

India: between "being" and "becoming"

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This essay will provide an overview of the foreign policy aspirations and struggles of the world's largest democracy. Its main ambitions lie on the international stage, where it seeks to be a major international player and a pillar of the "multipolar" world in the 21st century. To gain credibility on a regional level, India will have to reassert its political muscle locally. It needs to delicately negotiate the involvement of China – a partner and competitor – in South Asia. Despite its troubled history of intervention in Sri Lanka, India must play a greater role in working towards the end of the country's civil war. It must also work to convince members of SAARC, like Pakistan and Bangladesh, that the road to development and security lies through New Delhi. Even if India successfully consolidates its influence in South Asia, external players like the EU should not approach India simply as a regional power or as the sum of its neighbours. India aspires to be part of a new world order. Its gain could be Europe's loss.

According to a recent report published by the United States' National Intelligence Council, India will emerge as an "unrivalled" regional power by 2015.¹ Though generous in its appraisal of India's growing military and economic might, the report's prediction may come as something of a surprise to many Indian analysts and policy-makers. A disagreement of verb tense arises. India, in their eyes, *is* already the unquestioned super-power in South Asia, dwarfing its neighbours in every measure of state puissance. Its military expenditure alone is over double that of all its neighbours combined (with the important exception of China).² Its estimated GDP of \$785.5 billion is nearly four times the cumulative GDPs of all other South Asian countries.³

Yet, with so much global attention on its future potential, India itself seems caught between "becoming" and "being". In real terms, India is already the pre-eminent force in the subcontinent and the Indian Ocean littoral. But Indian ambitions will be limited by its continued inability to convince its smaller neighbours that the road to development and security lies through New Delhi. While India struggles to consolidate its influence in South Asia, it is more comfortably manoeuvring its way onto the centre of the world stage, where it hopes to shape and be an essential part of a new multi-polar international system.

¹ National Intelligence Council, *Mapping the Global Future*, http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_2020_project.html

² A.Z. Hilali, "India's Strategic Thinking and Its National Security Policy", in: *Asian Survey*, September-October 2001, p. 749.

³ World Bank survey, "India at a glance", 2005, http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/ind_aag.pdf

Indian foreign policy at a glance

Independence and sovereignty

The quest for global prestige is not altogether new for India. Under the leadership of its first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-1964), India proudly played a founding and prominent role in the Non-aligned Movement (NAM), joining with the likes of Indonesia and Egypt in signalling a third-way during the Cold War. Though NAM proved more symbolically and rhetorically powerful than historically meaningful, India's involvement in the organisation underlines an important strand in Indian foreign policy that continues today. A Nehruvian commitment to autonomy and self-sufficiency kept India at arms-length from the United States throughout the Cold War, while India's relationship with the USSR, though considerably closer, was never one of comprehensive agreement.

Since the end of the Cold War, Indo-US ties have warmed considerably. In the last fifteen years, India has discarded its hidebound socialism, chipping away at its centrally-directed economy with a raft of liberalising reforms that saw American FDI in India jump from \$76 million in 1991 to nearly \$4 billion in 1997.⁴ But the independent streak persists: it appeared in India's drive to secure Nuclear Weapon State status⁵ and it surfaced recently in the joint declaration of Russian, Chinese and Indian foreign ministers in February 2007, who reaffirmed their countries' dedication to a "multi-polar world" and to protecting international law, the "equality of nations" and the "sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries".⁶ The conscious invocation of the rights of states amounts to a thinly-veiled critique of the Bush administration's interventionist doctrine of pre-emption (the Indian parliament, after all, vociferously opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq and rejected US requests to send troops to the country).⁷ It appeals, furthermore, to the anti-imperialist rhetoric that remains significant in Indian domestic politics and elsewhere in the "developing" world.

Indian foreign policy has matured to the point where its true independence is not found in lip-service paid to NAM-style solidarity and sovereignty. India can now balance, on one hand, its growing ties with the US alongside, on the other hand, its involvement status in organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,⁸ a security alliance ostensibly at odds with US strategic interests in Central Asia. Indian policy-makers are aware that in the wake of both the Cold War and recent floundering American attempts to project military power across the world, the global politics of the 21st century will require constant negotiation and reconfiguration. India cannot put its eggs in any single basket because there is no basket large enough to hold them.

⁴ Indian Embassy to the US, statistics, 2001, <http://www.indianembassy.org/indusrel/economy.htm>

⁵ Hilali, 2001, p. 738.

⁶ PressEsc, "Russia, India, China join forces", 14 February 2007, http://pressesc.com/01171490876_china_russia_india_vs_us

⁷ "India rejects Iraq troop request," in: *BBC News*, 14 July 2003

⁸ Formed in 2001 under the leadership of China and Russia, with member Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. MK Bhadrakumar, "China, Russia welcome Iran into the fold", *Asian Times*, 18 Apr, 2006

At the same time, India remains invested in the current architecture of the international system. Though India is guilty of proliferating nuclear weapons and failing to accept the Convention against anti-personnel land-mines and the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, its policy-makers recognise that such actions have only damaged the country's international reputation.⁹ India advocates universal nuclear disarmament. It is wholly supportive of multilateralism and its associated world bodies, and is a frequent contributor to UN peacekeeping missions around the world. Over 85,000 Indian soldiers, military observers, and police officers have participated in 42 out of 60 of UN peacekeeping missions. Over one hundred Indian personnel have died on peacekeeping missions. In recent years, Indian soldiers have served with distinction in Cambodia, Somalia, where they were responsible for one-third of the country, and in Sierra Leone, in addition to operations elsewhere in Africa. India is also currently involved in UNIFIL in Lebanon and UNMEE in the Horn of Africa.¹⁰ The Indian foreign policy establishment believes in the UN's role on the international stage. This support may wane should India's ongoing campaign to secure a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council fail.

An Asian neighbourhood

Analysts close to New Delhi are fond of imagining India's relationship to its Asian "neighbourhood" as one of expanding concentric circles. The first circle encompasses the Indian subcontinent; the second widens to include East, Central, South East and West Asia (West Asia being the "Middle East"). Both circles revolve around a "central axis of historical and cultural commonalities".¹¹ While many contemporary notions of Asia exclude the Arab and Iranian world, India sees itself as conveniently situated at the middle of a "neighbourhood" of Asian nations that stretches from the Mediterranean to the Pacific.

Both the birthplace of Buddhism and the home of one of the world's largest Muslim populations, India can place itself at a pan-Asian crossroads. Yet, this geographical rhetoric speaks to India's desire to expand its "footprint" beyond the subcontinent; its growing economy requires the energy sources of West Asia as well as access to the wealthy markets of East and Southeast Asia. India's overarching foreign policy interest remains the maintenance of its high rate of economic growth (8-9%) by broadening its presence abroad and attracting more foreign investment domestically.

If India hopes to establish itself as the centre of a 21st century "Asia", it will first have to strengthen its hold on the Indian subcontinent, where many of its smaller neighbours remain unconvinced by the attractions of Indian power. No country can "rival" India in South Asia, but New Delhi nevertheless struggles at times to get its way in the region. It was reluctant to revive the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and is anxious to be seen as an Asian – not South Asian – power.¹² Its appetite for the petty politics of South Asia seems to have shrunk as its engagement with the rest of the world has grown.

⁹ Jagat Singh Mehta "Indian foreign policy: challenges and opportunities", in: *Indian Foreign Policy*, New Delhi, Academic Foundation, 2007, p. 72

¹⁰ Chinmaya E. Gharekhan, "India and the United Nations", in: *Indian Foreign Policy*, 2007 p. 203.

¹¹ Shyam Saran "Present dimensions of Indian foreign policy", in: *Indian Foreign Policy*, p. 116.

¹² Walter Andersen, "Recent Trends in Indian Foreign Policy", *Asian Survey*, 2001, pp. 765-776; 769, 776.

India and China

The rise of India and China has received much attention and speculation in the west in recent years. The prospect of two "Asian giants" – home to a full forty percent of humanity – towering over the 21st century has been met with equal measures of awe and fear. Their geographical proximity leads many analysts to point to the inevitability of conflict. Some American analysts and policymakers hope to rope India into a policy of strategic "containment" against China, since Washington is much more wary of Beijing's growing power than New Delhi's.¹³ Indian foreign secretary, Shyam Saran, has dismissed such suggestions, arguing that "India and China, as two continental-sized economies and political entities, are too big to contain each other or be contained by any other country".¹⁴

Rivals?

Even if Chinese and Indian leaders disavow theories of their strategic opposition (as they strenuously did during Hu Jintao's November 2006 tour of India), there remains significant ground for competition between the two rapidly growing nations. By most indicators, China holds a huge edge over India in terms of economic and even military clout. It has already begun to flood Indian markets with its cheap exports. More frustratingly for India, China has made inroads into its South Asian neighbours. China has been close to Pakistan for decades, supplying Islamabad with military equipment and nuclear technology. China is now supporting the construction of nuclear power plants in the country, as well as assisting the establishment of the deep-sea port at Gwadar. Beijing has further tightened energy and military ties with Bangladesh – for whom it is the largest supplier of weaponry – and convinced Myanmar to export its natural gas east to China rather than to India.¹⁵ (China has also consistently outraced India in securing access to energy resources in Central Asia, parts of Africa and Latin America.)

Furthermore, its presence in last year's SAARC summit as an observer appeared to some Indian analysts as a direct attempt to counter-weight India's influence in the region. China resisted similar Indian efforts to participate in the meeting of East Asian States and is uncomfortable with India's "Look East" policy, launched after the collapse of the USSR to expand Indian influence and ties in East and Southeast Asia.¹⁶ China has also consistently opposed the Indian bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Thanks in large part to Beijing's historical military links with Islamabad and to the legacy of India's humiliating defeat to China in the 1962 war, New Delhi does not underestimate the security threat posed by its hulking neighbour: over 200,000 Indian troops man the Sino-Indian border.¹⁷

¹³ Jane's Foreign Report, April 2003, http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/news/fr/fr030402_1_n.shtml

¹⁴ Saran "Present Dimensions of Indian Foreign Policy" 118

¹⁵ Mohan Malik, "China's Strategy of Containing India", *Power and Interest News Report*, 6 February 2006.

¹⁶ Bhartendu Kumar Singh, "India, China and the Politics of Regionalism", 30 December 2005, Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies South Asia.

¹⁷ Jing-dong Yuan, "India's Rise After Pokhran II", *Asian Survey*, vol. 41, no. 6, November-December 2001.

Partners?

Mainstream strategic thinking in India, however, holds that a relationship of "constructive engagement" with China is feasible and within both countries' best interests. China and India are most interested in economic development, and neither nation wants to unsettle the stability of the region or be distracted by the imperatives of power politics. Despite existing problems (which include border disputes and disagreements over Tibet and nuclear policy) and arenas of competition, the pragmatic way forward is one of regular negotiation and consultation.¹⁸

This perspective argues that instances of seeming competition – e.g. India and China are both present in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – are in truth areas of healthy cooperation; their involvement in ASEAN has been welcomed by member states as assisting in the gradual development of a "multidimensional regional architecture in Asia", consisting of "multiple and overlapping networks".¹⁹

Both countries are "security seekers" and agree fundamentally in the obsolescence of the American-dominated "unipolar" world.²⁰ Despite the potential for competition and friction in specific areas of their bilateral relations and broader foreign policies, India and China are both committed to the broader reshaping of the global order in the 21st century.

Another view, articulated in the influential American policy journal *Foreign Affairs*, suggests that the United States is attempting to negotiate India and China's rise by reconfiguring the international system and its various world bodies to better accommodate the Asian giants' ambitions. This includes measures like granting India permanent member status in the UNSC. Drawing Beijing and New Delhi into the system will crucially result in the shrinking of Europe's role in managing the international system.²¹ India and China's gain is Europe's loss.

India as a regional power

If India is to emerge as a true regional power in the near future, it is important to assess its regional role in the present. As detailed below, notions of Indian regional power do not always correspond to the state of its bilateral relations with its neighbours.

Pakistan

India's pretensions to pre-eminence in South Asia are most relentlessly challenged by Pakistan. The erstwhile foes have fought at least three "wars" (1947-8, 1965 and 1971) and numerous skirmishes (including the Kargil conflict of 1999) in the sixty years since they were carved out of British India. Most of their battles have been over the disputed state of Kashmir, with Pakistan still accusing the Indian government and military of brutally suppressing Kashmir's right to self-determination, while New Delhi continues to blame Pakistan for abetting terrorist groups active in

¹⁸ Sanjay Bhattacharya, "India and China: new directions", in: *Indian Foreign Policy*, 2007, p. 680.

¹⁹ C.V Ranganathan. "India and China: long road towards peace and development", in: *Indian Foreign Policy*, 2007, p. 695.

²⁰ Yuan "India's Rise After Pokhran II" p.1000

²¹ Daniel W. Drezner, "The New New World Order", in: *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007, <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20070301faessay86203/daniel-w-drezner/the-new-new-world-order.html>

Kashmir and interfering in India's domestic affairs (in February and March 2007, Indian authorities uncovered and detained members of an alleged Pakistani spy ring in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh).²²

Resolving their abiding differences on the territory is essential for the future of Indo-Pak relations, but despite the prickly history of Pakistani involvement in domestic terrorism in India, particularly through Islamabad's murky and often uncontrollable Inter Service Intelligence (ISI), bilateral relations have thawed. Pakistan faces far greater crises than Kashmir. Its northwest regions along the Afghan border are in the grip of growing lawlessness and radicalisation after the signing of the Waziristan Accord²³, while Islamic and sectarian extremists have begun bombing targets across the country.

With Washington losing its confidence in Pakistan's ability to stem the tide of Taliban fighters flooding into Afghanistan, Islamabad has chosen the path of less resistance in its relations with India. Kashmir remains a source of division, but after numerous high-profile visits between the country's foreign ministers and prime ministers in recent months, India and Pakistan are moving towards greater strategic cooperation. The first meeting of the Joint Anti-Terrorism Mechanism was convened in March in the wake of the Samjhauta train bombing, which killed many Pakistani citizens.²⁴ New Delhi and Islamabad are also cooperating in the ongoing negotiations around the establishment of an energy pipeline between Iran, Pakistan and India. Indo-Pak relations will not warm overnight, but such measures signal a gradual shift away from institutional hostility.

Nevertheless, Pakistan has been made deeply insecure by India's growing international profile. Islamabad will continue to resist India's attempts to win a permanent seat in the UNSC. Though its leaders pay lip-service to SAARC's goals of liberalising regional trade, Pakistan remains wary of opening its far smaller economy to India. It has sought support from long-term ally China in developing nuclear and commercial facilities, as well as providing a counterweight to India in SAARC. Ever since 1993, however, China has been turning increasingly towards New Delhi and away from Islamabad.²⁵ Its future policy in the region, as with all other large global powers, lies in cooperation with India, not in fanciful attempts to contain it.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's ongoing civil war is testament to India's failure as a regional power. A disastrous military intervention in the 1980s has since led to New Delhi receding into the background of the conflict, allowing foreign parties like Norway to step in as mediators.²⁶ The peace process has broken down and fighting intensified in recent months in the island nation. India's credibility as a regional power rests in large part on reasserting its political muscle and bringing all warring sides to the table.

India's bilateral economic relations with Sri Lanka are a different story. India is the largest exporter of goods to Sri Lanka, and both countries have collaborated on a

²² "ISI agent admits spying for Pakistan", in: *Times of India*, 10 February 2007.

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²⁴ "Indo-Pak joint anti-terrorism meeting", in: *Daily Times*, 6 March 2007.

²⁵ "India's Rise After Pokhran II" p. 998

²⁶ P. K. Balachandran, "New Delhi and the Tamil Struggle", *Hindustan Times*, 1 November 2004.

range of commercial and energy-production projects. Their free-trade agreement provides a model that India hopes to expand to all South Asia.²⁷

Bangladesh

Despite delivering Bangladesh's independence in the 1971 war with Pakistan, India quickly fell out of Dhaka's good graces in ensuing years. The two countries share frosty relations at best, with a host of grievances maintained on the Bangladeshi side. India has affected the flow of rivers into Bangladesh, been reluctant to allow trade concessions that would assist Bangladeshi exports, tacitly supported the militant Shanti Bahini in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and killed illegal Bangladeshi migrants along the tense border.²⁸

Yet, Bangladesh should be of utmost importance to India for a number security reasons, not least because it sits awkwardly in the midst of various Indian domestic insurgencies (Maoists in West Bengal and separatists in India's northeast). India needs Bangladesh's cooperation in combating these insurgencies. The growth of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh should provide India with further cause for concern.²⁹ New Delhi's inconsistent and often insensitive policies have played into China's hand and also placed further obstacles to improved mending Indo-Bangla bilateral relations.

India and Europe

Though India and the EU enjoyed relatively friendly ties in the late decades of the Cold War, it wasn't until the India's liberalisation in the early 1990s that economic cooperation and development assistance gathered steam. Europe is impressed by India's booming hi-tech economy and vast supply of skilled IT workers, with countries like Germany recently opening the door to greater Indian migration.³⁰ Indian policy-makers recognise that the European integration will grant the EU further sway over world events, and that European countries collectively represent an indisputable centre of power.³¹ The EU has also elevated India to "strategic partner" status, allowing New Delhi to join an exclusive club that includes Washington and Beijing.

Indo-EU relations are not unblemished. Europe has looked coldly upon India's recent civilian nuclear deal with the US and New Delhi's role in the global nuclear architecture. Despite German, French and British support for India's permanent membership in the UNSC, the EU has failed to back the Indian campaign. Europe's deep intransigence on cutting its massive agricultural tariffs and subsidies impedes progress at the Doha Development Round.

New Delhi also resents Europe's tendency to look at India through the prism of South Asia or Indo-Pak relations.³² Europe will need to treat India as more than the sum of its neighbours. If the EU's primary strategic interest in India is that of maintaining

²⁷ Nagendra Nath Jha, "India and Sri Lanka: from uncertainty to close proximity", in: *Indian Foreign Policy*, New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2007, p.655.

²⁸ Deb Mukharji, "Distant neighbours: India and Bangladesh", *Indian Foreign Policy*, 2007 p., 558.

²⁹ "Prosecutor of seven Islamists killed in Bangladesh", Reuters, 11 April 2007.

³⁰ "Germany wants 'India's best hi-tech brains'", in: *BBC News*, London, 30 Oct 2001.

³¹ Rajendra M. Abhyankar, "India and the European Union", *Indian Foreign Policy*, 2007, p. 461

³² *Ibid*, p. 466.

regional security in South Asia, it is unlikely to win the favour of the Indian policy establishment. European attempts to tie India – a country whose deep democratic and pluralistic values appeal to Europe – into a strategic alliance of "containment" against China will also be rebuffed.

India sees itself as a global player and wants to be treated as such. It now has no shortage of willing trade partners. A readiness to discuss elevating India's role in the international system (including supporting its bid for permanent member status on the UNSC) will keep Europe high on that list. The EU must also be wary of American attempts to form a "concert of power" between the United States, India and China in coming decades. Such a configuration would result in the marked reduction of Europe's role on the international stage.

India in IBSA

Though Indian policy-makers claim that the maintenance of the country's high economic growth rate remains their chief interest, the launch of the IBSA tri-lateral summit between India, Brazil and South Africa – all large, growing democracies and potential regional powers – in September 2006 was heralded by some analysts as the resurgence of "South-South" diplomacy. A current of "third world solidarity" still runs through Indian foreign policy making. In the case of IBSA, however, it seems that the rhetoric is still secondary to the bottom line.

Indian officials have been pleased to note that the tri-lateral ties have provided ample opportunities for business and increased trade. India is planning to urge the drastic reduction of trade tariffs between the three nations as part of a Free Trade Agreement-style deal. Other possibilities include cooperation in the energy sector, where the accumulated expertise of Brazilian ethanol, South African liquid fuel and Indian solar and wind energy industries can be pooled.³³

As of now, IBSA is being driven primarily by the engines of free trade, with South Africa and Brazil keen to tap into the massive, but oft-inaccessible Indian market. But like other multilateral cooperative initiatives, IBSA will likely grow from a mainly financial endeavour to include real cooperative measures on security and social development issues, a possibility which has already been discussed at the trilateral level.

Indian foreign policy's feet of clay?

India's involvement in IBSA speaks to its wider strategy of strengthening bilateral (or trilateral) relations with prominent states and regional organisations. This policy of joining various networks of cooperation – that at times overlap or even contradict each other (as with the case of India's growing alliance with the US and its simultaneous rejection of the "unipolar" world alongside Russia and China) – rests on a larger assessment of the nature of international politics. In a "multipolar" world, India must spread its net wide to safeguard and project its international interests. At the same time, India remains loyal to the international system, of which, in personnel terms (both bureaucratic and peacekeeping), it is already a large part. Under the stable umbrella of organisations like the UN and WTO, India's diplomacy-intensive foreign policy has its best chance of success. However, India may grow disillusioned with international institutions if they fail to become fairer and more

³³ Hardeep Puri and Krishan Singh, "Ibsa summit", *Indian Foreign Policy*, 2007, p. 470.

representative. Issues like American and European subsidies and UN reform will be key to deciding India's outlook on the current international architecture.

India is commonly seen as the pre-eminent "regional power" in the Indian subcontinent, even though New Delhi does not aspire to the title nor want to be limited by its implications. This explains its ambivalent relationship with SAARC, which has struggled to unify a divided region. Yet India's credibility as a global power requires that it first take a concerted interest in its neighbourhood. If India fails to convince its neighbours that its economic and strategic priorities are also in their best interests, other players like China will only be too happy to fill the breach. India's pretensions of greatness will also look risible if conflict continues to rage in Sri Lanka, if it maintains its petty feuds with Bangladesh, and if Pakistan remains a recalcitrant and dangerous foe.

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