India Rising: From Regional to Global Power?

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The Geo-Political Context

The end of the post-Cold War period was marked by the transition of a unipolar world, where the United States (US) was the sole superpower in a multipolar scenario in which the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the nations of the European Union (EU) emerged as significant players. This opened up the balance of power to realignment as other major powers manoeuvred for significance in the global order. The World Trade Centre attacks of 11 September 2001 significantly catalysed this change by bringing war to the American territory, an unprecedented event. The war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 followed suit, engaging the United States in the Global War on Terror. In that way, the aftermath of 9/11 has resulted in a post-post-Cold War situation where the United States is engaged in a war and is grappling with resultant economic recession. Simultaneously, other rising powers such as India and Brazil are questioning the collective dominance of the US, the EU and Japan in global markets. Indeed, the emergence of Asian economies has further tilted the balance of power firmly from Europe towards Asia.

Of these economies, China and India are specifically under scrutiny given their unprecedented growth rates, purchasing powers and vast populations. China is already considered a major power and an emerging superpower with its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Asia-Pacific Economic Council (APEC) and the East Asia Summit. Moreover, in the light of the much-debated "peaceful rise of China", the

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rivalry between the US and China will dictate the structure of great power relations in the 21st century. In Asia, the consequences of this great power struggle are affecting geo-political dynamics in a way that has so far been beneficial to the emergence of India as a regional power.

Crisis management, the sustenance of dialogue and active reconciliation are crucial to India's rise as a regional power.

This paper discusses the way ahead for India as a regional power aspiring for great power status, arguing that India already has the makings of a great power in its resources, human and natural, its armed forces, its democratic polity, its geo-strategic location and the soft power it wields around the world. The challenges present in sustaining regional power status are also enumerated.

The Neighbourhood – Immediate and Extended

India's role as a regional power is premised to a large extent on India's role in its immediate periphery. India's strategic perspectives have also been shaped by the geo-political imperatives of the South Asian region. India is both a continental and maritime nation, with a territory of over 3 million sq km, a land frontier of 15,000 km, a coastline of 7,500 km and a population of 1.1 billion, the second largest in the world. Its location at the base of continental Asia and the top of the Indian Ocean gives it a vantage point in relation to West, Central and Southeast Asia and the littoral states of the Indian Ocean from East Africa to Indonesia. An energy-deficient country, India is located close to some of the most important sources of oil and natural gas in the Gulf and Central Asia and adjacent to the Malacca Strait, a vital sea lane through which 60,000 ships transit every year[1].

However, the Indian subcontinent is also the second most unstable area in the world, beset with two armed nuclear powers, disputed borders, separatist movements and radical extremism. The war situation in Afghanistan, transitions to democracy in Pakistan and Nepal that have had a violence-laden path to achieving their objective, further militarisation of the long-running conflict in Sri Lanka and the breakdown of the electoral process in Bangladesh have shown patterns of instability that are troublesome. Post 9/11, the major countries of South Asia have undergone major shifts in their security environments, thus, changing the face of the South Asian security situation completely.

Whilst most South Asian states share borders with India, they do not necessarily share borders with each other. As such, India's centrality to South

Asian identity, politics and conflict is inevitable. There are numerous challenges in countering internal terrorism and maintaining foreign relations with neighbouring states that have harboured or sponsored anti-Indian elements or are involved in disputes over land, water or borders with India. Crisis management, the sustenance of dialogue and active reconciliation are crucial to India's rise as a regional power. This rise is dependent on India's relations with its neighbours but also on their relations with each other – the less intra- and inter-state conflict, the better the scope for regional cooperation. In this context, India's geo-strategic location and global standing give it the capability to respond better to challenges faced by the region.

While avenues for cooperation can be found in what have traditionally been bones of contention, the internal problems of states also affect their participation in collective arrangements – this is also true of most South Asian states that have been plagued by intractable conflict. Variables of ethnicity, religion, identity, extremism have all played out in matters of regional policy, often to India's detriment. Thus, the future of India's role in the region will be impacted by the domestic situations of other states as much as it will by its own internal situation.

Securing India's National Interests

India's foreign relations were altered dramatically with the unravelling of the Non-Aligned Movement in the post-Cold War era. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, India's traditional Nehruvian foreign policy underwent drastic revision[2]. Since then, the ebb and flow of relations with the United States has resulted today in an altered vision of India's place in the comity of nations. Despite widespread criticism and sanctions, India had refused to sign the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), giving it pariah status in the realm of global politics. However, the signing of the Indo-US nuclear deal for cooperation on nuclear technology and fuel meant for peaceful purposes and other bilateral agreements with France, Russia, Japan, Australia and China are testimony to the changing times. Increasingly, the acceptance of India's regional role and her bid to global power status is forthcoming.

Within the region, India's relations with her neighbours have evolved considerably. Having fought three wars with Pakistan primarily because of the territorial dispute over Kashmir, the Indo-Pak relationship has also been strained due to issues of water sharing, cross-border infiltration, and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Skirmishes have taken place between the two nations,

particularly in 1984 over the Siachen Glacier and in 1999 over Kargil. The peace process between the two countries has suffered with the Indian leadership increasingly frustrated at the inability to rein in cross-border violence and the volatile domestic scenario in Pakistan. Post 9/11, the War on Terror realigned the context of the Indo-Pak relationship with the worsening of Pakistan's domestic situation and involvement on its western front[3].

Traditionally, India's relations with Pakistan have dominated the spectrum of India's role on the subcontinent. Even though India has been involved in conflict and cooperation with other neighbours, the leap from bilateral relationships to multilateral forums was held hostage by Indian disregard for outside interference in what were considered "internal matters". Smaller neighbours also viewed India as a regional hegemon, largely due to the belief that it meddled in the internal affairs of neighbouring states with a view to securing its own interests.

Indian involvement in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 was testimony to this. This preference was also manifest in the militarisation of India's diplomacy in the 1980s. Operation Pawan in Sri Lanka (1987–1990) involved the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) to disarm the Tamil militants fighting for an independent homeland and Operation Cactus in the Maldives (1988) entailed Indian armed forces intervening to save the democratic government from a coup attempt. The use of military intervention in a situation deemed suitable is symptomatic of India's perception of its role in the region. Clearly, this brand of coercive diplomacy was used in the conduct of bilateral relations with smaller neighbours to achieve objectives that are in line with India's democratic ideals.

This view has been diluted over recent years, with the move towards multilateral forums where South Asian countries engage in multilateral diplomacy and engagement on issues of conflict resolution. An attitudinal change has occurred since the focus moved away from Indo-Pak relations to closely examine India's relations with other neighbours as well. This has evolved through regional groupings such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as also at international forums like the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Yet, India's passive role has often led to the impotency of these collective arrangements; much to the chagrin of smaller nations, more progress has been made on a bilateral level than through multilateral initiatives.

While this method might have worked in certain circumstances to achieve short-term goals, there are other players in the neighbourhood that necessitate a broader approach. Crucial to India's sustenance as a regional power is the resolution of the boundary dispute with China. Forward movement on the

negotiation with China is crucial since the resolution of this dispute could alter the territorial map of India, just as the resolution of the Kashmir situation would do[4]. Both China and Pakistan are long-standing rivals and the settlement of either or both of these disputes will open up India's strategic culture, which has so far been centred on these issues. The fallout of this settlement will be to establish India's rights and claims on its territory as also to give way to a strategic thinking that is broader than the narrow confines of bilateral relations with traditional rivals over a territorial dispute.

The waning of the bilateral paradigm to strategic thinking will also mean that once the peaceful settlement of disputes has been achieved, a much more aggressive defence and foreign policy will be sought. The influence of a realist paradigm to strategic thinking in India could find its roots in the trans-Atlantic bearings of India's newly forged ties. For a region to engage creatively with processes of globalisation while retaining its hold on regional supremacy is a challenge.

In this respect, India's vital interests in the regions of the Gulf and of Southeast Asia hold immense potential. The Gulf forms part of India's strategic neighbourhood and an important source of energy, home to over the 3.5 million Indians and a major trading partner. Southeast Asia too plays an important role in India's strategic perceptions, as a dynamic partner in the growing economy and on account of ethnic and cultural ties. India's strategic vision towards this area was articulated in its Look East Policy, formulated in 1992. The policy was given an initial thrust with the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visiting China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Singapore and India becoming an important dialogue partner with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1992. Since the beginning of this century, India has given a big push to this policy by becoming a summit level partner of ASEAN (2002) and getting involved in some regional initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Ganga Mekong Cooperation and becoming a member of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in December 2005.

Challenges to India's Rise to Power

The power wielded by India in its extended neighbourhood is under constant threat given the menace of terrorism it is surrounded by. It is located at the centre of an arc of fundamentalist activism, terrorism and political instability between North and East Africa and Southeast Asia that has witnessed some of the most dramatic acts of terrorism over the last decade, from the US embassy bombings

of Nairobi and Mombasa, the incidents in Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Bali and Jakarta and the Bombay blasts of 1992.

India also faces on a daily basis, a proxy war from across its borders using terrorism and local insurgencies. There are also spillovers of internal conflicts in neighbouring countries and threats to internal security from extremist movements from within. This threat is exaggerated by an unstable nuclear and missile environment. Apart from China and Pakistan, declared nuclear weapon states with whom India has had a history of aggression and conflict, and proliferation emanating from, and to, the region, there is the complete unaccountability of these weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferating to non-state actors and other extremist elements. Moreover, the Indian Ocean Region from

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East Africa to Southeast Asia is also busy with fundamentalist, terrorist, and militant, separatist or extremist organisations, and criminal syndicates involved in trafficking in drugs, arms and ammunition, human trafficking and sea lane piracy. None of these problems is unique to India but as a frontline state, this constant struggle for sustenance and progress make its regional power standing all the more checkered with responsibility.

Despite India's standing in the world community, demographic differences across the country are so stark that often India's regional or global power is disconnected from the people that make up the country. Major challenges to India's rise to power also stem from this disconnect. The rhetoric of "India Shining" is not universal in its reality, and unpredictable economic challenges, the widening energy deficit and the threat of terrorism are the major challenges that present themselves to India's growth to global power status.

In addition, the lack of strategic thinking presents a deficit in the development of a security culture well-equipped to deal with the dimensions of internal security in vast portions of India's political territory. Solutions to these challenges are difficult to manage as institutional lethargy has weighed down the efficiency of the political and bureaucratic machinery in India. The lack of Centre-state coordination has meant that for years, New Delhi has charted out policy for parts of India that are distant, geographically and culturally, from the

Indian heartland. This has led to widespread alienation of these states and their people, giving rise to separatist movements that have seeped into mainstream politics, often having lost their original cause for rebellion. Thus, the affected populations feel misrepresented or disillusioned, feeding into this vicious circle of lack of governance, law and order deficit and ensuing anti-state rebellion.

But the root causes of discontent remain the same. Economic challenges are present in endemic levels of poverty, wide economic and income disparities, regional imbalances, backwardness of the agricultural and rural sector, infrastructure constraints, the inaccessibility of industrialisation to most of the population, the development of capital-intensive industries instead of labour-intensive ones and the lack of adequate access to markets in India and abroad for traditional goods. Even within agriculture, the problems of land holdings, fragmentation, outdated records of rights and lack of technology have hampered the growth of India's largest sector.

While India's economy has its misgivings, it has grown rapidly in inequitable ways over the past few decades. This growth has made India the fifth largest consumer of energy in the world. Yet, India is energy deficient in its coal, oil and natural gas reserves. It is clear that energy-deficient India will remain a net importer of these sources of energy. India's import dependence has intensified concerns that without reliable, affordable energy, it will be unable to sustain high economic growth. The situation is complicated as major oil suppliers are in unstable regions in the Middle East and Africa, prices are high, with a possible supply disruption due to geo-political uncertainty and volatility in oil prices and the lack of viable energy alternatives.

If, indeed, India is to realise its economic potential, it needs alternative sources of energy, foremost among which is nuclear energy. India's indigenous development of nuclear energy has been seriously impeded by the lack of access to material and technology. In an increasingly untenable security environment, the consolidation of India's civilian nuclear programme is essential. The fears over India's pariah status in the nuclear club were founded over India's refusal to sign the CTBT and the NPT and in its testing of nuclear weapons in 1984 and 1998. These have now come to ease by the signing of the Indo-US nuclear deal that opens up India's entry into the club of nuclear haves and opens up the way for trade with other suppliers such as France and Russia[5].

Also crucial to India's rise as a regional power is its handling of terrorism. In India, terrorism is not a linear phenomenon; it is, instead, spread across the periphery – in Kashmir, Punjab and the Northeast as separatist movements by

groups that have interests inimical to those of the Indian state. Urban India is no less, with pockets of communal tension and sectarian violence spread across the metropolitan centres of the country. Be it the Hizbul Mujahideen, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) or the Naxalite movement, India's tryst with terrorism is far from over. The addition of urban warfare to conventional warfare necessitates the engagement of India's security establishments in a new kind of conflict, with which they have no previous experience. The revision of the Indian military and law and order establishments to this effect are urgent requirements as was demonstrated by the terrorist attacks in Bombay on 26 November 2008.

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India in the Post-Post Cold War Era

The intense debate on the shape of future warfare has led to the vision of the armed forces of India circa 2020. The most efficient combination of manpower and technology will have to be implemented carefully and judiciously. The nature of threats to India's security are such that Army 2020 will have to be designed to function in an amorphous security environment, with capabilities to operate across the entire spectrum of conflict from low-intensity conflict to nuclear warfare[6]. India's military capabilities were also demonstrated elsewhere—India has provided as many as 55,000 Indian military and police personnel to serve in thirty-five UN peacekeeping operations across four continents. India maintains the third largest military force in the world, which consists of the Indian Army, Navy and Air Force. Auxiliary forces such as the para-military forces, the coast guard, and the Strategic Forces Command also come under the military's purview. India maintains close defence cooperation with Russia, France and Israel, who are the chief suppliers of arms.

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) must accelerate its projects for the indigenous development of arms and military equipment, including ballistic missiles, fighter aircraft and main battle tanks, to reduce India's dependence on foreign imports. But also, progressively, a minimised focus on indigenous development and a broader vision for joint development projects might capture the evolutionary spirit of security mechanisms through

defence partnerships across the region and internationally. Indeed, even within India, the pronounced emphasis on public sector defence production is dying down – through the Defence Procurement Procedure, 2008, there is momentum for public-private partnerships, thus, encouraging the private sector to enter into defence production, either on its own or through joint ventures with multi-national defence corporations[7]. This might be direct fallout of the Indo-US nuclear deal that has ended years of defence technology apartheid.

India also has a stake in the security of the Indian Ocean Region. To this end, the Indian approach to maritime security is essentially cooperative and has coordinated maritime patrolling arrangements with Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka. The Indian Navy has been providing hydrographic assistance to Indonesia, Seychelles and Mauritius, and maritime security cover for Summit Conferences in Mozambique. The Indian Coast Guard and Navy have been active in anti-piracy, disaster relief, and environmental management and response operations. The navy has also been conducting joint exercises in the Indian Ocean with the US, France, Singapore, Russia and Oman amongst others.

Except for their role in defence cooperation and joint military manoeuvres, the role of the armed forces is going to remain the protection of the territorial integrity of India by land, sea, air. But a country's national security is safeguarded not just by its armed forces but by its comprehensive national power. The latter is a product of several factors, most notably socio-economic conditions, defence capabilities and population[8]. Thus, while it is essential to revisit the traditional security paradigms in South Asia, for India, in particular, it is also important to note how non-conventional security variables have now entered the domain of mainstream security. Issues of water, food, livelihood, displacement, refugees, human trafficking, narcotics are only conceptually separate – in the real world, they remain so closely linked to the traditional security framework that in many instances, they define it. They are now recognised as impacting both inter- and intra- state security beyond what the Cold War discourse cognised or envisaged.

This can be further explained by illustrating India's role in the evolving global discourse on power through the wielding of its soft power. Joseph Nye, who coined the term "soft power", said that while hard power, the ability to coerce, grows out of a country's military and economic might, soft power arises from the attractiveness of the country's cultural, political ideas and policies, thus, enabling upcoming powers like India to project its foundational strengths.

As an emerging swing state in the global balance of power, India has a role carved out in the reconstruction of an Asian collective (alongwith Russia, Japan

and China), political crisis management in West Asia (with the trans-Atlantic nations) and the management of the effects of globalisation (alongwith emerging economies of the East and the West). Thus, India straddles the cross-cutting responsibility of discarding a traditional North-South dynamic in favour of an East-West engagement. Relations with existing powers are essential to this reworking of relations in the immediate and extended neighbourhood.

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With no pronounced policy, India's grand strategic shift will work in concentric circles – the first circle will look at its immediate neighbourhood where India will ascertain that no interests inimical to its national interests are present. This will also include ensuring the absence foreign influence on its peripheries. The second concentric circle is the extended neighbourhood stretching across Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral. India has already sought to balance the influence of other powers that are threats to undercutting its interests. Actions of outside powers – such as China in Myanmar – will be under continuous scrutiny. The third circle is the global stage, where India is cultivating relations with Russia as well as the US, given the fear of encirclement by its traditional rivals, Pakistan and China. On the global plane, India is seen as a keen stakeholder in international peace and security, disarmament and a preeminent power. This is desirable as India has expressed a real need for a world position and for the world's recognition of that position.

Conclusion

Some of India's strategic problems remain unchanged and India has not been able to devise a successful strategic policy to tackle them. These include the growth of Chinese economic and military power, internal and external militancy, Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan, China's involvement in Myanmar, the opening up of Central Asia, the deteriorating domestic law and order situation and Pakistan's assistance to insurgencies on Indian territory. For these fears of imploding, given its various internal instabilities and rebellions as also for the external threats that it faces, India will only be able to secure itself if a comprehensive strategy is formed and implemented. The future of military strategic thinking lies in combating proxy wars against the backdrop of nuclear weapons and fighting insurgency without destroying democracy[9].

An efficient bureaucracy and inclusive political machinery are first steps towards a successful resolution of India's problems. The rise to regional power status and beyond also depends on threat perception, force structures and war preparedness of India's armed forces. The aggrandisement of India's standing in the regional or global order need not be exclusive of India's involvement in the furtherance of a collective and cooperative regional mandate. In the post-Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) world, alliances have given way to strategic partnerships – a concept most befitting India's posture. Such partnerships will foster goodwill, with direct effects on trade and commerce. As such, the vision of a powerful India must stem from an all-inclusive trajectory of progress that doesn't preclude the interests of other regional powers. In this era of political globalisation, India's rise to regional and global power can only be founded on the principle of first amongst equals.

Notes

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