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# India's Foreign Policy during Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper examines Indian foreign policy under Atal Bihari Vajpayee in terms of realistic pluralism. It argues that since the 1998 nuclear test, India has developed a slightly different style of realistic foreign policy as a means to achieve its core interests. It is characterized by an emphasis on engagement with contemporary challenges such as neoliberal globalization, terrorism, the issue of disarmament, coping with the changing international order, the decline of multilateral institutions, and new regionalism, etc. To deal with all these issues, India adopted realistic pluralism to accelerate India's economic development and security interests, as well as enhance its status as an emerging power in the international system by continuously promoting its cherished values. This paper explains how a party with its rightist ideology occupies power at a time when Congress fails to deliver people's aspirations. It analyses the key arguments that have been presented in this framework and the way Bajpayee put them into practice. It concludes with the assessment of Bajpayee strategies and future prospects that it will deliver for Indian foreign policy.*

**KEYWORDS:** Indian Foreign Policy, Atal Bihari Bajpayee, realism with restraint, Political acumen and diplomatic sagacity

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## INTRODUCTION

Atal Behari Vajpayee, as Prime Minister of India, had retained this position for three terms. The first term was in May 1996, which lasted just 13 days; the second term lasted for 13 months (March 1998–April 1999); and in the third term (1998–2004), as a leader of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), he completed the full five-year period. He is the tallest leader of the largest democracy and the first non-Congress leader to hold this highest office. As the Prime Minister of India, he shows political acumen and diplomatic sagacity, which have guided India's foreign policy to new heights.

His decision to undertake a nuclear explosion in May 1998 (Ganguly: 1999, Jayaramu: 1999, Sundaram& Ramana: 2018), developing friendly relations with neighbours (Chattopadhyay:

2010), inking the historic Lahore Declaration with Pakistan on February 20, 1999 (Ahmad: 2019; Dodh: 2017; Hafeez: 2011), Sino-India relations, Bajpayee's visit to China in 2003, and the institutionalization of the Special Representative (SR) mechanism for resolving the border dispute (Acharya and Despande: 2003), closer ties in Indo-US relations (Upadhyay: 2020; Malone & Mukherjee: 2009; Nayan: 2000), etc. look as usual for a layman. But each specific move has a certain logic behind his strategies of realist pluralism to navigate India's foreign policy more systematically and pragmatically.

A vast body of literature, including an article by Abhijnan Rai on the website *Mint*, links Vajpayee to 19th-century European strategists like Metternich and Castlereagha. Manoj Joshi's article on Vajpayee foreign policy for *The Wire* labels it as an endearing one. Similarly, Dipanjan Roy Chaudhoury's piece in *the Economic Times* portrayed Bajpayee's foreign policy as contributing to India's growing global stature. According to Arunima Gupta's article in *Modern Diplomacy*, Vajpayee foreign policy acts as a foundational pillar in India's growth as a responsible and important global force, etc. On empowerment of Female see (verma 2023c).

But this paper is a deviation. The purpose of this paper is to understand the concept of realistic pluralism that was practiced by Atal Bihar Bajpayee in shaping India's foreign policy as an aberration from his predecessor. This paper argues that the concept of realistic pluralism consists of three intermingled factors that were practiced during Bajpayee. These are: 1) ensuring strong national power to improve national security; 2) employing strong soft power cards; and 3) multi-aligning and not allying with regional, sub-regional, and extra-regional power to achieve economic development and fulfil other strategic needs.

All the practice aims at achieving the four-fold objectives. These are: 1) enhancing national security and Hindu national power; 2) deepening relations with the US; 3) developing cordial relationships with India's neighbourhood countries and align with regional, sub regional and extra- power to accelerate India's economic, strategic and social development agenda; 4) projecting India as a leading power by promoting Indian values and traditions on an international stage. Practicing realism in Indian foreign policy is not new. Before him, Indira Gandhi practiced it in 1971, when Bangladesh emerged on the international stage. But Atal Bihar Bajpayee's practice of realistic pluralism leads to a new beginning as far as strategy is concerned.

Hence, we need to examine different aspects of his policies that were considered a pathbreaking effort or torchbearer to insulate Indian foreign policy to a new height. Different events are to be explained and analysed to understand Bajpayee's effort to materialize each particular foreign policy move. To elaborate further, this paper is organized in the following manner: First, it analyses the genesis of India's foreign policy, Second Atal Bihari Bajpayee's foreign policy, which was a deviation from his predecessor called a paradigm shift. He is cunning and showing prudence and restraint in linking security with economic development. In this section, it will be assessed how growing importance is given to economics in shaping foreign policy. The reform provided a much-needed push to facilitate his development agenda. Lastly, I conclude by assessing how his reforms in foreign policy contribute to shaping the future prospects of the Indian nation.

### **a) Indian Foreign Policy: Salient Features/Core Principle**

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of post-independent India, who advocated non-alignment, was instrumental in the initial stage of shaping India's foreign policy. The idea was that India was materially weak and faced many developmental challenges in the post-independence nation-building process. So, India did not desire to be part of block politics during the Cold War period. As a result, it kept its distance from the two superpowers while advocating its commitment to causes such as decolonization, anti-imperialism, and disarmament and wishing to pursue one world notion as an emblem to preach idealism in guiding international relations by adopting a strategy called non-alignment. Non-alignment as a strategy means to adopt India's independent political and economic policy as well as promote world peace and international cooperation (Lal: 1967).

Nehru's death in 1964 and the India-China war of 1962 led Indira Gandhi (as Prime Minister of India from 1966–1977 and 1980–1984) to follow different strategies as She saw non-alignment as a kind of balance of power not meeting to India's national interest (Hall:2022). It is neither meeting the national security demand nor provided any space to preach world peace. It is in this context of Indira Gandhi's foreign policy, Stephen Cohen used the term "militant Nehruvian" to describe how she cultivated pragmatic devotion to non-alignment (Chiriyankandath, 2004). Indira's narrow focus on national interest and her opinion that India is a great nation and, if not a great power, any threat to her independence will be met through military means (Hall:2022). Later, the short-sting Janata regime, under the leadership of Morarji Deshi, ran the government, and his foreign minister, Atal Bihar Bajpayee, still gave much weight to non-alignment strategies. Even thereafter, Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi improved their relations with the US, but there was no major restructuring in their policy.

India, particularly in the late 1980s, was marked by, as Atul Kohil said, a crisis of governability. In such a situation, the very basic pillars of political and economic policy were weak, and it had impacted Indian foreign policy, leading to a balance of payments crisis. The reason behind this crisis was the disintegration of the USSR, which led to a narrowing of economic assistance and the depletion of India's economy. It was in this alarming situation that P.V. Narasimha Rao, the then Prime Minister of India, introduced the economic reform of LPG (liberalization, privatization, and globalization) and the "Look East" policy as a part of changing the direction of Indian foreign policy to attract trade and investment from East Asian countries to accelerate Indian economic growth (Hall:2022)

There are two notable changes marked in the global as well as domestic spheres of India at that time. The disintegration of the USSR led to the end of the Cold War, and simultaneously, as Rajani Kothari said, the Congress system, in which Congress as the single largest party dominated the ruling India, declined. With this change, the pattern of ruling enters the coalition era, where multiple parties form alliances and run the government at the center.

## **b) Atal Bihar Vajpayee's Foreign Policy: The Paradigm Shift**

As a leader, he is a natural grand strategist who cultivates realistic thinking in the state craft. Morgenthau, a leading theorist on international relations, argues in his work, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, that realists define power in terms of interest. In the same line as Chanakya, *Athasastra* said that a king's main goal is to increase the power of his state, expand the empire, and destroy his enemies. Hence, the concept of power is largely understood as having a coercive thrust in both western and Indian traditions. Moreover, national power is defined by the ability to alter the behaviour of others to get what you want.

As a realist, he knows the role of power in shaping international relations. Power affects and influences the state to varying degree over one another, thereby shaping political outcomes. The successes and failures of a nation's foreign policy are largely a function of its power and the manner in which that power is utilised. The shifting focus of Indian foreign policy during Vajpayee was from Idealism to pragmatism has been describe by analyst as "crossing the Rubicon" (Raj Mohan:2003). Indian policy makers argue that it is a deviation from Morgenthau description of political reality as it combined with normative principle (Kumar:2008). However, Vajpayee practice of realism is a comprehensive one which I term as realistic pluralism: it consists of three factors: 1) hard power, 2) soft power and 3) multi-aligned and not alliance formation

### **1. Ensuring strong national power**

In 1995, the global non-proliferation treaty (NPT) was extended indefinitely and unconditionally. India, a long-time champion of complete nuclear disarmament, rejected the nuclear non-proliferation treaty because only the P-5 members of the UN Security Council have the authority to use nuclear weapons. On the other side, the P5 is not interested in complete disarmament. This prompted the P-5 to propose another treaty regime, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), in 1996 with a contentious "entry into force" clause. This clause was added on China's request, and it indicates that if New Delhi does not sign the CTBT by 1999, it will face UN-imposed trade sanctions similar to those imposed on Iraq (Malik, 1998).

With the change of government, realistic policies and their impact on foreign policymaking were reflected a few weeks after the Bajpayee-led United Front government formed at the center in May 1996. In June 1996, Arundhati Ghosh, India's representative at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), declared that India opposed CTBT on the grounds of the nation's security considerations (Chiriyankandath, 2004; Jayaramu, 1999). India realized that both NPT and CTBT are discriminatory, and Pakistan's launching of the Ghauri missile on April 6, 1998 (Andersen, 2001) pushed India in between the policy choices of whether you have to acquire or lose a nuclear weapon. Bajpayee made a historic choice in May 1998.

## **2. May,1998 Nuclear Test (Hindu National Power)**

On May 11 and 13, 1998 the BJP led coalition government made two momentous decisions:1) it directed its defence scientists to test five nuclear devices at Pokhran, one of which was a thermonuclear weapon; and 2) India abandoned its 1974 promise to peaceful nuclear programme (Gidwani:1998). In reality, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) projected the 1998 nuclear test as a Hindu national power and a symbol of greatness and glory. This is more in line with the Rastriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) world view. M.S. Golwalkar, the dominant figure of the RSS, long ago argued that the manufacture of atom bombs was an imperative for India. This stands as the core principle in shaping India's foreign policy under Bajpayee. RSS always preaches for Hindu Nationalism "Hindu Rastra".

However, there are two issues to consider here: 1) What were the compelling reasons for Bajpayee's test of a nuclear bomb in 1998, and 2) Why did India take so long to test it? According to James Chiriyankandath, the purpose of answering the first question is to assert India's claim as a significant power in the post-Cold War international order. In explaining the rationale for the nuclear test, Bajpayee categorically said that "in the absence of universal and non-discriminatory disarmament policy, we cannot accept a regime that will create an arbitrary division between nuclear haves and have nots". India believes that it is the sovereign right of every nation to make judgment regarding its supreme national interest and exercise its sovereign choice.

Post-Cold War developments such as discriminatory disarmament regimes (such as CTBT and NPT) and the power of globalization driven by neoliberal ideology, where markets determine the outcome, led to many being sceptical about weakening the sovereignty of nation-states. In such a situation, India neither forcefully used the non-alignment strategy in the multilateral institution to advance its goals, such as UN Security Council (UNSC) reform or concern relating to the World Trade Organization, nor did it rely on Russia to meet armament and other issues (Mitra:2009).

The other related reasons are the growing threat posed by geographically close countries such as China (clandestinely providing nuclear know how to Pakistan) and Pakistan (breeding ground for terrorism), which is forcing India to revise its position on national power (Jayaramu:1999). In particular, Bajpayee specifically conveyed to US President Bill Clinton that growing China's strategic challenge was the rationale for justifying his stand on nuclear tests (Ganguly:1999).

The second answer is that India long ago acquired a British-assisted research reactor as early as 1956 and conducted a peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974, but it never upgraded to weapon grade because of financial, strategic, and moral limitations (Chiriyankandath, 2004).

As a leader guided by realism in statecraft, Bajpayee felt that India's national security was fundamentally ensured by a "strong national defence." The term "strong national defence" suggests effective deterrence capacity, including nuclear bombs, that is in line with the most

recent advancements in military technology. To Bajpayee, security and development go hand in hand. He says, "Without security, there can be no development; without development, our security is incomplete" (Li Li, 2008).

All of the above-mentioned reasons prompted Bajpayee to stick to real politics and direct the nuclear test in 1998. But Bajpayee struck a delicate balance in shaping India's foreign policy (by testing bomb and projecting Hindu national power) without ignoring or sidelining religious minorities. Vajpayee, after the May 1998 nuclear test in his statement to the parliament on May 27, 1998, alluded to the Nehruvian position of a nuclear-free world. He said, "our leader also realized that a nuclear-free world would enhance not only India's security but the security of all nations." That is why disarmament continues to be a major part of our foreign policy (Chiriyankandath, 2004).

While projecting India's hard power, Vajpayee at the same time-initiated measures for normalizing relations with Pakistan as well as China. Hence, his foreign policy of realism is a delicate balance between prudence and restraint. There are a number of evident testimonies to such a view. The first such instance was the aftermath of the nuclear test in May 1998. There is a cloud of scepticism over issues relating to the safety of nuclear weapons. There were experts who felt that a newly occurring nuclear state may play an irresponsible role and that minor confrontations may lead to crisis instability in the South Asian region.

However, Bajpayee clears the nuclear ambiguity by adopting two stabilizing measures: 1) an informal moratorium on further nuclear tests; 2) India announces a draft nuclear doctrine, which is a commitment to No First Use (NFU). This informal moratorium is proof of the agreed-upon Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) provision, which India earlier denied. And in relation to signing CTBT, Jaswant Singh, the foreign minister of India, negotiated with the US administration to withdraw sanctions and lift the ban on the transfer of high technology after the May 1998 test, followed by US sanctions (Jayaramu, 1999). And about "No First Use," various strategist views it as a proof of India as a responsible nuclear power (Sundaram& Ramana, 2018). India will follow a doctrine of "credible minimum nuclear deterrence" for its safety and it will use nuclear when survivability of our nation is in danger.

### **3. Institutionalising National Security Architecture**

Vajpayee has created a new institutional mechanism to address the growing security challenge to nuclear-armed India. A new institution, such as the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), was created to cater to Indian decision-making in relation to the use of nuclear weapons. In August 1999, the NSAB released its draft nuclear doctrine, and much later, India unveiled the Nuclear Command Authority in January 2003. About the Bajpayee government's position on India's nuclear weapon posture, Ashely Tellis says it is a "*force in being*" that is a deterrence posture consisting of available but dispersed components that are capable of being constituted into a usable weapon system (Chiriyankandath, 2004).

The other instance of Bajpayee's restrained posture was during the Kargil War in 1999. India made it clear in the early stages that it would not cede any territory or accept any ceasefire

unless Pakistan's forces had vacated the peak of Kargil. On the other hand, he instructed the Indian Air Force (IAF) not to breach the Line of Control (LoC). Reaching out to Pakistan through a historic visit to Lahore, witness his transformative vision of improving India-Pakistan relations. Despite terrorist attacks on the Indian parliament in December 2001, the Kargil War of 1999, and the Kandhar incidence and failure of the Agra summit, Bajpayee reached Pakistan in search of good neighbourly relations that led to peace and prosperity in the region. Using back-channel diplomacy to restore relations with Pakistan, the use of track two channels gave some momentum to the India-Pakistan peace process by adhering to composite dialogue (Hafeez, 2011). Pakistan, on November 3, 2003, gave a proposal of a ceasefire along the LoC, which India accepted.

Similarly in relation to China, India, under Bajpayee, achieved nuclear parity in 1998 and reached Beijing in 2003. The visit to China had two important reasons: 1) India's official recognition of the Tibet Autonomous Region as a part of mainland China. 2) instituted a Special Representative (SR) mechanism to resolve the border issue (Acharya and Despande: 2003).

## **5. Use of Soft Power**

The concept of soft power was coined by American scholar Joseph S. Nye Jr. in 1990. He described power as "when one country gets other countries to do what it wants." He explains that power's ability to alter the behaviour of others can be done in three ways: 1) coercion (sticks), 2) payment (carrots), and 3) attraction (soft power or co-optive power) (Malone, 2011). While hard power rests on coercion, soft power is the ability to achieve this through attraction. Nye Jr. further said that in today's world, power articulated simply by focusing on the military level, losing its hold, rather than factors such as technology, education, and economic growth, which are more significant at the international level (Malone, 2011). In explaining the relevance of soft power, Shashi Tharoor wrote, "Hard power without soft power stirs up resentments and enmities; soft power without the hard power is a confession of weakness" (Tharoor, 2009).

Some of the best instances where Bajpayee use his soft power cards are analysed here. Just after the nuclear test, the US imposed economic sanctions against India. Not only this, but as many as fourteen countries, such as Japan, Germany, Australia, Canada, Sweden, and Denmark, suspended their bilateral aid programs as a sanction against India and Pakistan (Morrow and Carriere, 1999). This period was a period of total isolation because global power put pressure on India, but India refused to surrender to the dictatus of global power and was determined to face the challenge in the form of sanctions.

This led to a decline in net capital inflows. India was able to compensate for this initial loss of capital inflows through the sale of the so-called Resurgent India Bonds to non-resident Indians. This bond issue brought in over \$4 billion, and by October 1998, total reserves exceeded the April 1998 level (Morrow and Carriere, 1999).

Looking into the remarkable contribution of the Indian diaspora in pulling out of the economic crisis after India's nuclear test and subsequent sanction by the US. Atal Bihar Bajpayee announced that India will celebrate Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD). It is celebrated on January

9 every year since 2003 to mark the contribution of the Indian community to the development of India. In the Indian context, C. Raja Mohan argued that the Indian diaspora community constitutes India's soft power, which India used in her foreign policy as early as 2003. In addition, India's cultural and civilized richness, democracy, free media, independent judiciary, and vibrant civil society are also major components of India's soft power (Malone, 2011). The Indian diaspora plays an important role in India's influence across Asia. In the 1990's, Southeast Asia alone was home to an estimated 6.7 million people of Indian origin, and they brought home a remittance that contributed to India's development.

The Indian diaspora, as a soft power, provided valuable help to India's growing relationship with the US. In addition, India uses democracy as a soft power to appeal to the communities of the nation against autocracy and the menaces coming from terrorism. Rediscovering the common value (democracy) leads to closer India-US relations as argued by scholar like Malone and Mukherjee (Malone and Mukharjee:2009). As a result, India has joined a number of multilateral democracy promotion forums, including the Community of Democracies, of which India became a founding member in 2000. According to S.D. Muni, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee stated in 2001: "The shape of our new world order will be determined by the success of pluralistic democratic societies in destroying the ideology of bigotry and hatred that drives terrorism" (Malone, 2011).

## **6. Multi-alignment and non - alliance in Vajpayee's foreign policy**

According to Raghavan, multi-alignment as a strategy indicates that in the post-Cold War phase, countries such as China, Russia, Japan, and India emerged as poles, but none of them were strong enough of their own to shape a multipolar world order in which the US remained the sole superpower. In such a case, India established links with multiple countries (all developed and developing) at multiple levels (a complex matrix of cooperation, coordination, and rivalry, building a coalition of like-minded countries) to achieve their common interests (Raghavan, 2017).

India's multi-aligning strategy is different from a treaty alliance, which is supposed to meet the military requirement. Take the case of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), etc. This alliance was formed to provide security to member states from outside aggression (Duffy, 1967). Whereas multi alignment is a strategy as explained by Dr. S. Jaishankar, the present External Affairs Minister said its aim is to engage as many international stakeholders and partners as possible based on India's own political, strategic and economic calculations. It is more energetic and participative in nature (Mishra, 2023).

In the post-Cold War phase, India devoted its energy to achieving economic development and security. This strategy, particularly after the nuclearization of India, gave India more avenues to pursue it more vigorously. As Walter Andersen explains, India's focus on economic development was less of a threat from Pakistan until and unless it got external ties with others, particularly the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. The US also no longer provided arms to Pakistan, as it happened earlier, likewise disintegration of the USSR and improving China-Russia relations, which led to decline of Pakistan's strategic significance.



With less threat to the traditional security environment, India reshapes its foreign policy to attract foreign direct investment, access to high technology, and a global market by giving importance to the non-traditional security sphere. This ambition led to India reaching out to different global, regional, and sub-regional forums as a multi align strategy to harness the economic potential, which further helped India fulfil its need for economic and social development in the domestic sphere (Andersen:2001).

Hence, this multi align strategy is a strategy help to prioritise India's interest by improving relations with countries like the US, Israel, France, Germany, China and multi-regional groupings such as the European Union, IBSA, ASEAN, and others. Bajpayee's frequent visits to these nations witness to all these events.

## **7. Relations with USA, and Other Countries**

### **i. Relations with USA**

In the aftermath of the nuclear test, India repaired its ties with the US, and an intensive dialogue between the two countries resulted in a deeper partnership. Some analysts argue that India's nuclear test provided stimulus for closer bilateral engagement between India and the US. Scholars such as Stephen P. Cohen and C. Raja Mohan said it was a gamble that paid off, which forced the US to take India seriously and engage with India in a more sustainable manner, which had not happened earlier (Chiriyankandath, 2004).

The closer Indo-US relations during that period owe to as much as nine rounds of talk between India's Jaswant Singh and US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Tallbot between June 1998 and 2000. This sustaining dialogue led Bajpayee, in a speech to the United Nations general assembly session in September 1998, to characterize the India and the US, the world's largest and oldest democracies were "natural ally". The term natural ally was first invented by Bajpayee, which was later used by Man Mohan Singh and US officials, as expressed by American foreign affairs expert Stephen P. Cohen.

Bajpayee's remarkable achievement in the foreign policy sphere was his effort to reach the US, which culminated in signing a document "India Relations: A Vision for the Twenty First Century" with President Clinton during his later visit to India in March 2000. In his view, he makes his voice clear regarding the fact that democracy is an important determinant of US policy towards South Asia. The performance of democracy is a yardstick on which the US further depends its relations with South Asian countries (Nayan, 2000). In the later part of the speech, he explains his vision of Asia based on cooperative efforts based on democratic and universal values. And both the US and India also adhere to these values as pillars to achieve future peace and prosperity for both nations. The March 2000 document declared that the heads of government of the two nations would discuss bilateral matters and sort out differences. With this, several mechanisms, such as the US-India Financial and Economic Forum, US-India commercial dialogue, the US-India working group on trade, and the US-India Science and Technology Forum, were created.

After Clinton's visit to India, the then Prime Minister Bajpayee visited the US in September 2000. The thrust area of his visit was: democracy, terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, Kashmir issues, and deepening economic relations. About democracy, Bajpayee, while addressing the joint session of the US, remarked that "American people have shown that democracy and individual liberty provide the conditions in which knowledge progresses, science discovers, innovation occurs, enterprises thrive, and ultimately people advance." India's liberalized economy, coupled with a big and expanded market, attracts the US, and India snatches these opportunities for investment from the US to craft its development agenda. This closer relationship was reflected in their improvement in trade. By 2002, India's exports totalled US\$11.7 billion, whereas imports totalled US\$3.7 billion. These statistics show that trades are greatly in India's favour (Chiriyankandath, 2004, Verma 2023a).

The closer Indo-US relations helped India when US put pressure on Pakistan to end the Kargil adventure in 1999 (Raghavan:2017).US-India relations got due importance after 9/11 attack in US followed by Bush administration's policy against "global war against terror". Their closeness gained much recognition when they forged a strategic partnership in 2004 (Upadhyay:2020). This led to increased cooperation in areas such as commerce, technology, and defence. With the change in US administration, particularly after the election of Buss as president of America, his national security advisor, Condoleeza Rice, observed that India might in the future serve as a useful countermeasure against China's ambitions in Asia. The ballistic missile defence proposal by President Bush in May 2001 further brought warmth to their relations in such a contest. India and the strategic community felt that from deterrence to creditable defence, India would push to a new era where it would not only secure but enhance its security interests. For the first time, the National Security Strategy released by President Bush identified India along with Russia and China as potential great powers, and India is one such country with which US interest requires a strong relationship (Chiriyankandath, 2004).

## **ii. Relations with Russia**

The improved Indo-US relations did not alter Indo-Russia relations at the same time. Because Russia still meets major India's defense requirements in the post-Cold War phase, India also knows Russia is a major player in the energy sector in West Asia, and in the past, India has continued to get support from the UN in different strategic issues, so India has continued to chart a cooperative path to fulfil its security and energy needs.

Bajpayee made a diplomatic push to acquire a 20 percent stake in the gigantic Sakhalin-1 oil and gas fields in Far East Russia for \$17 billion in 2001. This was India's single largest investment abroad. His model of energy security by investing in overseas projects has since been followed vigorously, with a footprint now expanded to 20 countries, and energy diplomacy is part of India's engagement with other countries. The Moscow Declaration, signed in 2001 by Bajpayee and Putin, also marked the beginning of a close security and trade relationship with Russia (Gidadhubli:2001, Raghavan:2017).

### **Relations with China**

China's growth, both militarily and economically, poses a strategic threat to India. And periodic clashes in the border pose more irritation to bilateral cooperation. So, to develop a cooperative relationship with China, Bajpayee initiated a Special Representative (SR) mechanism to relieve the border tension (Acharya and Despande: 2003).

### **iii. Relations with IBSA**

India also sought cooperation with other big countries of global south in negotiation in multilateral institution such as the World Trade Organisation(WTO).It was essential in establishing a block of 21 developing nations( known as G21)opposing the European Union and the US continuation of massive farm subsidies ahead of the September 2003 WTO ministerial meeting in Cancun, India, Brazil and China led the G21 which demanded a new round of trade liberalisation in the area of investment and competition (Chiriyankandath, 2004). In 2003, via the Brasilia Declarations, the IBSA Dialogue Forum was formed and institutionalised. IBSA is a trilateral developmental initiative to promote south-south cooperation and exchange. There were range of issues such multilateral trade negotiation, UN reform, peace and security, terrorism, globalisation, sustainable development, social development are discussed in their dialogue form to make the mechanism more active and functional.

### **iv. Relations with the EU**

In Vajpayee vision the European Union would be a major force in the post-cold war international relations. As a result, he initiated strategic partnership that became feasible in the form of India-EU Summit in 2000 (Raghavan:2017). Later this became an annual event. At the same time India also developed closer partnership with the European countries like UK, France and Germany.

### **v. Relations with neighbourhood**

Bajpayee gave much attention to India's neighbourhood policy. But the term neighbourhood is a complex one. It can cover both immediate and extended ones. After the 1998 nuclear test, the South Asian countries claimed that India was trying for regional hegemony, but Bajpayee changed the narrative of the South Asian countries by using his famous dictum that "you can change friends, not neighbours. In explaining India's renewed focus on neighbourhood, former foreign secretary Shyam Saran said India, at this juncture, gave high priority to closer political, economic, and other ties with her neighbours in South Asia. The core of this neighbourhood concept lies in historical and cultural communalities.

### **vi. Immediate Neighbourhood**

As a part of its neighborhood policy, India gives due importance to repairing its deteriorating relations with Pakistan. India's relations with Pakistan are based on anecdotal history (Ahmad, 2019). The historic Lahore Declaration aims to show support for a strong and stable Pakistan

(Dodh, 2017). For this, they have to settle disputes peacefully, end terrorism, initiate Kashmir talks, reduce nuclear risk, liberalize trade and visas for deeper cooperation, etc. (Mitra, 2009). To achieve all these objectives, India under Bajpayee initiated the “composite dialogue” process (Hafeez, 2011). In relation to Bangladesh, Bajpayee restarted the Dhaka-Calcutta bus service in June 1999, and in July 2001, the Dhaka-Agartala bus service was introduced. Bajpayee's 1999 visit led to an enhancement in trade, and both agreed to the restoration of multi-model communication links to richer trade potential in the near future.

Due to his foreign policy shift India achieve much economic gain through trade with different region of the world. As a result, India has taken a transformative step to shape key area of concern. Similarly, countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives, Myanmar got greater attention during Bajpayee as a Prime Minister. Simultaneously India’s traditional friendship cooperation was extended to Bhutan and Nepal and Afghanistan during this period (Raghavan:2017).

#### **vii. Extended Neighbourhood**

In 1998, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Bajpayee gave a new orientation to the existing Look East Policy. During his period, the concept of an extended neighbourhood was extensively used. As Kumar said beyond India’s immediate neighbour, India is in the best geographical position to pursue cooperative endeavour to establish Pan-Asian nationalism and reach beyond South Asia and region such as East Asia, West Asia, Central Asia and so on (Kumar:2008, Verma 2023b).

Earlier Look East policies visualized relations with ASEAN countries, and their focus was mostly on trade and investment. But the Bajpayee regime extended the definition of East by covering other than ASEAN members like Australia, Japan, and South Korea. In this period, the sphere of cooperation extended to wider economic and security issues, including a joint effort to protect the Sea Line of Communication (SLOC) and coordinate counter-terrorism, etc. In addition, India is also part of subregional groupings such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Scientific, Technological, and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). MGC initiative was established in 2000 with the five members: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and India, to achieve greater economic and security cooperation. (Singh, 2015).

#### **viii. Relations with West Asia**

Bajpayee recognized the value of Israel's military technology in dealing with the growing challenge posed by Pakistan. In response to this strategic necessity, India established political ties and exchanges, which resulted in the institutionalization of a national security-level dialogue in 1999 and the Joint Working Group (JWG) in 2000. India expands connections with Israel while maintaining its longstanding support for the Palestinian cause. India is also developing relations with Iran in order to expand trade and investment in oil and gas and the connectivity corridor. They went on to outline strategic-level cooperation, which resulted in the 2003 Delhi Declaration (Shah:2021, Verma, 2023a).

In a nutshell, multi-align serves India’s two purposes: 1) access to regional and multilateral grouping; and 2) bilateral strategic partnership with different countries. Both help India to

accelerate economic development and manage security challenges. During Bajpayee's tenure as Prime Minister, India signed strategic partnerships with countries like France in 1998, Japan and Russia in 2000, the US in 2001, and Iran in 2003.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee's multi-aligned strategy helped him bring major economic reform to the home front, including the first time he set up a department of disinvestment to a privatized sick public sector unit. The most important disinvestments were Bharat Aluminium Company (BALCO) and Hindustan Zinc, Indian Patrochemical Cooperation Limited (VSNL). Bajpayee also initiated the new National Telecom Policy (NTP99) for telecom firms with a revenue-sharing arrangement. In the field of infrastructure, the Golden Quadrilateral and Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana—an all-weather road—connected all villages in India.

## 8. Assessment

Atal Bihari Vajpayee's choice to conduct a nuclear explosion in 1998 led India to redraw the geopolitical map of post-Cold War Asia (Malik, 1998). It made a decision during a period when India lost a valuable friend (the demise of the USSR) who might provide a strategic nuclear security umbrella, which raised questions. In the neighbourhood, China's military alliance with Pakistan presented India with new security challenges. Again, India's uneasy relationship with the sole superpower, the US, as well as the force of globalization and China's growing economic and military prowess, push India to rethink its foreign policy in order to attain the best national security possible. The positive outcomes of nuclear tests are mentioned below.

First, this helped India show the rest of the world that it can play a significant role in shaping the new international order. Second, it signalled the end of a year of nuclear apathy. Third, it does not follow a non-proliferation regime based on nuclear have over nuclear have not. Four, it also effectively demonstrates its hard and deterrence power against the nations (Pakistan and China) and responds to sponsoring terrorism, as well as correcting the asymmetries in the power relationship between China and India by undermining China's perception of being the only legitimate nuclear power in Asia; and five, rearranging the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region and more and more application of nuclear confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) gain currency in South Asian regions (Malik, 1998). Six, In addition, India clears its nuclear ambiguity in relation to its use by providing a command-and-control architecture.

Finally, equally, nuclear tests also allow India to maintain close security relations with the US. It appeals to the US that India is no longer a non-alignment but rather a muscular one willing to defend its security interests well (Raghavan, 2017). This led to deeper Indo-US relations in the form of strategic partnerships by convincing them of the transfer of high technology, defence deals and other financial deals. India also developed closer strategic ties with Israel, a US allies, who can help India by using the Israel lobby and influencing the US (Cherian, 2008). In this way, India diversified its defence requirements in the post-Cold War period, whereas earlier India depended solely on the USSR.

Similarly, India, by using its soft power, further chanted a path of development: first, it successfully met the sanctions imposed by developed nations after the May 1998 nuclear test. In such a situation, the Indian diaspora helps India overcome a financial crisis. Second, by pursuing democratic roots, India made a strategic partnership with the US by cherishing democratic values in the world, and India is a leading member of the communities of democracy founded in 2000. All these factors help India to claim a permanent seat with veto power in the Security Council of the United Nations.

A multi-align strategy leads to closer relations with regional, sub-regional, and extra-regional power. Bajpayee's close relations with the US and increased ties with the EU and European countries such as the UK, France, and Germany play a larger part in shaping India's development trajectory. Further neighbourhood policy, both immediate and extended, leads to increased economic and security cooperation. The idea of extended neighbourhoods first appeared in the Ministry of External Affairs Annual Report for the years 2000–2001 (Scott, 2009), which promoted the idea that India is a major power. Particularly, its focus was on geoeconomic cooperation and cooperation in the energy area and later extended to security sphere.

In fact, Vajpayee's practice of foreign policy is not necessarily realistic in an absolute sense because his thought that for a country like India, enhancing national power involves not only hard military power but also soft power as well. The multi align strategy provided much help to guide the country in the path of development by expanding its sphere of influence from immediate neighbour in South Asia to extend neighbourhood and reaching to far way countries. According to David Scott, Bajpayee neighbourhood strategy entails that India's power projection strength lies in its hard military and economic power, soft power, or ideational posture (Scott, 2009). In fact, he employs all these ideas in shaping his foreign policy.

As a result, Vajpayee foreign policy is referred to as realistic pluralism. In a nutshell, his foreign policy initiative serves as a light for India's future development as an emerging power in the eyes of the international community. It enables India to play a significant role in shaping the international world order. This is now yielding dividends in the form of taking over the G20 and playing a leading role in the issues of climate change, UN reform, and other related global issues such as tackling the pandemic and providing COVID vaccine, etc.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Like any other strategy, realism under Bajpayee derives from a very thoughtful choice and articulation between perceived interests and one's preference, depending upon the issue and challenges you are facing. In such a situation, Bajpayee thought that realism should be considered in the form of prudence and restraint and the mixing of both hard and soft power and not be obsessed with non-alignment but rather use a multi-align strategy so that, while preserving its security interests, it should not create an environment that hampers its safe passage to achieve economic development. His focus was to attract capital flow in the form of foreign direct investment and improve infrastructure at home to attract investors to invest their

capital in India. While in pursuit of making India economically grow powerfully, he never wants to endanger its security concern and ignore the cherish value of India, so he provides a very political acumen and diplomatic sagacity to enhance the status of India by giving importance to security and economy and being simultaneously vocal about its longstanding cherish value.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Bajpayee's foreign policy confronts post-cold war challenges on two fronts: 1) India's continuous reliance with Russia in defense matter decreased, simultaneously India's threat perception increased from terrorism, disarmament regimes are highly discriminatory in nature and non-alignment strategy did not provide the required push to India at that juncture; 2) The force of globalization propelled India's neo-liberal, open economy into integration with the international market. India saw growing challenges to keep India's interest in the multi-lateral negotiation institution like WTO and other.

At this strategic crossroads, the testing of a nuclear bomb in 1998, despite widespread condemnation, helped to strengthen India's image as a major power (Horimoto:2017).

Now it is inevitable to give a critical look to Bajpayee's foreign policy, which can serve the future of India's national interests best.

First, India has to design its foreign policy to meet the evolving internal and external challenges to its security. The deeper strategic partnership with the US during Bajpayee's tenure as Prime Minister of India later paved the way for the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2008. To evolve further strategic defense partnerships with the US and others by matching expectations with practical cooperation. The present geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean regime (IOC) and possible alignment with link-minded nations can check the growing menace from China.

Second, as a political master stroke, use soft power, whether it is India's skilled manpower, Indian diaspora, traditional knowledge, including arts, crafts, culture, or democratic potential, particularly conducting free and fair periodic elections, to lure diverse regions to serve India's interests. Third, the multi-alignment strategy assists India in creating much-needed space, which rapidly sets the stage for achieving high growth in economic development and the search for alternative routes to achieve energy security as it requires in the near future. Exhibit much-needed support to immediate and extended neighbours in the vicinity of a strategic hotspot based on shared interests. Fourth, now those countries in the South Asian region, such as the Maldives, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, are reluctant to align, winning their trust requires investment in moral and physical assets on a short, medium-, and long-term basis. To attract more foreign capital and multinational investment, India needs to provide transparency, accountability, remove bureaucratic bottlenecks, create a business-friendly environment, and be cautious not to provoke religious minorities. India must support a rule-based international order. A stable and secure neighbourhood all around India provides a positive vibe to play a bigger role in international affairs.

All these components further help India to meet future challenges and reshape its long-term interest on the one hand and emerge as a leading power in the multi-polar world order on the other as a norm-shaper, which will guide international relations as a torch bearer in the coming decades.

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