of Russian annexation of Crimea and 'understood' its position.

Similarly, India attempted to court China as a potential investor and market during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to New Delhi in September. In addition to pledges by China to invest US\$20 billion in India in five years to link the 'world's factory' to the 'world's back office', their talks included civil-nuclear cooperation.

### **India's traditional foreign policy parameter**

India's traditional foreign policy was based on two major pillars: non-alignment and its belief in its potential to be a major power itself. When the Cold War broke out, it led the cause of the non-aligned countries. India brought to the fore both tenets in its foreign policy.

Firstly, India did not want to be 'aligned' to either the then Soviet Union or the US. Secondly, India was willing to lead the non-aligned movement, partly because it believed that it was a major power itself. It took a long time to realise the Indian potential, and only since late 1990s India was seen as a 'potential major power' in the making.

In this context, India has sought to diversify its security relations, to avoid any dependency on a single nation. It signed a civilian nuclear deal with the US in 2008, and expanded its security and defence relations with other democratic countries such as the US and Japan. Similarly, it has maintained strong security links with Russia. Within the context of an assertive and rising China, with which India fought a war over disputed territory, many Indian analysts believed that a democratic alliance of India-Japan-US-Australia would be the way forward.

However India has not considered 'aligning' itself with states holding democratic values. While relations with the democratic countries have improved, this has not come at the cost of relations with China or Russia.

India's recent foreign policy under Modi shows that it continues to possess major elements of its traditional strategy. It still seeks to maintain an independent and sovereign foreign policy devoid of alignment and sees itself as a major-global power. Its foreign policy, however, is no longer guided by socialistic idealism seen in the early years of independence. India has become an aspiring pragmatic state, believing that it is on the way to gaining global status, if it has not already done so.

### **A welcome change**

After being rather passive on the foreign policy front due to various domestic issues, India has finally got a strong government with a charismatic leader in PM Modi. He has pursued foreign policy in a more assertive manner during his short stint, and based his policies on economic pragmatism.

It is also a clear sign that India is not constrained by democratic values or thoughts of alignment. It still has the flavour of its historical guideline but packaged in new ways to meet its challenges ahead.

Those nuanced changes in its external relations reflect India's aspiration to engage all sides based on pragmatism rather than ideology. The growing confidence of India and its willingness to stand on its own also gives more credence to the notion of the 21st century being an Asian century which it will help to shape.

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