



# *Vibrant India*

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## *The New Resolve of a Confident Nation*

*One of the surest signs of a strong and self-confident nation or of a weak and diffident country is to be found in its foreign policy postulations. In the last more than three years, New Delhi's foreign policy perspectives have undergone a sea change — from being tentative and constantly looking over the shoulders for approval or disapproval from others, to being driven by national interest, and national interest alone. Whether it was the Look East and its transformation to Act East, or outreaches to Arab nations as well as Iran, or the new warmth in relations with both Israel and the US while maintaining close ties with Russia, or the renewed engagement with Europe — the Modi Government has established a new paradigm which says loud and clear that India Has Arrived.*

*Among the boldest moves and also arguably the most significant has been the de-hyphenation process. Essentially speaking, hyphenation was the country's foreign policy polestar. Thus we had Israel-Palestine, US-Russia (or formerly the Soviet Union), China-Southeast and East Asia, and even unbelievably Islamic-non-Islamic nations. This reduced our international relations exercises to ensuring that one got 'balanced' with the other. In simplistic terms, when New Delhi spoke in favour of Israel (which it rarely did over the decades), it quickly also added words in honour of the 'cause of our Palestinian brothers'. In any enhancement of our relations with the US (which became quite pronounced beginning with PV Narasimha Rao's tenure) we were prompt to assure our all-weather friend, the Russians, that India-Russia ties were "as strong as ever and will always remain so". We didn't get too close to Southeast and East Asian nations because of Chinese apprehension. The balancing act became so farcical that finally, India didn't know where it stood — nor did the others, friends and otherwise.*



*All that has changed over the last three years. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Israel was a historic one not just because it was the first trip by any Prime Minister to that country. It was also historic because the de-hyphenation had been done away with. Prime Minister Modi did not visit Ramallah (in Palestine) to strike that famed 'balance' despite warnings back home from sundry politicians, policy experts and others who continue to live in a frozen era. It was a bold move by the leader of a nation which is sure of its stature in the world community and makes no effort to hide it. The open show of friendship between Modi and his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu was the icing on the cake. There is no fear now of an Arab backlash — there never ought to have been, given that Muslim nations such as Jordan, Egypt and Syria actually have a working relationship and even treaties with Israel — and all three of them have gone to wars with the Jewish nation in the past!*

*It is true that Palestine Liberation Organisation chairman Yasser Arafat, who often referred to Indira Gandhi as his "elder sister", did not support Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir, but it is also true that neither did Israel. However, none of the countries belonging to the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) backed India's stand on the matter, despite being grateful to India's backing to the Palestinian cause. And yet, New Delhi continued with its Israel-Palestine hyphenation as some sort of a zero sum game to appease the OIC. It needed boldness to course-correct, and that has now been done.*

*Just how paranoid Indian diplomacy had been in the decades since independence can be understood in the context of India-US- Russia relations. In one way, India's dealings with the US in the Nehru and the Indira Gandhi eras were similar to that of our stand vis-a-vis Israel. We kept a safe distance from Washington, DC, for fear of annoying Moscow in the Cold War time. But we covertly sought help from the Americans — as in meeting our food grain requirements in the pre-Green Revolution period, or seeking military help during the 1962 war with China. We received the first after a great deal of pleading but did not get around to receiving the second because the Chinese abruptly ended the war once they had completed their humiliation of India. If*





*the explanation is that the Cold War period was a bipolar one and New Delhi could not be seen on both sides simultaneously, then it brings to question the concept of non-alignment, of which idea India was a prominent mover. Although noble on paper, the non-alignment concept was a farce in practice, and, for India, another occasion to keep hyphenating every other nation to a level that New Delhi ended up losing its identity.*

*The constraints that hyphenation brought, disincentivised us to strike closer partnership even with countries that were in the near neighbourhood and crucial to national security and stability. Thus, years were wasted before we summoned the courage to reach out to the likes of Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Singapore. New Delhi did not want to annoy Beijing with whom some of these nations had territorial and other disputes of a long-standing nature. Ironically, this gesture did not in the slightest influence China, which continued to be hostile to us — whether it be the border disputes or on affairs relating to Pakistan. The Modi Government's Act East policy has broken those shackles and today New Delhi openly and proudly flaunts its relationship with East and Southeast Asian nations. Not just that, it has bluntly told the world community — in an apparent reference to Beijing's muscle-flexing in South China Sea — that it backs freedom of navigation for all in international waters. This new-found determination has been most recently and most tellingly demonstrated in the standoff with China in Doklam at the Tibet-Bhutan-India tri-junction. In the past, the Indian troops would have been most probably asked to withdraw by the political leadership to hasten de-escalation and normalisation. This time around, despite many veiled warnings from Beijing, the Government has refused to back down. Instead, it has gone ahead with the Malabar naval exercises, in which the Navies of India, Japan and the US have participated. It is possible that Australia, which has been wanting to join this exercise, will be brought in at some near future date — though it's not that we don't conduct bilateral exercises with Canberra; we do, in what is called AUSINDEX, the Australia-India naval collaboration, of which the most recent one was held just a month ago. But given the Modi Government's no-nonsense approach to national interests, we could see the next high level being touched soon.*



*It's the mark of a confident nation that, while it keeps national security upfront in dealing with and even snubbing powerful countries (something which tiny Israel has repeatedly demonstrated to the world), it also shows the maturity to not disrupt other ties, such as in the areas of trade and commerce. We held firm to our position in the World Trade Organisation on agricultural tariffs despite US pressure; we have told Beijing in no uncertain terms that India would like to address the deficit it suffers from in bilateral trade; New Delhi has gone ahead to reiterate its commitment to the Paris climate change agreement despite the US pulling out of it; we have broad-based our list of defence equipment suppliers, moving beyond Russia and to the US, France and Israel. But at the same time, we have continued to enhance our economic relationships with nearly every country with whom we have disputed on disparate issues.*

*The net result of the new resolve, of the firmness of purpose, of the refusal to anymore sit on the fence, and of the courage to call a spade a spade, has been a growing, and in some quarters grudging, admiration for India. The message has gone loud and clear; That New Delhi can no longer be taken for granted; that it has its own mind and is quite prepared to ruffle feathers if it comes to the crunch.*

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## About VIF

*Vivekananda International Foundation is a non-partisan institute for dialogue and conflict resolution from a nationalist perspective. Some of India's leading experts in the fields of security, military, diplomacy, governance, etc have got together under the institute's aegis to generate ideas and stimulate action for greater national security and prosperity, independently funded.*

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