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The World View

Two years of Indian Foreign Policy under Subrahmanyam Jaishankar

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is known for springing surprises. One such thing he did was to appoint Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar as India's foreign minister when he inaugurated his second innings in late May 2019. Jaishankar was the most suitable person to head the foreign ministry given his illustrious career in the Indian Foreign Service, having held prestigious assignments like that of foreign secretary and the post of Ambassador to China earlier. His innings as foreign minister also coincided with the release later in 2020 of his book, 'The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain world'. Thus, when he began his political career, Jaishankar carried rich professional experience to guide the nation's foreign policy against the background of the spectacular changes that were taking place in an uncertain world, as he puts it. Both in his book and as one in charge of foreign affairs, he has taken pains to lay emphasis on India's long held belief in and advocacy of multilateralism in the conduct of international relations. Needless to say, Jawaharlal Lal Nehru as the architect of India's foreign policy emphasised the need for practising multilateralism, which expressed itself in the form of the foreign policy strategy of Nonalignment, a policy which served India's global interests admirably in the Cold War ravaged world, with the exception of the military debacle with Communist China in 1962.

Jaishankar never misses a chance to reiterate our commitment to a rule-based international order, emphasising, however, the need for getting out of the prism of Cold War, indirectly attacking the Opposition Parties, the media and academia whom he sees as prisoners of the Cold War mindset.

My analysis of Jaishankar's role as foreign minister is in the limited context of our relations with China, the United States and the Asia-Pacific region in recent times, not covering the entire external world.

As regards China, it is worthwhile to recall the Chinese adventure in the Galwan valley in the second half of 2020. It is a measure of the failure of the foreign office and the intelligence wing of the Government of India that they were

not able to foresee the swiftness with which the Chinese forces moved in and attacked our soldiers in the most brutal way killing dozens of them, though they were ostensibly aware of the road building activity the Chinese were carrying out in the area. It is worth noting that the talks Jaishankar held with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, (whom he has known for long years), later in Moscow did not yield any success in making the Chinese leadership to withdraw its soldiers from the occupied region, a fact acknowledged by the foreign minister himself. The failure of negotiations only goes to show that nations go by their professed national interests than personal acquaintances. Defence minister Rajnath Singh was more forthright in his admission of the

failure of his talks with the Chinese Defence Minister earlier. Foreign minister Jaishankar went about explaining the India-China 'encounter' in the larger context of the power struggle between a rising China and a rising India, calling for a measure of reciprocity between the two nations in accommodating each other's foreign policy objectives, despite the asymmetrical nature of their military-strategic capabilities. Though the peak of the winter led to withdrawal of some Chinese troops from the inhospitable terrain, the fact remains that as a result of the Galwan hand to hand combat, the Chinese have acquired fresh portions of our territory. The withdrawal that has taken place is not a restoration of the status quo ante that prevailed before May 2020.

Indian diplomacy has also not been able to prevent the Chinese in restraining Pakistan from raising the Kashmir issue in international forums including the UN General Assembly session in September/October 2020. Nor has there been any forward movement in diluting China's opposition to India's bid for a permanent seat in the UNSC.

In the Asia-Pacific region, India is going along with the US in adding indirectly a defence component to the QUAD. However, it remains to be seen whether our foreign policy establishment succeeds in insulating itself from the larger US interests in the region vis a vis China. The challenge lies in decoupling the India-China power rivalry from that

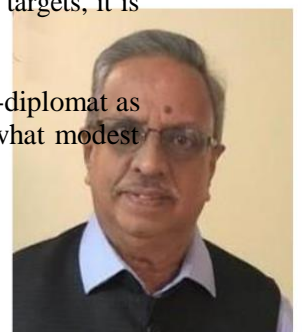
of the US, while at the same time, continuing with efforts to checkmate China's growing strategic presence in the region. As for Indo-US relations, it must be acknowledged that our leadership has focused on establishing the right ambience for an upgradation of the bilateral relationship with the Biden Administration, notwithstanding its close identification with the previous Trump Administration. Prime Minister Modi was perhaps the first among the global leaders to speak to Joe Biden on his assumption of office. The democracy component in the two nation's political systems/traditions is a positive in this direction. As the US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said in his talks recently with Jaishankar, 'people to people contact and shared values are the foundations of US-India partnership'. At the same time, the Biden Administration has not taken kindly to human rights violations in India, suppression of civil liberties, curbs on media freedom, etc. The South bloc has not been successful in containing the damage to the nation's international image despite Jaishankar's letters to and conversations with the Chiefs of Indian missions abroad.

As for helping India in fighting the second wave of the Corona virus pandemic, after some initial hesitation, the Biden Administration came forward to assist the Government tide over its serious problems regarding oxygen supply and raw materials for the production of vaccines. Regarding the supply of vaccines, despite the recent visit to the US by foreign minister Jaishankar, question marks remain about the extent of vaccine supply. Jaishankar was able to meet the US Secretary of State only on the last day of his US visit, as the latter was on an official trip to Israel around the same time, perhaps, reflecting the importance the US attached to the Middle Eastern crisis. Jaishankar described his meeting with the Secretary of State Blinken as having 'further solidified our strategic partnership and enlarged the agenda for bilateral cooperation.' But, viewed against the background of the 'priorities of its foreign policy, as articulated by the Biden Administration, which includes China, climate change, withdrawal from Afghanistan, the trans-Atlantic alliance and the Middle East in the light of the military face off between Israel and Palestine, one is not sure how strongly India figures in President Biden's calculations.

Going back to the vaccine support to deal with the deadly second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, the US has announced that it will supply 80 million vaccines to the outside world. However, Indian expectation that a significant portion of it would come to it has not been validated by any favourable statement by the US leaders.

As for the Modi Government's vaccine 'maitri' diplomacy and domestic criticisms of it, clearly, the Government resorted to exporting vaccines to the outside world to boost the Prime Minister's international image, disregarding domestic requirements. However, the foreign minister has strongly, but rather unconvincingly, defended the Government's decision-he did so during a television interview in Chennai a few months ago and in his talk at the Stanford University during his recent visit to the US- that 'the world cannot be part vaccinated and part neglected, as that is not going to be safe'. He further said that because 'we gave vaccines to the outside world, the rest of the world is coming to our help now'! Such laboured justifications can not absolve the Government of its inept handling of the not only the pandemic. The Supreme Court has come down heavily on the Government's vaccination policy, calling it arbitrary and unjust and asked it to submit all records, including the file notings. Strong words by the apex court indeed. The Government's vaccine diplomacy too stands rejected in popular perception. After all, the US too took care of its domestic vaccine requirements by buying them in bulk from the international market and only when it has met its declared targets, it is coming forward to help the outside world.

The conclusions that emerges from the above analysis is that despite having a scholar-diplomat as foreign minister, India's foreign policy successes in the last two years remain somewhat modest though it must be conceded that Jaishankar personally enjoys respect



and close rapport with many of his counterparts globally.

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