

ESSAYS

POLITY

WHAT ARE INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES AGAINST A BACKDROP OF CAA & NRC?

What are India's foreign policy challenges against a backdrop of CAA and NRC?

With India sharing its borders with other countries such as Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, or being quite close to countries like Sri Lanka and Myanmar, it becomes easy for citizens of these countries to enter Indian territory, often without permission. There are many people that come into the country for work and return after the work is completed. Then there are others who come as tourists or refugees, but with permission from the government. However, there are hundreds and thousands of people that come into the country for different reasons, especially as refugees, but without authorization. Over the years, this has led to problems such as the refugees taking up jobs, using up important resources, or even indulging in violent clashes.

It is true that people fearing persecution in their home countries should have a means of getting out and seeking shelter, but unauthorized entry creates issues, most of which continue to exist for a long time. In such cases, it is the government's duty to ensure that peace is restored to find a suitable solution to such a problem. This is where the CAA or Citizenship Amendment Act and NRC or National Register of Citizens come into play.

What is the Citizenship Amendment Act?

The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 introduced by the BJP government, is a revised version of the Citizenship Act of 1955 and aims to provide a means to obtain Indian citizenship to the illegal immigrants (specifically Hindu, Christian, Jain, Parsi, Sikh, and Buddhist) that had fled Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh before 31 December 2014, fearing or facing religious persecution. This is the first time that religion has been considered a criterion when seeking Indian citizenship since the Act excludes Muslims from these countries. This Act caused a major uproar in the nation due to its discriminatory nature; there were riots and protests in many parts of India, with numerous injuries and deaths.

What is the National Register of Citizens?

NRC is essentially a register which documents all the legal citizens of the country and aims to identify and deport the illegal ones. It is a part of the Citizenship Act of 1955 and was implemented in Assam in 2013-14, owing to the fact that it is a border state, which experiences large scale illegal migration regularly. Now, the BJP government plans to implement it for the entire country in 2020. It has stated that there would be proper checks to verify citizenship, and those that are found to be living illegally in the country would be deported or held in detention camps, which the government has started building. The irony in all this is that many of the labourers constructing these camps do not have legal documents attesting to their citizenship, or are immigrants themselves, which means that they too might end up in the same detention camps they are constructing.

How do CAA and NRC pose a challenge to India's foreign policy?

The introduction or the pending introduction of CAA and NRC has not only created a major impact within the country, but has also affected India's relations with other countries, or its image. While the BJP government, under Narendra Modi, had managed to stabilize relations with neighbouring countries and introduce good foreign policies, the decision to implement CAA and NRC has created some problems, some of which are: -

- **Negative Impact on foreign relations:** Over the years, India's relations with its neighbours like Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and even Pakistan to a certain extent had improved. However, CAA and NRC have strained these relations. The CAA which been considered discriminatory and against the principles of secularism and has created problems with the three countries which are mentioned in the Act since they are Muslim-dominant countries.
The Act does not provide a means for Muslims from these three countries to attain Indian citizenship, like the other religious groups (the Act has made many feel that India is only for Hindus, and no other religious groups, especially Muslims), and this has been deemed extremely unconstitutional and has negatively affected India's relations with the three countries; leaders from these countries have canceled their India visit due to these acts.
- **Damaged India's Global Reputation:** The Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights states that while the idea behind the Act is commendable (providing citizenship and refuge to persecuted individuals), it should be done with no regard for religion. It also criticized the exclusion of Muslims from the provisions of the law, stating the step to be discriminatory. Similarly, many other leaders and organizations have criticized the acts, and this has dented India's global reputation. While the government has emphasized on the matter is an internal one, the fact remains that many nations and world leaders do not condone this decision.
- **Might Affect India on the China Front:** India needs to maintain a cordial relationship with the United States of America, especially since the US plays a major role in managing the China issue, and the US sees India as a reliable ally in controlling China's aggression in Asia. However, with 2 US panels- the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Commission on International Religious Freedom criticizing India's decision to implement CAA and NRC calling the move unconstitutional and discriminatory (especially since India is a democratic and secular nation) could negatively affect their relations, which might, in turn, create problems on the China front.
- **Might Affect Trade and Other Deals:** It might severely affect India's trade and partnerships since many global leaders, businesses, and nations, in general, have condemned its move to introduce CAA and NRC, calling it discriminatory against Muslims and for considering religion as a criterion for granting Indian citizenship to individuals seeking refuge from religious persecution. While it has already affected relations with Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, it could possibly create a negative impact on the commercial front, with other nations not wanting to engage in trade either. While India has made many efforts towards attaining self-sufficiency in many areas, it still depends on imports for many reasons, and that could take a major hit, in the backdrop of CAA and NRC.

There is no doubt that the problem of illegal immigrants is a major one and needs to be solved, and also the fact that India's decision to provide the means to obtain Indian citizenship to those fleeing religious persecution in the three countries (Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan) is a positive one. However, the problem lies in its implementation since it excludes Muslims from the provisions of CAA and NRC.