

# INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND THE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IT FACES POST COVID-19

*This paper throws light on the concept of Independent India's Foreign Policy, its objectives and the challenges posed by Covid-19 on its bilateral, multilateral and strategic relation vis-a-vis its next door neighbors as well as other nations. It has been witnessed how India has suffered during the pandemic right from economic contraction due to lockdown, supply of medical equipment's, vaccine diplomacy, border (Galwan) issue and non-traditional threats during and post pandemic. This paper further suggests a way forward with which we can partially address and devise a dynamic and global strategy to counter the traditional and non-traditional challenges faced by India's international relations vis-a-vis foreign policy, where "India, that is Bharat" as a largest democracy in the world plays a role of a constructive, result-oriented and a rule abiding nation with a pragmatic and a reformed multilateralism approach.*

## Introduction

It was in August 1947 when India got its Independence from the British Raj and today in 2022 we are celebrating Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav to commemorate 75 years of Independent India in every aspect. During these seven decades, India as an independent nation has encountered different internal and external challenges. However, with the changing scenarios, India's Foreign Policy has also been constantly evolving since its independence right from Panchsheel, NAM, and Anti-colonialism to Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas. It is based on the concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (The World is One Family). The entire world community is a part of one single-family and the members of the family must work and grow together, trust each other and live in peace and harmony. India's foreign policy is outlined by its historical aspects, cultural values and ethos, geopolitics, geoeconomics and strategic components. It is a framework that shapes the perception of a nation to influence its Soft as well as Hard power and a web of political, social, cultural and economic relations between nations via regional, bilateral and multilateral platforms and an in-depth analysis of the symbiotic relationship between international law, security, diplomacy and governance between the nations around the world. The thrust of foreign policy changes with respect to the international situations. As we all are aware of the fact that in an interconnected and globalized world the outcome of an event in one part of the world has both positive and negative impacts on the other parts of the world as well. As recently the entire world has witnessed the global impact of the Russia-Ukraine war be it on the economic or political front. Therefore, the study of foreign policy becomes vital for every nation to understand and delve deep into the national interests of other nations in terms of geopolitics, geoeconomics, historical aspects, society, cultural value systems, and role of state and non-state actors and security.

## Objectives of India's Foreign Policy

**National Interest:** The primary objective of India's Foreign Policy is to secure its national interests. This includes securing India's borders to protect territorial integrity, countering cross-border terrorism, energy, food and cyber security, non-discriminatory global trade practices, infrastructure, protection of the environment, regional stability and international peace. In a globalized world, foreign policy should be flexible and pragmatic to respond to emerging situations.

**International Engagement:** Diplomatic channels, bilateral and multilateral relations and regional groupings help us to push India's national interests and promote its social, economic, cultural and political aspirations that have a positive impact on the country and its citizens. To ensure that India's voice is heard on global forums and to have a positive influence on issues of global concerns such as terrorism, climate change, institutional reforms, etc.

**Neighborhood First Policy:** India's former Prime Minister Shri A.B. Vajpayee once remarked "You can change your friends but not neighbor's". The neighborhood remains a primary diplomatic and a central pillar of India's foreign and security policies since 2014. In recent years, one of the key pillars of India's foreign policy is the "Neighborhood First" policy. It is based on improved connectivity, infrastructure, strong development cooperation, security, people-to-people contacts, non-reciprocal, outcome-oriented approach and to build a secure and stable neighborhood. The policy aims to ensure that our neighbor's also benefit from our economic development and growth and focus on improving ties with India's immediate neighbor's.

**Trade and Commerce:** Promotion of foreign trade and investment is one of the most important tasks and a harbinger of a healthy relationship between two or more nations. Attracting FDI or helping Indian industries to establish in foreign countries acts as a catalyst to foster relations between nations. It is important to create an external environment which is conducive to the inclusive development of India so that the benefits of growth can reach the grass-root level.

**Diaspora Engagement:** Around 180 years ago thousands of landless workers were sent out of India under the British Raj as plantation workers to different parts of the world e.g South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, etc. These workers now comprise both Non-Resident Indians and Persons of Indian Origin and form the Overseas Indian Community which is around 35 million. Several top tech companies from Microsoft to Google are headed by People of Indian origin and the same goes for the heads of Governments of 6 nations eg. Portugal, Guiana, Seychelles, etc. India has received around \$87Billion as a remittance in 2020-2021, we have a full-fledged division to handle overseas Indian affairs in the Ministry of External Affairs. Indian Diaspora is a perfect example of India's soft power and has been pivotal in shaping the design of India's foreign policy. The proactive engagement with our overseas community helps us to engage with the governments of the day and make a blueprint of our foreign policies.

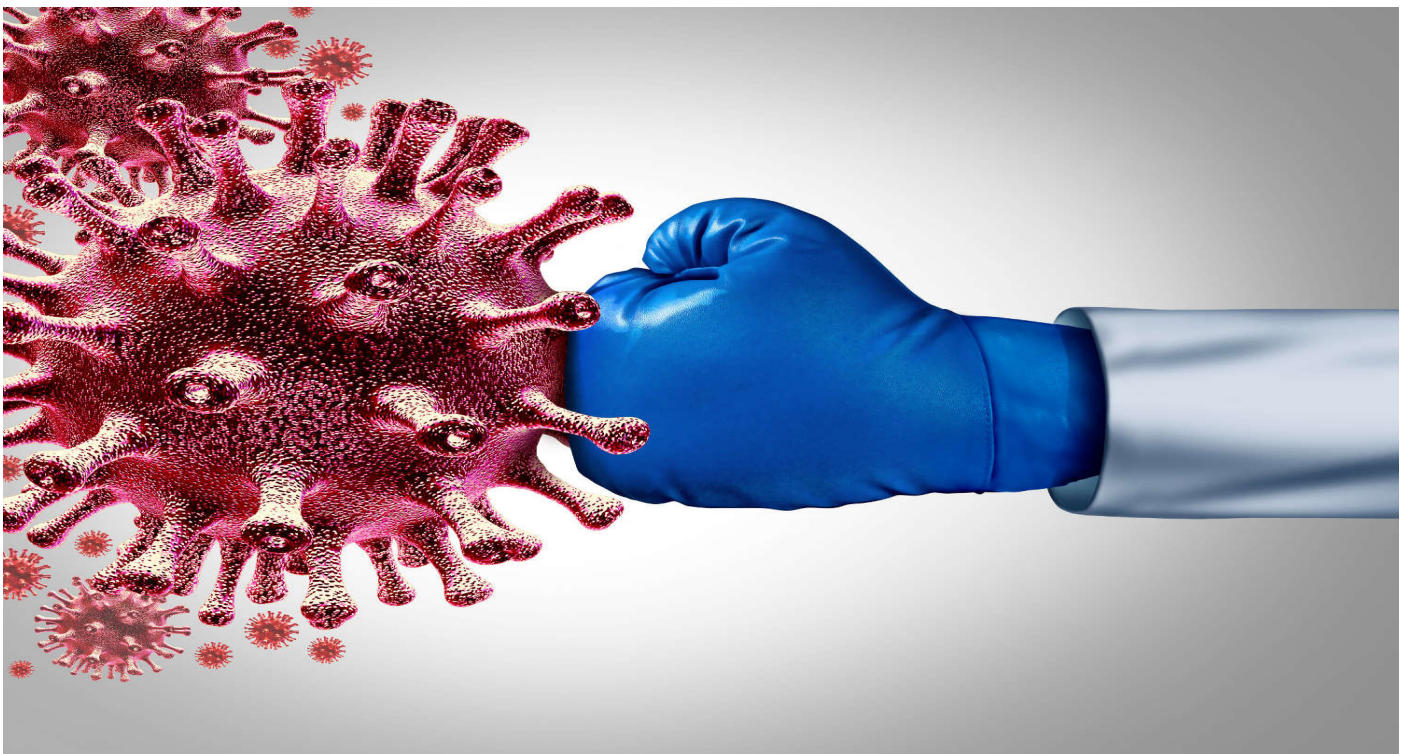
### Challenges ahead for India's Foreign Policy

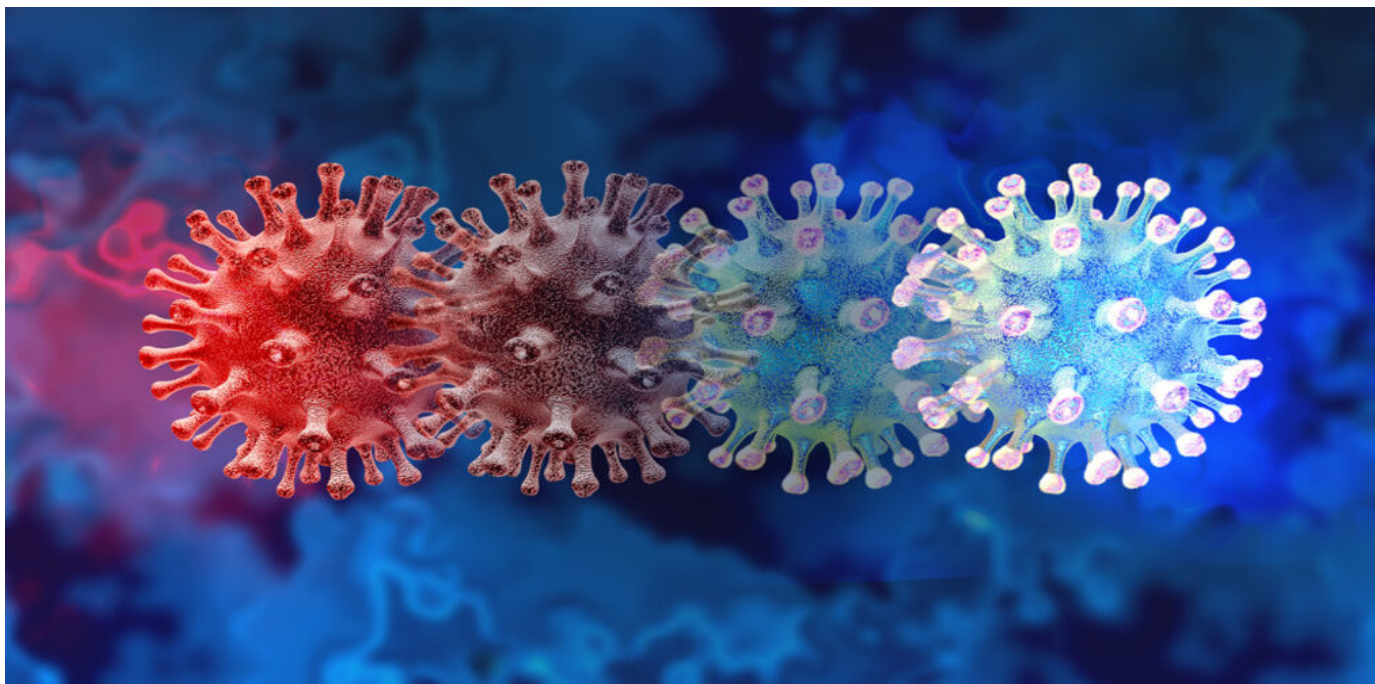
#### Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic which initially was a health emergency gradually turned into economic turmoil (Shringla, 2020). The pandemic pressed the doorbell of India when the nation was already facing maritime disputes and border security issues with China and Pakistan (Chadha, 2021). Developed nations took the advantage of COVID-19 and affirmed influence over the developing and under-developed nations during the pandemic with respect to vaccines, PPE kits, ventilators and other medical equipment required for covid patients. The pandemic gave rise to a new normal where not only India but nations across the globe were left untouched by the winds of geopolitical and geo economic storm and gave rise to new Non-Traditional threats (Foreign Secretary's Remarks on "India's Foreign Policy). Recently India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar highlighted how the Covid-19 pandemic has altered the dimensions of nations from trust and transparency to awareness and decentralization of globalization. Some fluctuations were also witnessed vis-a-vis India-US relations. During the Covid-19 pandemic when the US was going through a deadly covid wave India lend a helping hand by exporting medical supplies and easing export restrictions, however, the US was reluctant to reciprocate when India went through the same phase (Kurup, 2021).

#### Issue of Afghanistan and Taliban

In 2022, when India and Afghanistan were concentrating on the past infrastructure and other developments and India's future plans to help prosper Afghanistan, both nations were unaware of the fact that the time is not far when these developmental issues and progress they have made so far were going to be highjacked with an unexpected political shift. It was none other than the Taliban which took over Afghanistan's political system and the entire picture was turned upside down. Though, India didn't offer any resistance to counter the Taliban's plan of action (Haidar, 2022). However, we cannot deny and ignore the possibility that in the future Taliban with the support of Pakistan may revive cross-border terrorism and militancy in Jammu and Kashmir. Secondly, Pakistan's close proximity with China, the two nuclear powers may result in security as well as a diplomatic challenge for India to counter the traditional and non-traditional threats from its next-door neighbor's (Saran, 2022). On the other hand, during 2019-2021, the international community garnered support over the farmer's protests on the agriculture bill issue and the govern-





ment's crackdown on protestors, violence in Jammu & Kashmir and North-East, as well as attacks on minorities became a bilateral issue (Haidar, 2022). Traditional diplomacy was all about territorial control and resources. However, lately, with the advent of the digital revolution and new technologies, a threat of geo-technology vis-a-vis geopolitics and geo-economics has emerged. In today's world the components of national strength latest technology rather than territory (Foreign Secretary's Remarks on "India's Foreign Policy").

### Issues between India and China

In 2020, India also witnessed armed forces deployment along both sides of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the fatal clashes in Galwan valley (Haidar, 2022). Concerns were also raised over China's expanding influence in India's neighboring countries which call for a strong and strategic response from India (Saran, 2022). The other important and strategic issue faced by India is China's Belt and Road initiative which India has boycotted on the grounds that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) or Belt and Road initiative trespasses disputed territory in PoK which is claimed by India. As of now, India's challenge is to ensure Chinese troops return to the status quo with respect to April 2020 when the aggression at the LAC began and to keep a hawk's eye on the political and economic activities of the Chinese in our neighborhood (Haidar, 2022).

### Way forward

India should focus on a dynamic and responsible global strategy in a multipolar world (Foreign Secretary's Remarks on "India's Foreign Policy"). India's vision should be guided by a leadership role that allows her to participate and contribute to the emerging world order with a progressive approach to foster developments. While addressing the Raisina Dialogue in 2021, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi remarked, "the Covid-19 pandemic has presented us an opportunity to reshape the world order, to reorient our thinking. We must create systems that addresses the problems of today and challenges of tomorrow. And we must think of the entire humanity and not merely of those who are on our side of the borders".

India is doing quite well to foster close relations with the new Quad comprising of India, Israel, the U.A.E and the U.S. also known as I2U2 and the former Indo-Pacific Quad which is already on an active mode since concerns over China continue to rise. Henceforth, to further improve its position, India should aggressively push its Act East policy and participation in Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Secondly, it should ponder over of becoming a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum APEC and finally, the option of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTTP) may also be considered in which China is not a member yet (Saran, 2022). India's foreign policy must also act to counter non-traditional security challenges such as cyber-attacks and bio-weapons (Harsh Vardhan Shringla, 2020). The Indian model of development i.e. Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas is comprehensive and works on multiple platforms such as grants-in-aid, line of credit, capacity building and technical assistance. Last but not the least, an effective, efficient and flexible foreign policy which promotes global goodwill project India as a world leader.

### Conclusion

The fundamental issue with India's foreign policy is to ensure that India's engagement on international platforms should be consistent with respect to modern-day realism. The current global environment is challenging and sailing

through some rough patches since World War II. Henceforth, a progressive commitment and pragmatic resolution are required on strategic and diplomatic terms to counter the traditional and non-traditional threats which hinder our growth and prosperity. Covid-19 was a harbinger to show the world that if anything goes wrong in one part of the world it will impact and have serious repercussions on the entire global community and no one will be left untouched, therefore, every nation should respect its territorial integrity and move ahead with a progressive, responsible, inclusive and an innovative approach for the world as a one family. India as the largest democracy in the world can surely and positively contribute to ensuring a sustainable future.

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