

BHARAT BHAGYA VIDHATA - REIMAGINING INDIAN DIPLOMACY IN A POST-COLONIAL WORLD ORDER

INTRODUCTION - THE INGLORIOUS EMPIRE

The dawn of modernity in the Indian subcontinent is often attributed to the period of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for this was the time period when merchants from European nations were flocking in port-cities along the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal. These traders were increasingly interested in pocketing profits through facilitating maritime spice trade between South Asia and Europe. In the course of time, these merchants fathomed the fact that bringing capital from Europe and trading it for fine commodities of India would evaporate their fortunes - a fact that their antecedents in the Roman age had already underscored, for we have Pliny the Elder writing about how gold and silver from Rome was draining into India in the first century AD - "So dearly do we pay for our women and our luxuries." Noted historian William Dalrymple has written about the mammoth measure of revenues Romans extracted from the maritime trade with India through Red Sea for it would have "...covered around one third of the funds that the Roman Empire required to administer its global conquests and maintain its vast legions."

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While India has been renowned to attract travellers and traders from all around, what distinguished the European merchants of the early sixteenth century was the fact that they had organised themselves into mercantile corporations, and had secured charters from their monarchs. This enabled them to pursue a policy of chicanery and conquest.

In an exceptional account of the colonial experience of India, Dr Shashi Tharoor quoted English officer John Sullivan in his book 'The Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India' - "With the absorption of each Indian state, the little courts disappear, the capital decays, trade languishes, the people are impoverished - the Englishmen flourishes, and acts like a sponge, drawing up riches from the banks of the Ganges, and squeezing them down upon the banks of the Thames"

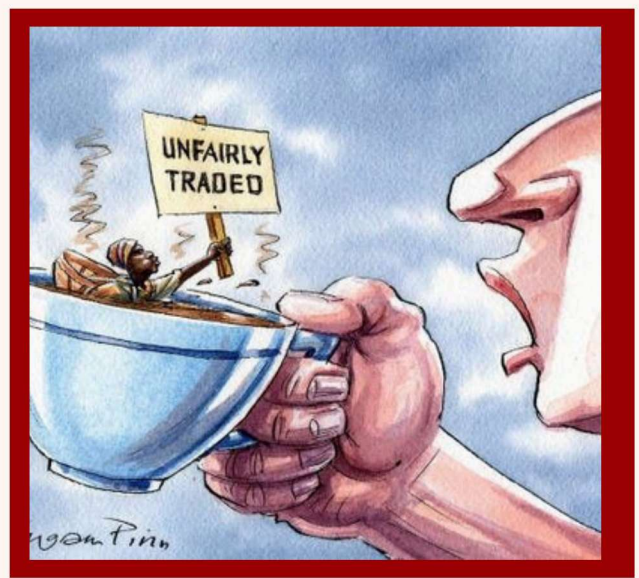
Britannica defines decolonisation as “The process by which colonies become independent of colonising countries.” The United Nations, in 1960, adopted a landmark resolution titled ‘Declaration on Granting Independence to Colonial Countries and People’, which characterised colonialism as a violation of human rights and called for self-determination of the dependencies and territories.



However, the question of decolonisation is not limited to just the political aspects of self-determination. Enabling the decolonisation of economic and social facets, while rejuvenating indigenous cultural pride along with liberating minds from colonial hangovers are the wider goals of the idea of decolonisation. India has witnessed an era of suppression, degradation, and prejudice, now however, an independent nation and republic, we are responsible for deconstructing colonial supremacy amongst the citizens, and one prime avenue for the purpose is the re imagination of India's standing in the hegemonic world order dominated by the west.

COLONIALISM IS DEAD; LONG LIVE NEO- COLONIALISM!

For the purpose of understanding the evolution and architecture of the prevailing global order dominated by Western ideologies and institutions, it is essential to consider the context of said developments. The post-renaissance Europe was going through an era of scientific liberation during the fifteenth century, thus providing fertile ground for the Industrial Revolution. Renaissance had also triggered an era of exploration wherein European seafarers tamed the oceans to open up maritime routes for flow of trade, travellers and traditions. As the trade flourished, European lust for political imperialism multiplied and eventually manifested itself in the era of colonialism across Asia, Africa and Latin America. It would be a fair assessment of history to say that the industrialisation of European nations was largely sustained through the de-industrialisation of its colonies elsewhere in the world.



It is interesting to note that while in late eighteenth century, slogans of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity were reverberating across Europe; Europeans were trampling upon the freedom of millions to build their imperial empire. It would not be wrong to say that the architecture of the prevailing global order was built upon the skeletons of the global polity which emerged after a prolonged era of colonialism and imperialism, followed by two massive World Wars, and even later the Cold War. These major events of world history cemented the position of European nations as bustling centres of opulence and prosperity - prosperity which smiled murkily in the desperate eyes of those who starved to death.

The aftermath of the World War II ushered in an era of global reconstruction and restructuring which gave birth to most of the incumbent international institutions. Though these institutions were sanitised of the old colonial manners of subjugation; neo-colonialism in the form of economic leverage and dubious power structures emerged as the novice manner of carrying on the best interests of the powerful nations. A prime example of this fact is the composition of the United Nations Security Council, wherein United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia and China - the so called victors of WW II - cling on to the permanent membership, effectively rendering the institution as a manor of imperial powers.



A prime example of this fact is the composition of the United Nations Security Council, wherein United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia and China - the so called victors of WW II - cling on to the permanent membership, effectively rendering the institution as a manor of imperial powers. Exclusion of India - a nation of 1.3 billion strong with a fabulous track record of democracy, mammoth military and roaring economy - remains a blot on the face of UNSC. Apart from India, vast continents of Latin America and Africa have been denied representation, a fact uncharacteristic of the present geo-political realities. It needs to be understood that in a world where nations are rising with triumph from the ashes of poverty, disease and decay inflicted upon them by their colonial masters, global political order cannot be divided into the apartheid of haves and have nots. India has for long highlighted the fact that the conservative approach of P5 nations to preserve the Security Council as a status symbol will erode its relevance in the emerging multipolar geopolitical scenario.

Nations of the Global South have realised political sovereignty in the post-Cold War era, developed nations maintain a tight grip on the global mechanism of economic transactions. International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, jointly referred to as the Bretton Woods Twins, have been instrumental in giving shape to the global economic roadmap - however, the steering wheel remains with the nations of global north. United States of America (USA), which has come to occupy the central field of global economy in the post-war period, controls a staggering 16% of the votes in Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) in the IMF, virtually equipping it with veto power.



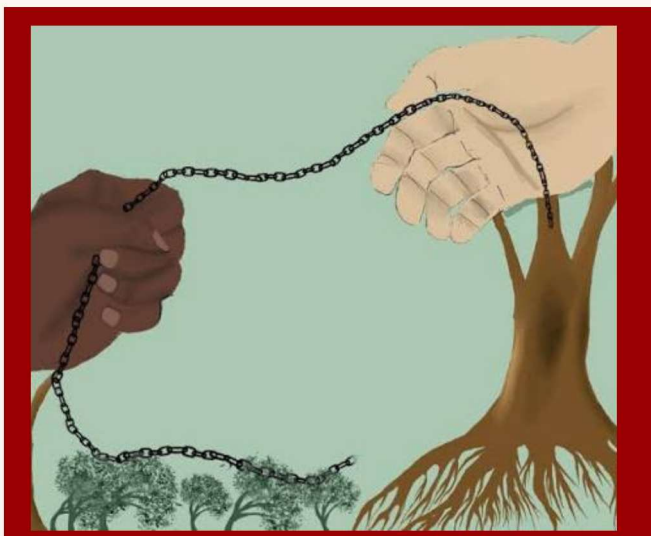
Countries of the global north have monopolized the flow of financial assistance to the developing countries - creating circumstances where desired reforms are pushed down the throats of struggling economies. India itself, during the Balance of Payments (BoP) crisis of 1991, has been prey to this evil mechanism wherein economic liberalization was pushed upon the Indian economy by IMF as a prerequisite for financial assistance; thus expanding markets for large western corporates at the cost of struggling indigenous manufacturers and service providers.

It should be noted that the need of economic assimilation and merits of economic liberalisation are not called in question, however, virtues of globalisation should be by means of adoption through deliberations rather than imposition and erosion of a nation's economic sovereignty. It needs to be understood that economic liberalisation needs to entail the liberation of not just multi-billion dollar Multi-National Corporations (MNCs), but also of, if not more, of the peasants, small tradesman, merchants, labourers, and the increasing middle class. It needs to be understood that economic liberalisation needs to entail the liberation of not just multi-billion dollar Multi-National Corporations (MNCs), but also of, if not more, of the peasants, small tradesman, merchants, labourers, and the increasing middle class. Also, at the macroeconomic level, a straightjacket approach of economic restructuring cannot be implied to every national economy for the all entail varied sets of issues and necessities.



INDIA KNOWS NO REX!

The era in which India emerged independent from amongst the gloomy shadows of imperial rule, that same era was also marked by an extraordinary schism between the capitalist first world and the communist second world. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Premier, inaugurated the principle of strategic autonomy when he decided that India shall not be subservient to the interests of any particular bloc, and that the Indian foreign policy shall be dictated by our national interests alone. Leaders and policymakers in immediate pre-independence India had an acute sense of their colonial legacy, and hence they forged foreign policy with the motive of being outside the game of the Cold War. This is when India made its first decisive stand for an independent foreign policy, adopting the policy of Non-Alignment, declaring to be part of neither camp. India got the support of nations like Indonesia, Yugoslavia, and Egypt, who too were trying to dismantle their colonial past. Nehru made it clear several times, in his speeches and interviews, that non-alignment should not be equated with neutralism.



Whenever the question of two extremes has been posed to India, the nation has responded in a measured fashion rather than being riddled with factional politics or false notions of idealism. It was a litmus test to ensure that the autonomy and self-determination that we have achieved after centuries of struggle are not lost to some new neo-colonial power. However, India maintained a distinction between the terms non-alignment and neutrality.



The policy was to engage with all states – major or minor, without getting aligned with any in the process. Pandit Nehru visited the USA on a state visit in 1961, where he was warmly received by President Kennedy. But this does not bar India from condemning the Vietnam War just three years later. Moreover, our relations with the USA did not bar us from signing the historic Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR in 1971, evidencing our independent yet engaging approach.

In the quest off seeking the dismantling of the hegemonic world order, and creation of a multipolar horizon in global arena, Indian foreign policy has been guided by the principle of strategic autonomy. Shashi Tharoor defines strategic autonomy as “...a nations ability to make sovereign decisions in foreign policy and defence without being constrained by external pressures or alliance obligations.” It is worth mentioning that India’s approach to world affairs is often interpreted by neutrality, but that is a shallow understanding of India’s position.



India’s strategic autonomy should not be mistaken as neutrality or isolationism, but rather should be seen as a pragmatic framework fit for the multi-polar geopolitical scenario which has dawned in the twenty-first century. While other facets of governance and administration have undergone multiple iterations of recreations under successive governments, ethos of conduct of foreign policy has been pursued as a continuous effort of generations.



In 2022, as armed conflict erupted between Russia and Ukraine, Western nations irked India to abandon political-economic associations with Russia without giving heed to Indian national interests associated with the same. Indian government, in a bold display of strategic autonomy, refused to desert time-tested Russo-Indian relations, and instead called on the belligerent states to utilize channels of dialogue and diplomacy in the pursuit of peace. India was much criticized for not matching up with the tune of the western nations, but India held strong and continues that stance despite the recent developments regarding the levy of punitive tariffs by Trump administration. But we also had the grit and willpower to convey to Russia that “This is not an era of war” while also questioning the West on its double standards.

These events are testimonials to a simple fact which the western intellectuals are yet to grasp - India has long thrown the shackles of imperial rule, and has evolved a standing of its own in the affairs of the world - India is subservient to no-one but the will of its people.

THE CIVILISATIONAL COMPASS OF GLOBAL DIPLOMACY



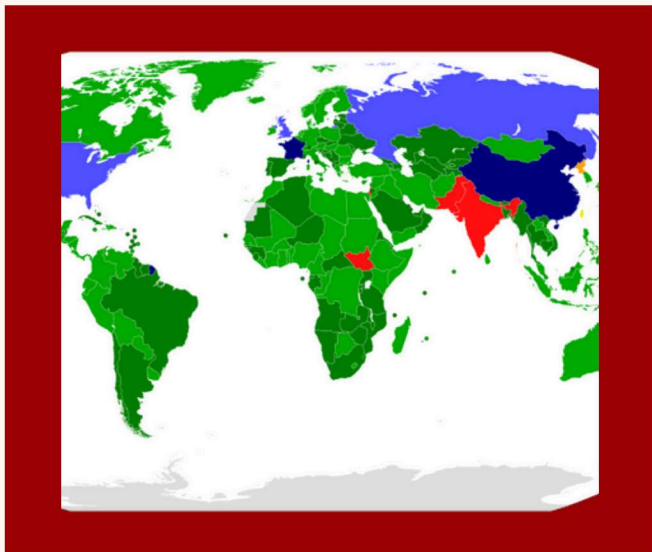
Despite the fall of the divide between the Capitalist First World and Communist Second World, there still exists a divide – economic and political. This creates the Global North (Europe, USA and extended Western countries) and the Global South (Asia, Africa, and Latin America) - notions which resonate the colonial mindset by creating the distinction of us versus them. It is in context that when India chaired the 2023 G20 Summit, the motto was “One Earth, One Family, One Future”, reflecting the sentiment of Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam.

Under India’s G20 Chairmanship, membership was extended to the African Union (AU), giving utterance to the voice to fifty-five African states in what is practically the most vibrant and inclusive international forum bringing a larger set of emerging economies. The formation of BRICS along with Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa – all post-colonial nations (Russia is not a post-colonial nation yet has had an anti- colonial stance since the days of the Soviet Union) has emphasised India’s solidarity with the Global South, and its commitment to take everyone onboard.



We must note that engagement with the Global South should not be interpreted as non-engagement with the Global North. India is part of the QUAD along with the USA, Australia, and Japan; and is an invitee at G7, the exclusive grouping of developed economies.

In the recent past, India has expanded diplomatic cooperation with the nations of Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Caribbean and Pacific Island nations. India has also shown willingness to engage diplomatically with the Taliban-led Afghan government, despite reservations regarding regional security and religious fundamentalism. India's nuclear policy is also an example of how India has defended its sovereignty despite harsh odds. India has always remained committed to universal, non-discriminatory, and verifiable nuclear disarmament; while also recognising the need for developing atomic capacity to defend its territorial sovereignty and national security, while being challenged by a hostile neighbourhood.



India has always considered the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons a biased 'Nuclear Apartheid' imposed by a few powerful countries on the international community.

INDIA'S MAJESTIC MARCH - WAY FORWARD

We cannot shy away from the fact that colonial legacies continue to influence contemporary foreign policy debates and formulations. The study of International Relations as a discipline is heavily infected by a biased Eurocentrism, deriving ideas and methods from the rationale of Western thinkers and diplomats. These post-colonial notions are reality faced by various nations every day. These post-colonial notions are reality faced by various nations every day. In this prism, India finds itself in a unique position - being a civilisational nation-state,, the most populous country on the face of the earth, with a fast-accelerating economy and tactical nuclear and military abilities.



But the most important leverage is the fact that India is the largest democracy across the globe ; probably the most successful democracy among the post-colonial nations. This has enabled India to occupy a significant leadership role among the countries of the global south, thus facilitating south- south cooperation.

Chanakya, father of Indian polity and governance, has written in his famous work Chanakya Niti – “Kah kalah kani mitrani ko desah kau vyayagamau kascaham ka cha me saktiriti chintyam muhurmuhuh.” (4.18) It means – “Consider again and again the following: the right time, the right friends, the right place, the right means of income, the right ways of spending, and from whom you derive your power.”

In my view, this is a dictum which Indian foreign policy should be concerned about – acting at the right time, recognising the right allies, participating in the right organisations, enhancing the right means of strengthening the economy, investing in the right domains, and being aware of the means we use to derive power. Rest assured; the India’s majestic march has begun on the path to be the master of its own destiny - Bharat Bhagya Vidhata...

