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## A Tough Neighbourhood | Foreign Policy

*The new government must continue to strengthen relations with the United States, Japan, Australia and Southeast Asia as part of countervailing and constraining Chinese power*

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Illustration by Siddhant Jumde

**D**espite several changes in government over its 72-year history as an independent nation, India's foreign policy has displayed more continuities than departures. Successive leaders may have brought changes in style or emphasis, but each has had to function within parameters set by India's own relative power vis-à-vis other states and the changing geopolitical landscape within its own neighbourhood and beyond. The challenges Prime Minister Narendra Modi faced were not much different from what previous prime ministers did. He did not change the basic direction of India's external relations, but pursued some relationships and policies with greater vigour and personal engagement.

There is the perennial issue of Pakistan and its use of cross-border terrorism as an instrument of state policy. China remains the biggest foreign policy challenge for India and the asymmetry in economic and military capabilities between the two Asian giants is expanding rather than shrinking. Confronting China wherever India's interests are threatened is one part of managing China. Working together on issues of convergent interest with it is another and the two aspects need to be kept in balance. India's subcontinental neighbourhood is the most critical for India's national security and here the inroads that China is making by deploying resources far greater than India can is eroding the country's dominant position. The Gulf and West Asia continue to be important for India's energy security, for the welfare of the six million Indians who live and work there and because sectarian conflict in the region can have spillover effects on the fragile multi-religious fabric of the Indian state. This set of challenges will remain for the successor government. But they may manifest themselves in different ways and demand appropriate responses.

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The new government will have to grapple with the depressing reality of China significantly outpacing India in virtually all categories of national power-economic, military and now, technological. India's diminishing room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis China is a reality. The

steady penetration of Chinese presence in our immediate neighbourhood through the use of economic levers, which we are unable to match in scale and speed of delivery, will test Indian diplomacy. The impact of the long-standing China-Pakistan alliance will become more lethal and further constrain India. There is a very real threat of China succeeding in its continuing effort to tether India to the subcontinent and prevent its projection of influence in the region and beyond.

What this points to is a far greater and sustained focus on our professed "neighbourhood first" policy. There has to be much more regular political-level engagement and a deliberate policy of expanding the density of economic and trade relations with neighbours. We have the advantage of proximity in promoting economic relations, but this also requires investment in both physical connectivity and efficient passage of goods and peoples across borders. India must become the transit country of choice for all our neighbours leveraging its considerably advanced transport infrastructure which is also improving steadily. In addition, we should leverage the strong cultural affinity we enjoy with our neighbours, which China lacks. While our economic cooperation programmes in our neighbouring countries do not match China's, they are significant. But our delivery commitments is poor and China scores on this point too. There is an urgent need to set up an autonomous economic cooperation agency under the overall direction of the ministry of external affairs to ensure that India's credibility as an economic partner does not suffer in comparison to China.

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Confrontation with Pakistan is a major constraining factor on India's external relations. As long as Pakistan enjoys a strong Chinese shield and the US seeks Pakistani support for its withdrawal from Afghanistan, India's efforts to isolate Pakistan internationally will have only limited success. On the other hand, rising tensions between India and Pakistan bring back the hyphenation between the two countries and invites meddling by outside powers. The new government must see a way to bring about relative normalcy in state-to-state relations with Pakistan without giving up the focus on terrorism. There may be some opening available because Pakistan is uncomfortable with its heavy and almost singular dependence on China driven by its hostility towards India. The opportunity of a summit with Imran Khan at the forthcoming Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit should not be lost.

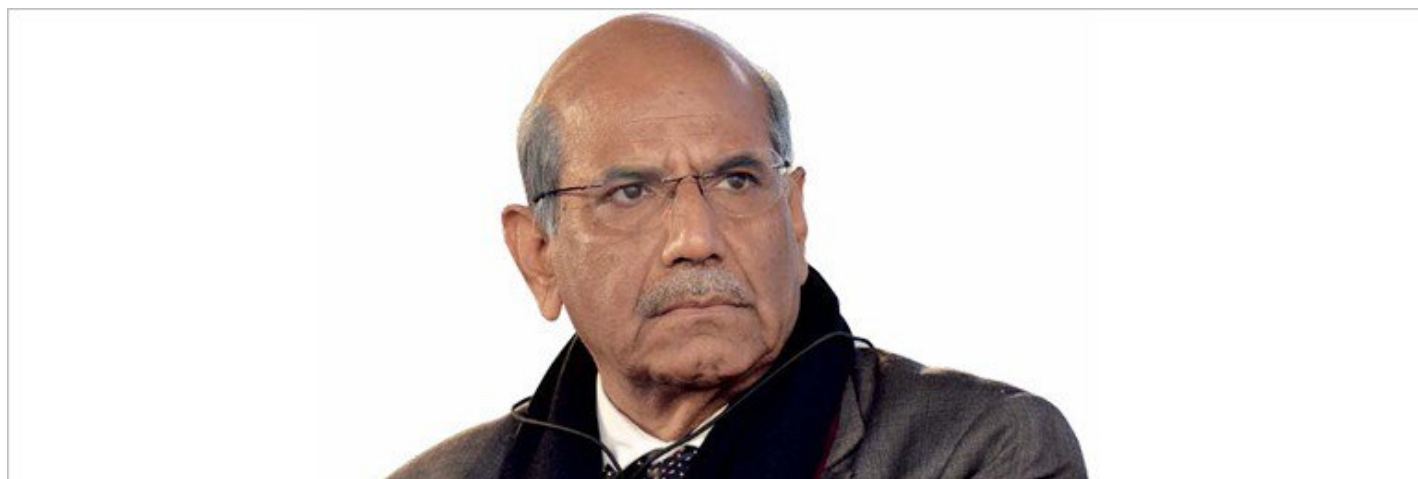
The new government must continue to strengthen relations with the US, Japan, Australia

and Southeast Asia as part of countervailing and constraining Chinese power. There should be less inhibition in further crystal-lising the Quad as a consultative forum on security cooperation. This should remain short of a full-fledged military alliance, but its value to India must be acknowledged. Australia should be invited to the next round of the Malabar naval exercises. Balancing relations with China and the US will become more difficult as the two major powers descend from competition to confrontation, but India must resist pressures to join an emerging containment ring around China. It is also important to remain engaged with Russia which continues to be a major and friendly power. It should not be seen as irrevocably committed to its current alignment with China.

Deepening relations with Europe, particularly with Germany, which is now the most powerful country in the continent, must continue to be on our foreign policy agenda even as Europe disappoints due to its inability to prevent the ongoing fragmentation of the European Union. Africa and Latin America will remain regions of interest, both for their economic potential and for imparting a global reach to India's foreign policy. However, to sustain an expansive foreign policy, India will need to expand its paltry foreign service corps and deploy more resources to the pursuit of its external relations.

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Despite the unpredictability of Trump, India-US relations have been consolidated and defence and counter-terrorism cooperation has expanded. The weak point lies in a contested economic and trade relationship and this will need urgent attention of the new government. India has been a major beneficiary of globalisation and of a more open trade and investment regime. The temptation to walk back from this must be resisted because this will push India further towards the margins of the global economy, reduce its political leverage and put paid to any prospect of catching up with China.





By Shyam Saran

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