The Era of Great Powers and the National Security of India

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Abstract: *In the contemporary world, any long-term understanding of the national security should necessarily factor in the de-facto existence of multiple Great Powers without any reigning superpower. This new situation is the result of declining America led western liberal order and emergence of multiple centres of power and civilisation. National security has got disentangled from the super power regime and attained the autonomy and complexity of its own. India, like other emerging powers, is facing a less black and white world order where there are end numbers of opportunities as well as challenges to its foreign policy endeavours. As a post-colonial anti-hegemonic power, which has with zeal guarded the moral and strategic autonomy of its foreign policy, India has quite a good legacy with which to face the era of great powers. The paper aims to throw light on the prospectus and challenges that Indian foreign policy might face in the times when the overarching super power regime is not around and India has to forge ahead its path as an emerging power in the World.*

Keywords: Multi-Alignment, National Security, Great Powers, Strategic Autonomy, Super Power

1. Introduction

More than anything else, it is the ordering principle of sovereign and self-determining national state that has proved to be the most resilient dimension of modern world system. Although this system, which emerged in Europe, got universalised in the conditions of asymmetrical power relations of colonialism, domination and hegemony, it has gained autonomy of its own. This autonomy is now sustained by a much wider distribution of national power, wealth and civilisation in the world. The phase of international system which remained dominated by one or the other superpower like Great Britain in 19th Century and USA in 20th Century is perhaps quite difficult to achieve in a world where, riding on the back of modernity itself, multiple centres of power have emerged in the world (Buzan, 2011) . Though USA continued to be militarily and economically strong in the post-Cold war period, it has not only lost the moral and social standing that once legitimised its universality of power but American primacy faced serious challenges from an ascending China, post-Communist Russia and other defiant regimes here and there (like North Korea and Iran) (Mandelbaum, 2022) . This trend can be witnessed in the way its leadership is increasingly posturing its self-identity away from internationalism (America First) and in the declining enthusiasm for sustaining and promoting global institutions and regimes[1]. That being said,

the emerging international order of multiple great powers[2], without any superpower or superpowers, only makes national security independent of any overriding and universalistic superpower security regimes-military and non-military alike. Though national security is now more local, eclectic and devoid of any attachment towards universal regime, its self-referential nature, where every nation state is both uniquely constrained and flexible in pursuing its specific policy goals, makes the world even more complex, chaotic and precarious. This is not to say that state can be indifferent to inter-national constraints, it only means that in absence of powers and institutions wielding global influence, states are more at home in undertaking various foreign policy initiatives. Due to the capability distribution between states, it also means that there will certainly be regional balances of power in play and competing spheres of influence around Great Powers. The lower and middle rung powers don't face the stark choice of aligning with one or the other Great power. They can manoeuvre their ways in multiple ways and avail different contingencies in their favour. The only limiting factor in this game is the capability of the state, its geopolitical position, international stature, strength of economy etc.

Evolving Principles of India's Engagement with the World:
Although India as a post-colonial nation aspired for the world of multilateralism, non-domination and sovereign equality among nations, the structure of international system, alongside domestic and regional constraints, shaped its changing narratives of national security. Early on, and quite naturally so, it was mainly the non-military aspects like national unity, socio-economic reconstruction, establishment of rule of law, laying foundational democratic institutions and seeking peaceful international order that occupied the centre stage of national security in India. The leadership was

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[1] Though this trend appeared prominently during Trump Administration, its continuation from much earlier was ensured by structural factors like socio-economic decline, loss of global consensus and rising powers. Joe Bidden has not been able to completely reverse the trend despite his lip service to liberal internationalism (Biden is more 'America First' than Trump ever was; Sam Collins;https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2023/09/01/joe-biden-more-america-first-than-donald-trump-ever-was/

[2] Variously referred as Multipolar World, Polycentric World, Decentred Globalism etc.

soon tested for its attention towards military dimension of security. The issues like Indo-Pakistan rivalry, Chinese Aggression, Nuclear Testing by China etc. very early brought more realistic outlook to Indian international policy. The policy of non-alignment didn't rule out any independent engagement with the world and it found itself constrained to turn towards Cold War military bloc politics for protecting its national interest in Kashmir and later against China. Its regional security imperatives, prompted mainly by the development of nuclear weapons by China, which had been aggressive towards it in 1962, also led it to *strategic* non-acceptance of discriminatory nuclear regimes like Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and eventual development of nuclear weapons. In fact, it is the nuclear energy sector in which India has demonstrated itself as a kind of revisionist power. Despite being a non-signatory of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and not being a member of Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG), India is the only nuclear weapons country outside NPT that has been able to get recognition as a responsible nuclear power. Though India had to undergo a phase of strained relations with the powers that be, but India was able to withstand sanctions while continuing to pursue its nuclear programme and push international diplomatic efforts for a less discriminatory international nuclear regime. After the Civil Nuclear Deal with USA in 2005, India has signed such agreements with more than a dozen such countries (14 to be exact) and has established its standing as a responsible and transparent nuclear power. India, alongside other nuclear powers, also didn't sign the latest and most ambitious legally binding nuclear ban treaty under the UN viz Treaty on the Prohibition of nuclear weapons (TPNW), which came into force on 22 January 2021. The Indian contention is that disarmament being a charter responsibility of United Nations (UN) would be more effective if it results from the Conference on Disarmament which was recognised "as a single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum of the international community" by the UN in 1978[3]. However, India is still predominantly occupied by its focus on modernising economy, strengthening its industrial production base, increasing capital footprint and seeking global cooperation for its developing economy. Its idea of international system was instinctively against any hegemonic dispensation that can threaten national identity of others. The recently perceived shift in its policy from non – alignment to multiple alignment is not only reflective of the changing power distribution of international system but also the concomitant assertiveness in Indian foreign policy resulting from its increasing capability and power. Though foreign policy of India is understood to have evolved through "non-alignment" to "strategic autonomy" and now

"multi-alignment", the underlying chord that runs through all these positions is the insistence on maintaining autonomy and independence of foreign policy. Right from the beginning India preferred bilateral strategic partnerships rather than committing itself to collective military alliances or binding security arrangements. In the post-Cold war period India did open up its largely closed economy and integrated with the west led liberal capitalist international order, yet it continued to advocate for favourable changes in the discriminatory security, trade and climate regimes of this order. In multiple alignment this autonomy is reflected in the simultaneous engagement with different power nodes in the emerging polycentric world. This policy position is also constituted by "engagement with established and new multilateral forums, formal partnerships with multiple states in multiple issue areas, and what is termed 'normative hedging" (Hall, 2016) . Multi-alignment is a situation in which post-Cold war world having, from the early 2000, led to the emergence of multiple poles like China, India, Japan, post-soviet Russia and European Union (EU), India has to build relations with all of them and with others in the international community, navigating through a complex matrix of cooperation, coordination and rivalry, and building or joining coalitions of like-minded countries to pursue specific common goals (Raghavan, 2017) . India is now following the policy whereby it "prefers to enhance the convergence of alignments around its policy preferences, while avoiding the creation of alignment structures characteristic of formal intergovernmental organizations (FIGOs). This practice balances two competing Indian imperatives: on the one hand, to maximize its ability to advance key issues across different groupings; and, on the other, to pursue its preference for foreign policy hedging over becoming locked into new FIGO-type structures (O'Donnell & Papa, 2021)

India and the Era of Great Powers
The era of great powers has many opportunities and challenges for the emerging powers like India. India has a strong image of being an anti-hegemonic country that has supported the establishment of multilateral institution of peace and development internationally and also successfully developed strong democratic mechanisms at the domestic level. That being said, world is no longer a straightforward case, if it ever was. All the more so when no guarantee is in place for any particular international order and everybody is there to fend for itself. Though after the Nehruvian Era, Indian foreign policy has been to certain extent "normless" in so far it has avoided commitment to any multi-lateral security arrangements for western backed liberal international order or desisted from strongly committing itself to any alternative international order. It has kept its foreign policy options close to its chest and taken the ever-changing nature of the international reality very seriously. This is also because as an emerging power it could not afford to impose its principles on others or court harm because of its principles rather it took a much more pragmatic approach in dealing with other international players and institutions in the world. It even pursued its interests through mutually exclusive policies and opposing alliance partners. Seeking technology transfer from the west as well as condemning its discriminatory policies towards developed world. Seeking military and diplomatic help from

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[3]The Conference is comprised of 65 member States, including the five NPT nuclear-weapon States and 60 other States of key military significance. It is the Conference on Disarmament (CD) and its predecessors that have negotiated such major multilateral arms limitation and disarmament agreements such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction (BWC), the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction (CWC) and Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Soviet Russia without any commitment towards communist camp in the world. This posture of autonomy has been the defining trait of India's foreign policy and may serve it better in the coming days as it has already mastered the art of living in complex world. In other words, Indian trade-off for attainment of its goals has been morally and ideologically minimum. This has been referred to as "normative hedging" and has been nurtured for quite a long time in India (Hall, 2016) . However, for gauging the impact of new framework on the foreign policy dynamics of India, we have to take into account the broader geo-political reality of Indian subcontinent. India's relations with China and the neighbouring countries will be the determining factor for the long term geo-political stability of the region and also for the international standing of India. It is quite imperative that the first priority in the foreign policy of any country is the management of its relations with neighbours. As one commentator has succinctly put it

A stable neighbourhood strengthens a country's foreign policy posture, whereas an unstable and troubled neighbourhood saps its ability to act forcefully and effectively on the international stage. Th credibility of a country's regional and global posture is undermined if it is seen as embroiled in disputes and conflicts with neighbours. Th time and energy spent in controlling events in the immediate neighbourhood is at the cost of pursuing wider interests at the regional and global level (Sibal, 2009)

Though the relations among neighbours should be built around their special concern for each other but an overwhelming international structure led by some powerful player or players does not allow this autonomy in the first place. This means that countries are not always free to act even within their own neighbourhoods and are subject to various constraints. Particularly significant is the fact that if countries in the neighbourhood act to involve some external powerful player, others are then forced to get involved in some form of band wagoning or alliance making. India started off with a neighbourhood policy that was based on the idealistic premise that 'the subcontinent is India's exclusive sphere of influence and New Delhi must strive to prevent the intervention of great powers in the affairs of the region' (Mohan 2003). Nevertheless, the reality of the international order made India to change its posture and accept not only the foreign intervention but rely on strategic partnerships with one or the other powerful players in international system. The situation in South Asia today is one where India, despite aiming at continuing its strategic autonomy, is faced with hard choice of offsetting the power of China; by having a friendly neighbourhood and courting strategic relations with other countries of interest. Under the multi-alignment policy, India is developing close relations with China's archrivals such as the USA and Japan. A secure neighbourhood though is critical for handling China on merit. India as a major player in South Asia aims at building a strong regional network and reduce the chances of its neighbours looking towards other countries. Though good relations with neighbours are a desirable thing but developing and sustaining such relationships in a situation of competing interests and asymmetries of power is quite a different endeavour altogether. India is facing a particularly difficult situation because the decolonisation process of

South Asia gave rise not only to many bitter memories but also to border disputes and mutual distrust. This makes it difficult to foster a kind of trust required for long term relationships of peace and cooperation. The region has always, thus, remained vulnerable to external interventions and India gradually learned to live with these affairs so long its own interests are not jeopardised in any way.

2. Conclusion

The Era of Great Powers is throwing up lot many new opportunities and challenges for international actors-state and non-state alike. The emerging powers like India are facing less unambiguous world and have to rely on good relations with its neighbours in order to offset the hegemony of the immediatelocal powers contending against it. The reliance on super-power regime is not a long-term sustainable option. India has quite a good foreign policy legacy of strategic and moral autonomy to pursue its agenda in a normless world.

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