India's Grand Strategy

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Knowledge, not weapons, will be the currency of power in this century

India is unusual in having had a grand strategy at Independence to meet the external and internal challenges to its growth in order to become a major international actor. The Constituent Assembly's oath in 1947 implied that India would promote world peace for the welfare of mankind, including its own population, and it would assume its rightful global position by developing itself to the standards of the industrialised world. This was the strategic goal. It had to be achieved in a world recovering from a war-ravaged economy and entering the Cold War. At Independence, India was a downtrodden former colony with 80 per cent poverty, a life expectancy of 31, food shortages and low literacy. India's grand strategy during the second half of the 20th century, therefore, involved a policy of non-alignment to deal with external security problems, the adoption of the Indian Constitution to address governance challenges, and a partly centrally planned development strategy to accelerate growth.

Non-alignment, while a strategy, is often mistaken for ideology. Nehru first articulated it as a means to safeguard Indian security in 1946, after Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech, but before independence or Partition plans had been decided. But Nehru was not enthusiastic about a non-aligned movement. He favoured remaining in the Commonwealth and procuring defence equipment and licences from the UK, France and the US. It was only when the Soviet Union emerged as a more reliable provider of cheap but adequate military equipment against an increasingly hostile China that India's security interests aligned with Moscow's. Even then, India made defence deals in the 1970s and the 1980s with France and the UK, and also with the Reagan administration for jet engines. Non-

alignment was therefore pragmatic, and meant that India could get support from a superpower if its national security was threatened.

While campaigning against nuclear weapons, India's leadership from Nehru onwards also kept the nuclear option alive. India was compelled to declare itself a nuclear weapon power in 1998, only after the international community legitimised nuclear weapons by indefinitely extending the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and China armed Pakistan with nuclear weapons to balance India. Once India declared its nuclear capability, the attitudes of major powers changed.

The other aspects of India's grand strategy related to governance and development. No other country is comparable to India in terms of its diversity of religions, languages and ethnicities. Consequently, unity is only possible under a secular, pluralistic, democratic and quasi-federal constitution. Although India's Constitution implied accountable governance and the delivery of goods and services by the state, grave deficiencies emerged. Inadequate justice and law enforcement, unacceptable poverty and widespread illiteracy all persist, but universal adult franchise has empowered the previously disadvantaged to a level incomparable to elsewhere in the decolonised world. Although the record of the Election Commission is something to be proud of, deteriorating governance remains a serious internal security threat.

By century's end, India was a pluralistic and secular democracy on the path to becoming the world's third largest economy, with 62 per cent of the population above the poverty line despite its having grown fourfold. India had also dismantled the licence-permit-quota raj, demonstrated its technological prowess, and developed sizeable foreign exchange reserves. Despite such positive trends, poverty and illiteracy have still regrettably not been eliminated. Many have wondered whether India's development could not have been expedited by following another model, such as China's. They forget that Chinese communism allowed 30-40 million deaths from starvation. Independent India, by contrast, has never experienced that thanks to its democracy. Moreover, China benefited from Soviet assistance in the 1950s and external investments in the 1980s. Nor were many US allies significantly better off than India. It was only after the rehabilitation of Western Europe and Japan that available capital enabled the development of the Asian Tigers. India (along with the US) is unusual for democratising before industrialising. The emergence of most major nations — Britain, France, Russia, Japan and Germany — was viewed with concern by others, often resulting in war. While China's rise causes concern today, India's emergence does not.

The 21st century is vastly different from the 20th century. The numbers of states, their populations, their productivity and their standards of living have all increased manifold. The transportation and information revolutions have globalised the international system. Humanity as a whole has become more sensitised to gender, racial, and religious inequality and inequality of opportunity. Migration and demographic trends mean that pluralism will be required for peace and domestic stability. Violent conflict between great powers is becoming ever more unthinkable, and major states are today competing in peace, not war. There are many reasons for this: the existence of nuclear weapons, the establishment of the UN, powerful military alliances, decolonisation, the success of armed insurgencies and the spread of democracy. In this century, knowledge — not weapons — will be the currency of power and will determine the international hierarchy.

However, there are still challenges and threats to peaceful human progress and the preservation of pluralistic and democratic societies, including terrorism, failed states, one-party rule, pandemics and organised crime. The 20th century world order is unable to adequately address these challenges. The NPT cannot address terrorism resulting from acquiring nuclear weapons, old military alliances cannot deal with challenges such as Afghanistan, and the UN is not designed to defend pluralism, secularism, and democracy.

India's gravest security problem is jehadi terrorism, centred in Pakistan. Pakistan has been using terrorism as a state policy since it acquired nuclear weapons with Chinese help and American acquiescence in the 1980s. The United States' motives at the time were anti-Soviet, but China's were anti-India. India, of roughly equal population to China, has proved that a developing country can grow rapidly without sacrificing either democracy or pluralism. Along with American influence, India's rise threatens China's hegemonic ambitions in Asia, and Pakistan serves as a convenient springboard by which to counter both.

Thus the real question about the future world order is whether it is to be democratic and pluralistic, or dominated by one-party oligarchies that prioritise social harmony over individual rights. If the US remains the world's predominant power, and China is second, India will be the swing power. It will therefore have three options: partnering with the US and other pluralistic, secular and democratic countries; joining hands with China at the risk of betraying the values of its Constitution and freedom struggle; and remaining both politically and ideologically non-aligned, even if against its own ideals. Many Indians worry

about an unequal partnership with the US because they do not appreciate the full potential of India as a knowledge power. In the years ahead, the US will require a reservoir of skilled manpower, and India will require green energy and agricultural technology to grow faster. The emerging Indo-US partnership is not about containing China. It is about defending Indian values from the challenges of both one-party rule and jehadism, and realising a future in which poverty and illiteracy are alleviated.

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Among the strategic challenges facing India are those relating to defence policy, nuclear strategy, and governance. India is the world's fourth-largest military power and has fought five wars against neighbours that are today nuclear-armed revisionist states advancing territorial claims against it. But India has lacked an ability to formulate future-oriented defence policies, managing only because of short-term measures, blunders by its adversaries, and force superiority in its favour. The cardinal mistake of India's leaders was flouting the principle that chiefs of staff should never be in command of their forces. Separating command and staff functions enables the service chiefs to focus on defence planning and policymaking, including procurement, human resources, and military diplomacy. Theatre commanders handle the administration, daily management, operational planning, and operational training of forces. This is the practice of all large, modern armed forces, but there is no demand to rectify this shortcoming in India.

At present, defence policymaking is ad hoc, short-term, and service-specific. The state of readiness of forces and jointness of operations, training, and planning have not been addressed. Although a Chief of Defence Staff has been discussed, the position is not in harmony with India's size and democratic structure; a Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee under a full-time chairman is more appropriate. The National Security Council, which had been expected to address policy incoherence and inadequate strategic planning, burdened itself with executive responsibilities. The services intelligence directorates are ill-equipped for long-term intelligence assessments, and area specialists are few, suggesting a greater need for think tanks. The armed forces have also not fully though through important aspects of nuclear policy and strategy. In a nuclear era, the role of the military becomes, essentially, preventing wars from breaking out through appropriate weapons acquisitions, force deployment patterns, the development

of infrastructure, military exercises, and defence diplomacy. This is a far more demanding task than peacetime operations in a pre-nuclear age.

India is a reluctant nuclear power. After the Bangladesh war, India opted for a "recessed deterrence", but this position could not be sustained after a 1979 intelligence assessment that Pakistan was attempting to acquire nuclear weapons. Indo-Pakistani nuclear deterrence is often viewed in the West through the prism of the Cold War, with doubts about the viability of India's no-first-use doctrine and concerns about an arms race. But theirs is not an unconstrained competition, and India's position has always been that deterrence is not proportionate to the number of warheads a country faces. No-first-use is also at the essence of deterrence, as the threat of a first strike is plain aggression. Although China was first in announcing a no-first-use policy, its caveat is that areas considered parts of China are excluded. The more important challenge with China is not nuclear confrontation but its defying international regimes and norms.

As a revisionist state espousing terror as state policy, Pakistan's conception of deterrence is radically different from that generally accepted by the international community. Pakistan's lesson from various crises over the last twenty-five years was that India had been successfully deterred. Other than perhaps during Operation Parakram, India, not being a revisionist state, has never been deterred because it never contemplated aggression against Pakistan. Successive Indian governments have proclaimed that a stable and prosperous Pakistan is in India's interests, but these sentiments have never been reciprocated. Given Pakistan's nuclear deterrent, India must resort to engagement as the only viable strategy against terrorism. India is handicapped because Pakistan defines itself as anti-Indian, and its army is against developing commercial or social contacts with India. As Pakistan requires American aid, the US has a better chance of increasing Pakistani dependency in order to persuade it to give up terrorism as a state policy.

A final note on governance: It is a myth that India's political classes submit themselves to public accountability at every election. India's first-past-the-post elections, in which as little as 25 per cent support can produce victory, results in patronage politics that favour some sections of the population at the expense of the majority. Democracy therefore does not always result in the fair delivery of goods and services to the entire population. Non-inclusive growth is consequently not a result of globalisation but of patronage politics. Politicians also often have a vested interest in keeping voters poor, as it costs less to buy their votes. As long

as the first-past-the-post system prevails, corruption, caste politics, and the poor delivery of goods and services by the state will continue, and the elimination of poverty and illiteracy will be hampered. The simplest solution is run-off elections if candidates are unable to attain a majority, but second-preference voting is another possibility.

India's foreign relations: The transformation of the Indo-US relationship from estranged democracies to strategic partners is bound to take time, and relations should not be measured by the number of successful transactions. The shared values of both countries — democracy, pluralism, tolerance, openness, and respect for freedoms and human rights — acquire a greater prominence in building a more peaceful, prosperous, inclusive, secure, and sustainable world. The relationship must therefore be assessed on its progress in setting up structures that make it more effective in countering the challenges of the 21st century. In addition to terrorism, failing states, organised crime, pandemics, and nuclear proliferation, there are threats to various global commons — such as international waters, cyber space, and outer space — which cannot be addressed unilaterally or through NATO-like military alliances. In any other age, China's rapid and inevitable rise would also probably have led to war, but that is unthinkable in a nuclearised and globalised era. US advantages in its competition with China include China's ageing and unfavourable demographics, US immigration policies, and its culture of innovation. But to sustain its preeminence, the US still has every incentive to enter into a partnership with India, a democratic, pluralistic, and secular country with a young population that will soon exceed China's.

What about Indian interests? If not sabotaged by poor governance and corruption, India's growth will make it the world's third-largest economy. It could then try to develop further on its own, but will be unable to bridge the vast gaps between it and the US and China. It could cooperate with China, but the Chinese model is inadequate for a diverse country such as India. Finally, it could partner with the US, a country that is home to a large Indian diaspora and shares India's values. Other countries — including Japan, France, and Germany — face similar concerns as India. Together, the leaders of the democratic world must face the combined challenges of authoritarianism and jehadism, which cannot be countered by military means alone. Comprehensive and cooperative action by democracies, who constitute more than half the world's population for the first time in history, is therefore necessary. Global governance must rely upon networks of bilateral strategic partnerships among democratic powers that

manage rather than impose outcomes, and provide a powerful response to the challenges they face.

Indian strategic thinker **K. Subrahmanyam** passed away on February 2, 2011. This article is adapted by Dhruva Jaishankar from four of Subrahmanyam's unpublished essays on grand strategy, Indian foreign relations, defence policy, and nuclear deterrence. It was published in the Indian Express on 02 and 04 Feb 2012.

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