


Building on the gains in the foreign policy realm

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By Mohan Kumar

Evoking respect is the necessary first step to eliciting a neighbour's trust, not the other way around. A strong and prosperous India is bound to evoke respect.

Now that the new Lok Sabha has convened, here is a catalogue of foreign policy issues that call for priority attention from the Prime Minister and the external affairs minister.



New Delhi: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan at a meeting, in New Delhi, Monday, June 17, 2024. (PTI Photo) (PTI)

Relations with the US will continue to be the most salient for India. And yet, extraneous issues keep cropping up acting as a brake in the otherwise vital partnership. It is time both sides recalibrated what they rightly call the most consequential relationship of the 21st century. More fundamentally, it will require re-imagining ties between the two countries leading to a fresh bargain. This could, inter alia, involve India significantly upgrading its defence and security ties with the US, in exchange for the latter's substantial commitment to advancing India's strategic interests in its neighbourhood and the Indo-Pacific. It was appropriate that the US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan was one of the first foreign visitors to Delhi after the elections, for advancing the bilateral Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies. Discussions on the joint manufacture of jet engines and armoured infantry combat vehicles are also making progress. All these are steps in the right direction. Making the Indo-US strategic partnership the fulcrum of an emerging order in Asia and the Indo-Pacific should be the goal.

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There is widespread consensus that China constitutes the main strategic threat to India. Confronting this threat will require a two-pronged strategy on India's part. The first is external balancing in the form of Quad, ties with the US, joint exercises in the Indian Ocean with countries like France and links with Japan, which are all extremely important and must be intensified. More recent steps to develop a serious defence relationship with the Philippines and Vietnam must also be pursued more vigorously. India has also quietly become a full-fledged member of the Combined Maritime Forces (based in Bahrain) which maintains the international rules-based order on the high seas. The bottom line is that India cannot afford to lose its side of the Himalayas to China. Equally, it cannot afford to lose the Indian Ocean to China. This then is the twin security challenge that confronts India.

The second part of this hedging strategy is to keep the strategic dialogue with China going. Ideally, there ought to be a tete-a-tete between our PM and Chinese strongman Xi Jinping. But that may have to wait since PM is not going for the SCO meeting in Astana. There are also signs of hardening of position from both sides as evidenced by the visit of the US delegation to Dharamsala and our PM receiving that delegation later. One will have to wait and watch.

The EU has just concluded elections and the UK will soon have one of its own. Having embarked on ambitious FTAs (Free Trade Agreements) with the UK and the EU, the new government must devote resources and muster the necessary political will to conclude these expeditiously. The first 12 months of the new Modi government are crucial in this regard not just for the FTAs, but also carry out the more difficult economic reforms regarding land, labour and agriculture. A good blueprint for trade policy reform may also be found in the recent remarks made by the CEO of NITI Ayog at the annual summit of the CII in May. How the government will carry out difficult reforms in a coalition format will be closely watched by both domestic and foreign investors.

The momentum of engagement with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE must be maintained and strengthened further. The war in Gaza is distinctly unfortunate from India's perspective. Apart from human suffering, it puts strategic connectivity projects such as IMEEC (India-Middle East-Europe-Corridor) in limbo. Nevertheless, India must relentlessly push for it. It is understood that this was discussed during the visit of Sullivan.

India has dealt with Russia fairly; in doing this, it has had to walk a diplomatic tightrope. In the meantime, some NATO countries are upping the ante and itching for a fight. India will need to have a frank conversation with its friends in the West, if only to convey to them in clear terms that the hitherto proxy war in Ukraine must not be allowed to become a catastrophic all-out war between NATO and Russia. India's awkward participation in the recently held Ukraine peace conference in Switzerland led to its eventual disassociation from the final declaration. It is, however, noteworthy that the final declaration called for dialogue between the parties, something India has been urging.

Yet another challenging dossier for the new government is how to revamp the erstwhile “neighbourhood first” policy. Three things suggest themselves. One, India’s redlines must be conveyed to its neighbours letting them know that there will be consequences if they are crossed. One gets the impression that this has been done successfully in the case of Pakistan, but not necessarily with other neighbours. Two, India must be the one to take initiatives for greater economic integration, strengthening regional connectivity, and improving the implementation of investment projects. Last, evoking respect is the necessary first step to eliciting a neighbour’s trust, not the other way around. A strong and prosperous India is bound to evoke respect.

Finally, a proactive foreign policy involves taking calculated risks. Given the record of coalition governments in India, there is no reason to believe the present government will in any way be constrained in the realm of foreign policy.

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