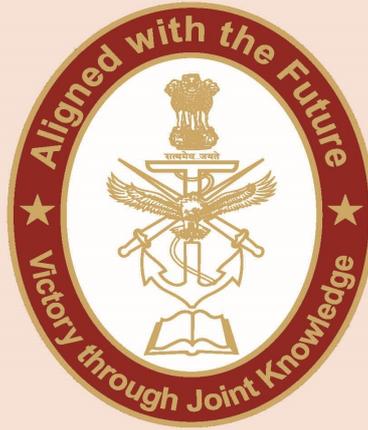


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

INDIA'S UNIFORM FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES FOR 2019

BY

MAJ GEN HARSHA KAKAR (RETD)

In recent times India has shown strategic independence in its foreign policy approach. While in the last decade it has moved closer to the US, including signing the COMCASA and LEMOA, yet has sought to maintain cordial ties with Russia and China, both of whom are adversaries of it. Since 2014, Modi has made maximum of his international visits to the US and China, four each. Interestingly, three of his US visits have been during the Obama regime, indicating his uncomfortableness with Trump.

In 2018 India sought to expand its relations with ASEAN nations, which China considers its backyard. The icing on the cake was the presence of all ASEAN leaders on the dais during the Republic Day celebrations. While it has enhanced military ties with them, it has been careful not to step on Chinese toes. It has also refused to upgrade the QUAD seeking to avoid conveying to China of it joining a coalition against it. While Modi has had four interactions with Xi Jinping, the tensions and pressures which arose post Doklam have yet to die down.

India and Japan have been traditional allies. The relationship grew manifold post Modi assuming the mantle and is presently a strategic relationship. Japan has now begun the process of changing its pacifist constitution. As a first step it plans to convert its two helicopter carriers into aircraft carriers and enhance the capabilities of its self-defence forces. It is also enhancing its defence budget. Japan and China have differences over

Senkaku islands in the East China Sea. China vehemently criticized Japan over its decision to change its pacifist constitution.

India and Australia have, like the Indo-US and Indo-Japan relations, commenced their 2+2 dialogue, seeking to enhance ties at the strategic level. Australia is also a member of the QUAD, though India, in deference to China, did not permit its entry into the traditional Malabar exercises.

Indo-Russia relations had begun indicating a downward trend. The signing of the S-400 Missile deal, despite threats of sanctions from the US, was a change in relationship. The Sochi summit of 2018, post the Wuhan summit with Xi, was possibly the occasion when Putin promised to reign in China. Russia needed India in the SCO to prevent the organization being hijacked by China. It was Russia which invited India for its dialogue with the Taliban, an event which even the US did not do, though the US special envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad will brief Indian officials on the talks in Jan.

At the end of 2018 Trump announced the withdrawal of troops from Syria and possibly Afghanistan. The US has recently clarified that withdrawal from Afghanistan is presently not on the cards. While talks between the US, Afghanistan and the Taliban are still in the nascent stage, the involvement of other powers into the scene will impact India.

India has huge investments in the country and would not desire the future government to be pro-Pakistan, as it was earlier. Therefore, it is seeking to engage with all nations presently in parleys with the Taliban. There are also reports that the Taliban would not mind engaging with India, which it visualizes as a positive player in the country. The Pak foreign minister had stated that involvement of India is essential for peace in Afghanistan while its foreign ministry spokesperson in a briefing stated the opposite, 'Pak sees no role of India in Afghanistan'.

Within South Asia India has ideal relations with all its neighbours, less Pakistan. The recent elections in Maldives and the reinstatement of Ranil Wickremesinghe as the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka has led to pro-India governments, thus pushing back Chinese influence. While Bangladesh results yet to be announced, it is hoped that the pro-India government of Sheik Hasina would continue.

India's relations with Iran has been accepted across the world. India is amongst the few which continues purchasing Iranian oil and developing the Chabahar port, despite US sanctions. The US has realized that India cannot stop its procurements as it would impact its heavy investments and the same could mar India-US relations, has announced a waiver.

The US-China trade war and tensions over Chinese expansion in the South China Sea (SCS) show no immediate sign of thawing. Similarly, with the US announcing its withdrawal from Syria literally opens the country to increased influence by Russia and Iran. US-Russia relations continue to flounder whether over interference in US elections and its actions in Ukraine and Syria. US continues to pursue its sanctions on Iran, hoping to push the nation into accepting tougher terms on the nuclear deal. Parleys of Russia, Iran and China with the Taliban only adds to US discomfiture.

Indian foreign policy under Modi cannot be termed as either pro-US nor nonaligned as India has sought to maintain equal level of relations with the US and anti-US camps. Hence, an optional term could be a 'uniform foreign policy'. This policy though ideal for India's security and strategic concerns is difficult to implement and maintain. With increasing differences between the US on one side and Russia and China on the other, balancing is essential.

The clearest example of this policy were the two specific meetings held by Modi on the side lines of the G20 Summit in Buenos Aires. One involved a trilateral consisting of India, Japan and the US, while the other was of India, Russia and China. It was thus engaging both camps with equal grace.

Balancing is evident in the manner India interacts with these nations, abstaining in the UN where needed, avoiding commenting on internal matters or where disputes exist and not joining in joint military actions which could mar the relationship. With elections in the country in May this year, whichever government comes to power would have no choice but to follow the same policies.

2019 would only add to India's difficulties in progressing in its 'uniform foreign policy'. Russia would continue to challenge the west in Ukraine as it considers the region as its backyard and would not desire any NATO dominance or presence in the region. Thus, US-Russia relations would continue being tense and US sanctions on it would remain. China-US trade war may possibly slow down, however other issues including SCS and intellectual property rights would ensure that the two nations remain at loggerheads.

Afghanistan would be another flashpoint. With Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan and the US all engaging the Taliban, all for their own reasons, it is the US which would face the impact. Multiple nations pushing the Taliban would give it the confidence to refuse US terms and demand final withdrawal of all foreign forces, which may not be agreeable to the US as it

is desperate to have a government which does not become a threat in the long term, as happened prior to 9/11.

India would therefore have a very narrow bandwidth on which to process its foreign policy and maintain relations as it had in 2018, without indicating preference to one side or the other. It would need to step carefully as it needs the support of both camps to avoid escalating military threats, enhancing military capabilities and ensuring steady development.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.