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India's Grand Strategy: Some Preliminary Thoughts

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SUMMARY

India's emergence as one of the great economic powers in the international system and its military strength position it to be a major player in the international system in the twenty-first century. However, its current policies, rooted in a vision of India's role in the international order that once reflected a consensus of Indian elites, appear to reflect a mismatch between its growing means and its overall role in international affairs. The emergence of "new thinking" and debates are gradually breaking down the consensus of India's founding generations. Drivers of change are many, but it remains to be seen which tips India from a passive regional power to a more assertive global one.

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India is emerging as one of the great economic powers in the international system. Its population—currently more than one billion—will exceed China’s by 2050. Its culture—in the form of music and film from “Bollywood”—pervades South Asia, but also extends across much of the Middle East and parts of Southeast Asia. India’s military, which is the third or fourth largest in the world, possesses significant numbers of nuclear weapons, and its strengths in high-technology industries (space, information systems, electronics) certainly position it to be a major player in the international system in the twenty-first century.

India’s policies, however, appear to reflect a mismatch between its growing means and its overall role in international affairs, much to the frustration of most U.S. and some Indian analysts. The policies are rooted in a vision of India’s role in the international order that once reflected a solid consensus of Indian elites, and is only gradually being adjusted to fit new realities.

INDIA’S GRAND STRATEGY

India’s “grand strategy” is not formalized in any sense. It reflects instead a pre-independence world view and elite consensus, shaped by a perspective on India’s history dominated by the thinking of Jawaharlal Nehru. This perspective focuses on a few assumptions: India’s conquest was due to superior technology and internal disunity; Indian civilization is inherently secular and insular, encompassing both Muslims and Hindus and not threatening adjacent regions; India’s role in the global economy was crippled by predatory economic practice; and India has a unique civilizational world view that can shape the international system to prevent predation and support development.

Indian policy in the Cold War was to “punch above its weight,” relying heavily on moral force, avoiding entangling alliances that might drag it into conflict, supporting the emerging post-colonial states in the developing world, pursuing insular economic policies and rejecting capitalism, and trying to position itself as a leader in multinational institutions including the Non-Aligned Movement and the United Nations.

This grand strategy therefore appears relatively accommodating to many observers—India’s reluctance to use military force, for example, is frequently noted—but it actually has sharp moments of aggressiveness, assertiveness, and (some might argue) dissonance. India’s apparently two-faced policy on nuclear weapons, for example, is rooted simultaneously in a belief in universal disarmament and a determination not to be denied nuclear weapons technologies which might result in unacceptable pressure from a foreign power.

Its commitment to UN peacekeeping and norms of non-aggression is belied by occasional military assertiveness regarding its borders (Goa, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Kashmir).

India refused to choose sides in what it saw as a classic realist competition during the Cold War, opting instead for a non-alignment approach based on “soft power.” Non-alignment was “modified” to work more closely with a Soviet Union that provided significant military and economic benefits as well as a more sympathetic anti-colonial stance, creating an awkward silence when the USSR invaded Afghanistan. India’s engagement with the global economy was almost cripplingly tardy, but when economic reforms were finally enacted in the 1990s it suddenly became a dynamo. These inconsistencies reflect not only changing opportunities and conditions, but also the emergence of “new thinking” and debates that are gradually breaking down the consensus of India’s founding generations.

Kanti Bajpai has argued that modern India has three identifiable foreign policy “schools” among policymakers, academics, and other elites: 1) Nehruvianism; 2) “hyper-realism”; and 3) liberal internationalism. For four decades, Nehruvianism was a near consensus, but since the 1990s elements of liberal internationalism have become increasingly prominent in Indian foreign and economic policy debates, which in turn offer some promise of change in Indian grand strategy. The drivers are two-fold: 1) increased participation in the global economy (with a growing sense of engagement and expanded interests in the broader international community); and 2) a new generation of elites that are both more engaged in the world and less bound by the world view, traditions, and, some might argue, suspicions of the founding generations.

Change may come slowly. The Indian government bureaucracy is ponderous, age and experience remain important elements in promotion, and the elite institutions that train government officials are resistant to change in world view. Nevertheless, the India of the twenty-first century is evolving a grand strategy that is fundamentally different from the practice of the founding generation, based on growing power and a newfound confidence. The positive change in India’s relationship with the United States over the past ten years is one key indicator of India’s evolving world view.

DRIVERS OF CHANGE

China may emerge as a critical driver in both the pace and the magnitude of Indian grand strategic change. India views China with a mixture of envy and concern. China is an ancient Asian civilization that has

mobilized itself as an economic and military force in the international system despite a century of European dominance. China was a founding member, with India, of the Non-Aligned Movement, and shares some of India's concerns about the slow adaptation of the international economic system to the rise of Asia.

On the other hand, India fought (and lost) a significant war with China in the Himalayas in 1962, and more than 90,000 square kilometers of territory are still in dispute between the two countries. India has always considered the Chinese nuclear force to be a significant threat, and is justifiably suspicious of China's close security relationship with Pakistan.

As China's reliance on energy from Africa and the Middle East grows, it will increase its presence in the Indian Ocean, and has begun to develop close political and economic ties with some of India's neighbors. The presence of Chinese warships, currently deployed in task forces for anti-piracy duty, may expand and eventually be tied to permanent bases and alliances. Finally, India's most pressing security threat is actually a domestic threat: the rise of a Naxalite insurgency that some Indian elites believe either is or will be supported by China for reasons of both ideology and realpolitik.

India's grand strategy is changing, but for the moment it is changing on "India time." This evolution could be accelerated by domestic events, external events, or a combination of both. Thirteen years ago, it appeared that the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—with its aggressive Hindu nationalist ideology, and its rapid decision to test nuclear weapons—might indicate a shift towards a more robust realpolitik approach to foreign policy. In fact, however, the BJP, once in power, did not radically break from India's foreign policy traditions. It even weathered two very significant military crises with Pakistan and avoided a major conventional war. Accelerated change is unlikely to emerge from the domestic political parties, but domestic terrorist events, like the barely-failed attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001, multiple attacks on Mumbai, and other charged incidents, could provide the spark that pushes India in a more radical direction.

External forces are far more likely to accelerate grand strategic change. The most likely source is, sadly, Pakistan, which maintains a robust terrorist infrastructure for attacking India. The key apparent obstacle to Indo-Pakistani peace is Kashmir, but it is not clear that a resolution of the Kashmir conflict would truly change Pakistan's policies, which treats India as an imminent and existential threat. Recent crises (Kargil, 2001–2002, Mumbai) continue to spur the Indian military to find new doctrines that will allow it to punish Pakistan without raising an unacceptable risk of

major conventional or nuclear war, and Indian policymakers have considered military action against Pakistan at least a half dozen times in the last twelve years.

Demonstrations of strategically significant military technology might also push changes in Indian policy. There was some shock effect, for example, from Desert Storm in 1991, which showed some of the limitations of key Indian weapons systems (the T-72 tank). Indian analysis, particularly of the air war, was self-critical and made important recommendations. These were not followed, however. India had just instituted robust and controversial economic reforms, and the timing was not right for major spending on defense issues. Desert Storm did accelerate Indian thinking about the desirability of tested, deployed nuclear weapons, however, and contributed strongly to the justification for an eventual nuclear test later in the decade.

As mentioned above, China also could accelerate the pace, and change the course, of Indian strategic evolution. Since roughly 2007, China has been episodically acting in ways that offend India: denying visas; stapling visas in the case of those coming from the "disputed" territory of Kashmir; arguing that Indians born in Arunachal Pradesh do not need a visa because they were born in Chinese territory; and increasing the number of military encroachments in disputed territory. In addition, China's support for Pakistan reached new heights when PLA engineers entered the northern areas in considerable numbers to provide support after floods. Concerns about Chinese intentions in the Indian Ocean recently increased when Pakistan, in the aftermath of the bin Laden raid, formally offered Gwadar to China as a naval base. While China declined, Indian sensitivities about the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean are already high. Finally, although India's activity in the South China Sea is fairly limited, recent reports of a confrontation between Indian and Chinese ships will certainly be considered by India's policymakers.

INDICATORS OF CHANGE

As a result of China's recent assertiveness, and increasing (if still tepid) engagement with the United States, any sign of retrenchment in Washington would be viewed with concern. India already has a "Look East" policy, attempting to establish better trade and diplomatic links with Japan and the ASEAN states. Its capacity to "fill in" for U.S. forces in that area, however, remains modest at best. More likely, India could cooperate—if desired—to take up the slack in the Indian Ocean if U.S. forces withdrew to a less active posture.

India's current forces are necessary but perhaps insufficient for the task of maintaining stability in the broad Indian Ocean region. An "Indian" Indian Ocean would certainly be resisted by Pakistan, which might in turn lead to greater Chinese presence, creating a classic security dilemma.

Such choices will be difficult for India. Although the increasing influence of liberal internationalist thinking among elites is changing Indian policy, in general India is not yet willing to make hard choices outside of its immediate vicinity. The vestiges of the Nehru era are strong, and Indian elites see little reason to take significant risks that might destabilize what is currently a reasonably acceptable international environment. The speed with which the new generation of leadership gains influence (and India is notorious for electing octogenarian political figures) will determine how quickly change comes in an institutional setting that is best described as stultified and ossified. Nationalist sentiments, as demonstrated in the BJP administrations, can quickly be assimilated into more traditional policy practice so long as Indian economic growth is robust. India's economic rise provides a useful ameliorating effect for more militant nationalists, who do exist at the margins in the political realm, and who are sometimes strident in the think tank world and opinion sectors.

Civil-military relations in India are the opposite of those in Pakistan. Civilian control over the military is much stricter than in the United States, and until fairly recently the Indian military had little influence over major national security debates. To put this in perspective, for more than forty years, the military had no role in India's nuclear program, including the 1974 nuclear test! Events of the past two decades have demonstrated the importance of the military having greater access to and influence on policymakers, but this recognition is only slowly being implemented, due both to innate political conservatism and to inter-service rivalry between the very large Army establishment and the much smaller but more technical Air Force and Navy. Of all the services, the Navy has the most room for expanding Indian practice, but even this is tempered by domestic political realities.

There is some evidence, however, that "hard power" is being viewed as a more important element of Indian power beyond its immediate neighbors. While much of India's military strength is focused (understandably) on Pakistan, there is a growing recognition in think tanks, in some of the services (particularly the Air Force and Navy), and among some other Indian elites that force projection capability throughout the region and across regional boundaries is important

and useful. India's decision to both build and lease nuclear powered submarines, the Navy's interest in amphibious warfare ships (which have many uses in peacetime), the new Air Force MMRC contract, and the purchase of advanced U.S. military transports all demonstrate greater interest in and movement towards greater capability. The Army may be more conservative, because of threats on both western and northern borders, but discussions of new doctrines ("Cold Start," "Limited War") do suggest an effort to provide greater options for policymakers—even if those policymakers have (so far) not chosen to either fund them or to select military options in crisis.

The key indicators of change, however, will be in the political realm. Institutional reform in the bureaucracy is critical. The Ministries of Defense and Finance create enormous obstacles to military procurement. Reforms are needed in the military industrial sector, where bloated and inefficient state-run industries continue to demand and drain away scarce defense resources; and in the Ministry of External Affairs, which still houses great suspicion of the United States, great affection for Russia, and a generally benign outlook on China (although all these are changing).

CONCLUSIONS

India's transition to a grand strategy that looks more like a traditional great power will not be easy. India's position is similar to that of the United States at the turn of the twentieth century: great economic potential and an increased role in the international system, but a traditional and understandable reluctance to engage in the global balance of power. That policy only changed because of a combination of internal and external shocks, including the Spanish-American War of 1898 (proving that the United States could defeat an established European power), the assassination of President William McKinley and the emergence of Theodore Roosevelt, a naval arms race based on new technology that pushed America into a more prominent global military position, and a massive great power war on the European continent. It is not clear what shock or series of shocks might push India into a similar trajectory. What is clear is that the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and Persian Gulf regions hold plenty of threats that might force India to reconsider its current policy, and to accelerate its shift from passive regional to more assertive global power.

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