

# “As geopolitical tensions unfold India will need a more agile and engaged foreign policy to protect its autonomy” – Rakesh Sood

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*At India @ 70: LSE India Summit 2017, Ambassador Rakesh Sood was part of a panel of distinguished experts discussing India as a rising global power. After the plenary, he spoke to Alexander Spalding about the direction of Indian foreign policy and Indo-US relations.*



**AS: Could we start off our discussion on Indian foreign policy today by investigating what is the state of India’s ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ power in the world today?**

RS: Let me put it to you like this. You can’t be effective in exercising soft power unless you have a respectable degree of hard power. This is particularly important for countries that are not currently members of any security alliances because they have to be able to rely upon themselves. So whatever we may say about India’s civilisational approach to the exercise of soft power does not detract from the fact that its rise in the international political arena does not cause the same kind of disquiet to peripheral nation states, for example China. Furthermore, India cannot just rely on soft power to meet its strategic demands and foreign policy objectives. From this point of view, it needs to be able to exercise some degree of hard power, there is simply no way of getting around that.

The exercise of hard power in the case of India is, however, somewhat different to other contexts because India has not engaged in an ‘enterprise of conquest’, as it were. So India’s strategy is far more constraining and non-coercive than in the case of countries with a more conquest-oriented foreign policy. I think this is where a key difference lies.

This to an extent derives from the kind of worldview that India has. How are these kinds of worldviews constituted? Looking to the record of history is extremely valuable, with the Indian freedom and independence movement and the ideologies of the respective leaders who coordinated this movement being a case in point. The decision to steer clear of Cold War alliance structures was really a defining formative moment in the consolidation of India’s contemporary foreign policy worldview, which, in many ways, has then remained relatively consistent ever since. This worldview can also be seen in the way Prime Ministers Vajpayee and Modi have both conducted themselves in relation to nuclear armaments and proliferation, wherein they have both demonstrated reluctance to take Indian foreign policy in a more conquering and militant direction. With Prime Minister Vajpayee, this can be seen in his management of the Kargil War in 1999, whilst with Prime Minister Modi, this can be seen in his 2014 decision to not jettison India’s first-use nuclear doctrine.

There therefore exists a fair amount of continuity in that sense in terms of India’s belligerent foreign policy programme. What we see is a fine-tuned balance of both soft and hard power whereby the latter is only to be exercised with an air of caution when it is deemed to be absolutely essential.

**You write a lot on Indo-US relations and the position that the US maintains in the contemporary world of international politics. How do you think India is likely to engage with the US in light of the Trump administration?**

In order to understand this, we need to be aware of a couple of key drivers within the Indo-US relationship. One of these factors is India’s rapidly growing economy and India’s economic engagement with the US. The other factor is the fact that, at least for the past 15 or 16 years, Washington has been emanating a consistent sentiment that India’s economic and political rise operates as a fruitful stabilising force in the context of international politics.

An example of this is Barack Obama's recent proclamation that the Indo-US partnership is one of the most indispensable of the 21st century. We also saw this in the Bush administration, with Condoleezza Rice's proclamations that a stronger India (in both the economic and political sense) is in the United States' best interest. Clearly, therefore, there is a positive sentiment that has bolstered India's rising politico-economic interests and that has provided a stable support network.

What we must bear in mind is that the changing US presidential administration is not going to have a significant impact on the ability of Indian citizens to obtain H1-B visas when seeking work in the US, for example, given that Indian citizens were already facing issues with this process during the Obama administration. What I would therefore forecast is that, in the context of issues that do not directly relate to American domestic politics, the US is going to continue recognising that a rising India is going to operate as a conducive stabilising force for international politics.

The third aspect to take into consideration is the fact that the reason why the Indo-US partnership has received so much bipartisan support across respective US presidential administrations is linked to the lobbying power that is inherent to the Indian diaspora in the United States. This diaspora is one of the most politically influential in the world, and as a result, plays an important part in the coordination of American politics. Members of this group also maintain important roles in the American government, as can be seen, for example, with Kamala Harris' election to the United States Senate. We also see them in influential positions within the US State Department and the US Department of Defence, as well as in important US-based think tanks that are directly engaging with policy formulation. Some members of the diaspora support the Democrats whilst others support the Republicans which means that the the diaspora's engagement with the Indo-US relationship is bipartisan.

I would argue that the factors I have just outlined are not going to change significantly under the rule of the Trump administration in terms of their importance for conditioning the Indo-US partnership. Once the Trump administration is able to settle, we are going to see a reversion to the kind of Indo-US engagement that we have seen with past American presidential administrations. It is not as though India's continued politico-economic rise will threaten the stability of the United States in any way; it is not as though the members of the Indian diaspora within the US government are going to be thrown out overnight; and it looks fairly unlikely that the pace of India's economic growth would decrease to a rate of 1% that would then translate into a loss of interest in India's international political influence on the part of the US. If the Indian economy therefore continues growing at a rate of 8% or 9%, and if the Indian diaspora continue to keep the American political system energised and engaged with India, and if India's rise is seen as benign, then I think that the nature of Indo-US cooperation will continue on good footing.

### **Finally, could you tell us a little bit more about what you think the future of Indian foreign policy looks like?**

I think what we are definitely going to see is a continuation of the kind of stable consistency that has characterised Indian foreign policy since the Cold War. Of course every individual leader is going to put their own unique stamp on Indian foreign policy, and Prime Minister Modi is no exception. He has obviously imparted a new sense of energy and a new kind of packaging to Indian foreign policy in terms of the way he has put out labels of Neighbourhood First, or the way he reached out using the Sagarmala project in the Indian Ocean so as to elaborate upon India's maritime interests. Now all of these initiatives are extremely important, and must be understood in the context of how the global locus of geopolitical gravity is shifting in this contemporary age.

What we must also bear in mind is that, during the time of the Cold War, when conflicts were manifesting in Africa or Latin America, India was able to remain detached from these conflicts because it was not directly engaged (although when the Cold War arrived on India's doorstep, e.g. with the Bangladeshi independence war of 1971 or when the US stationed Task Force 74 in the Bay of Bengal, the nation soon realised that the non-aligned stance was not necessarily paying off in the way that it should have been). Today, as important geopolitical tensions begin unfolding literally on India's doorstep, as can be seen with events in China's geopolitical periphery, the Indian Ocean, as well as the South China Sea, the ability of India to remain as moralistically detached as it was during the Cold War is going to diminish. We will therefore be forced to take up positions and stances on these important matters, which will

therefore call for a much more nimble, agile, and engaged foreign policy approach on India's part so as to not only remain involved as a key actor in these conflicts, but so as to also guarantee India's strategic autonomy.

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You can watch the India @ 70: LSE India Summit Foreign Policy Panel [here](#) or read the event summary [here](#).

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## About the Authors

**Rakesh Sood** is a former diplomat who writes and comments on India's foreign affairs, and is currently Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation.



**Alexander Spalding** is a third year student of Social Anthropology at LSE. He spent a summer working with the Observer Research Foundation as a policy research intern with the think tank's cyber security team in Delhi, and also formed part of the Communications team at the LSE India Summit 2017



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