

# An Aspirational India on the Global Stage



*As India turns 75, the LSE South Asia Centre will publish commemorative posts till August 2023 to dwell upon India from multiple perspectives. In this post, **Harsh V. Pant** discusses the emerging priorities in India's foreign policy, and where an 'India First' engagement with the global order — stemming from its domestic socio-economic realities & aspirations — may lead India in future years.*

As the Russia–Ukraine crisis escalated earlier this year, India's response to it generated a heated debate in Western capitals. New Delhi was accused of not supporting Ukraine and siding with the West as it refused to publicly name Russia as the aggressor. India's Minister for External Affairs Dr S. Jaishankar [responded to it frontally](#) by arguing that India's foreign policy is not sitting on the fence, just because it may not be agreeable to some other countries. 'It means I am sitting on my ground', he said, arguing that 'Europe has to get out of the mindset that Europe's problem is the world's problem but the world's problem is not Europe's problem', making clear that 'I am one-fifth of the world's population. I am today the 5th or 6th largest economy in the world .... I feel I am entitled to have my own side. I am entitled to weigh my own interests, and make my own choices ... There is no country in the world which disregards its interests.'

It is certainly a basic tenet of international relations that national interests are paramount and India too, like other nations, has pursued its interests when it comes to foreign and national security policies. But as it celebrates its 75<sup>th</sup> year of independence, what gives India greater confidence in articulating an 'India First' foreign policy is its growing economic, military and diplomatic capabilities as well as a sense of optimism about the future. More than any other major power today, Indians view their future in aspirational terms, and that is shaping their domestic as well as their foreign engagements.

The consequences are quite remarkable. Even as the Western world has expressed disappointment about India's position on the Ukraine conflict, ties between New Delhi and the West have gained momentum. So while the Western media has been lecturing India on its democratic responsibilities, Western governments seem to understand India's challenges better; somewhat ironically, the Ukraine crisis has provided the means to both New Delhi and the West to come closer, and to engage with each other more substantively.

The international order is evolving at a rapid pace and structural changes such as the changing balance of power with the rise of China are compelling India and the West to deal with each other on the basis of these 21<sup>st</sup> century realities. But India's response to its strategic priorities has also evolved significantly. Today's India has a new voice on the global firmament — clear, rooted in domestic realities and firm in the pursuit of its vital interests. As Minister Jaishankar remarked at this year's 'Raisina Dialogue' (2022), it is better to engage with the world on the basis of '[who we are](#)' rather than try and please the world. If India is confident about its identity and priorities, the world will engage with India on its terms. Over the last few years, New Delhi has not been averse to challenging its adversaries and in courting its friends without the ideological baggage of the past. From being the only global power to challenge Xi Jinping's 'Belt and Road Initiative' as far back as 2014 to responding to Chinese military aggression with a military push back, from trying to work with the US without entering the full embrace of an alliance to engaging the western world to build domestic capacities, India has been pragmatic to the core and willing to use the extant balance of power to its advantage. India's focus today is on enhancing its capabilities in every possible sector and that allows for a more clear-eyed engagement with its partners. The West, often used to a pontificating India of the past, today hears an Indian voice on the global stage that is capable of articulating a narrative of a responsible stakeholder that despite being firmly steeped in its own ethos is not willing to shirk global commitments.

And the world is also witnessing a more pro-active Indian response to regional challenges. New Delhi led the way in shaping regional response in South Asia to the Covid-19 pandemic, supporting its neighbours (later expanding globally) with critical supplies of medicines, and later with vaccines as part of the '[Vaccine Maitri](#)' (Vaccine Friendship) initiative. More recently, New Delhi has come to the [aid of Sri Lanka](#) at a time of grave economic crisis especially when China, with all its economic heft, was unwilling to do much. 'Neighbourhood First' has become more than a mere slogan. It is an operational reality that India should be aspiring for if it is to attain its global agenda. The focus of New Delhi's 'South Asia' policy has shifted from its fixation with Pakistan to the more productive Bay of Bengal maritime geography which lends itself to a more organic connect between South and Southeast Asia.

The challenges confronting India are serious and are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. China's rise and its assault on Indian interests is forcing New Delhi to reassess its old assumptions. India's position after the [Galwan Valley crisis](#) of 2020 that Sino-Indian relations cannot be normal unless the border situation does not get normal is an audacious one but there is no going back. There are also institutional issues that need attention — from the size of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs to forging an integrated, joined-up government approach to national security. Yet, New Delhi's readiness to address these challenges is shifting the conversations in ways that are quite revealing.

As it celebrates its 75<sup>th</sup> year of interdependence, India wants to play the role of a 'leading power' in the international system, one that shapes global norms and institutional architecture, rather than being shaped by others. Toward this end, it is willing to enter into partnerships that are likely to yield concrete outcomes. Shedding its old diffidence, New Delhi is proclaiming that it is no longer Non-Aligned, rather it is willing to align based on shared interests. From the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the QUAD) to BRICS, India holds a long list of such strategic memberships. Often this is seen as old-style meandering, but look closely and one will find that increasingly India is willing to articulate and acknowledge its priorities more sharply than before.

Today's India is willing to establish a new set of standards and that is shaping its external engagement as well. This may or may not be a significant break from the past but it is certainly a reflection of contemporary domestic socio-economic realities in India. The next few years will determine how successfully New Delhi transcends the constraints of the global order and domestic infirmities to achieve its aspirations on the global stage.

*The views expressed here are those of the author and not of the 'South Asia @ LSE' blog, the LSE South Asia Centre, or the London School of Economics & Political Science.*

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