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Testing times for Indian foreign policy

January 31, 2022, 3:52 PM IST / Jagdish Batra in Cultural Inputs, India, TOI

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Jagdish Batra

Dr Jagdish Batra is a senior academic, currently working as Professor of English at O.P. Jindal Global University, India. He has nearly four decades of

Towards the close of PM Modi's first term, India's relations with different countries were at an excellent level. But change is the law of nature as also of worldly relations. How this change has come about and what it augurs for the country is surely important to understand.

It has not been long when the panelists on Pakistan TV would rue the rising

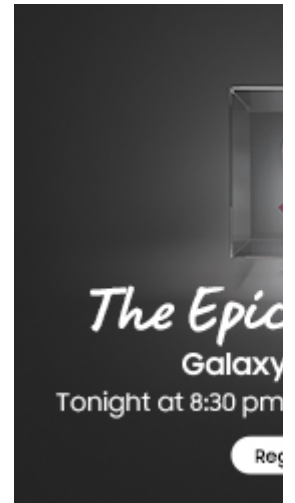
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image of India in the world. It had good relations with Russia as also with America. China had not yet bared its fangs and the surgical strike in Pakistan weighed heavy on the minds of the debaters. Even as India activated its ties with Israel in a fruitful way for the first time, it could afford to maintain positive relationship with the Palestinians and other neighbouring Arab states. Dramatic change in relations with the Saudi Arabia and UAE followed, much to the consternation of India's adversaries. The Chabahar port project indicated growing Indian engagement with Iran. Howdy Modi events in the US and Modi's successful visits to different countries having sizeable Indian diasporic population were an eyesore for many in the world. The bold measures undertaken within the country like demonetization, abrogation of article 370 etc. were taken as his boldness in taking risky decisions.

Not that everything has gone haywire now, but surely a lot of waters has flowed down the Ganga. Covid19 brought into the world by China upset economies all around. The dragon had mischievously planned expansionist moves to coincide the world under lockdown, which it tried with almost all neighbours. Chinese incursion into India, even though checked in the tracks, did cause surprise and brought in memories of the 1962 war. Its

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growing proximity, though not something new despite the Uighar Muslims issue, emboldened Pakistan to further its adventurist moves. China is also misusing with utmost impunity its economic leverage that it has come to acquire over the years, and so encircling India serves its strategic interests. More than that, however, it aspires to bind other countries of Asia, Africa and even South America through B&R projects. All these attempts throw challenge to India and stretch its resources. China has belied the belief nurtured so far that the world has moved on from political imperialism to economic imperialism only. The response to the Chinese designs has to come not only from the government but also the public which, by purchasing Chinese commodities fills its coffers with billions of dollars. It is this thing in mind that the Prime Minister sent out the call, in his very first address on the Independence Day, to 'Make in India' while welcoming foreign investors into the country.

Our one-time all-weather friend Russia seemed to be drifting away and has had to be mollified for now through a hefty purchase order for S-400 tanks. Even as the prospects of Russian support in any future clash with China seems unclear, the purchase has not found favour with America which had not liked our earlier

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purchase of Rafale fighter aircraft from France. How far the American initiatives in forging some groupings with India in the wake of the Afghanistan situation work out is yet to be seen. America's withdrawal from Afghanistan was a major upheaval that caused tremors all over the world as it symbolized in no uncertain terms the rise of fundamentalism in the region.

The Turkish President Erdogan mirrors the megalomania characteristic of the Chinese President Xi Jinping and having flexed his muscles during the Azerbaijan-Armenia tussle, dreams of ruling the Islamic world like the bygone Caliphs even though his country is facing economic problems like its buddy Pakistan. While the other partner in this triumvirate, Malaysia, has been chastened, Turkey continues to host anti-India activities on its soil. Fortunately, Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to remain on the right side with India and deft diplomatic moves have won friends in Central Asia.

The prolonged farmers' agitation in India gave enough grist to the anti-India mills abroad. The Canadian Prime Minister's vocal support to their cause necessitated a bold warning from the foreign ministry. Similar was the case of some British parliamentarians. While ties with Israel

have helped India acquire critical technology, the Pegasus deal has been seized upon by the opposition as a good stick to beat Modi with. There are spoilers all around like the New York Times with its known anti-India track record.

In this very fluid situation, India needs to be strong enough to counter inimical forces and international pressure. The situation at home has to be managed deftly. The withdrawal of the three farm laws out of the piquant situation and with elections round the corner have set a bad precedent spurring moves based on the farmers' agitation model. If allowed free space, that can lead to anarchic situation which will only gladden the anti-India forces. Needless to say that highly calibrated political action and a more thoughtful response from our opposition parties are needed. Only an economically strong nation can have an effective foreign policy. Towards that end, the cooperation of general public in the form of support to domestic goods coupled with boycott of Chinese goods can enable the country to tide over the looming crisis.

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