

India and America in the Strategic Times to Come

Remarks to the Delhi Policy Group and the MIT Center for International Studies

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As the second decade of the 21st Century begins, no great regional power is as sought after as India. Over the past few months, the prime ministers and presidents of China, France, Russia, and the United States have all come here to Delhi to make the case for enhanced relationships with India. Earlier, Britain's new leader also came a-courting. Why all the sudden attention to this previously underappreciated corner of the globe?

It is not just the stunning beauty of India's women, though that is a compelling enticement revealed to all the world by Bollywood. Nor is it the dynamic growth of the Indian economy, though India is clearly on its way to becoming once again a big factor in the global marketplace. It is not the vibrancy of India's democracy, though India's politicians – like those back home in America – regularly astonish citizens with their legislative stratagems, scalawaggery, shell games, and shenanigans. All these things are part of India's contemporary image. But what most attracts foreign leaders to India is its strategic empowerment by the changing constellation of global power.

I want to speak briefly with you today about shifting patterns in the world and regional political and economic orders and how they may affect India, its neighbors, the United States, and the world. I will begin with a bow to strategic geography and history.

Isolated behind adjoining deserts, mountains, and seas, the Indian subcontinent was long the target, not the instigator, of strategic change. The fabled riches of South Asia were in the main the creation of its own intellectual, human, and natural capital, supplemented by gains from trade with West Asia, North Africa, Europe, Southeast Asia, and China. Indians inhabit a distinct geopolitical zone, separated in normal times from all these others. This region is easy to defend but it has proven vulnerable to occasional transforming invasions from Central and West Asia, and, at last, the sea.

Until their British rulers joined them to a global empire, Indians seldom ventured abroad except as traders or missionaries. The Islam of Southeast Asia, like its Hinduism and Buddhism, is a legacy of this politically isolationist tradition of outreach primarily through commerce and the force of spiritual example. The wide attractive power of Indian culture (and the broad reach of the Chola Empire) notwithstanding, historically, India has been – in the main – content to keep its armies and navies at home. Its political and economic ties to its east have long been especially tenuous.

The arrival of European colonialism drew India out of its strategic shell and involved it in the quarrels of Europe. British India actively defended its lines of communication with the “mother country” against disruption by pirates or rival powers. The Raj sought to buffer its marches against Russian expansionism. To this end, it sent mostly Indian armies to conquer and garrison the shores of the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf as well as Iraq. It mounted repeated military expeditions to Afghanistan and Tibet to keep the great powers behind them at bay. Until the Japanese Empire turned on it, British India saw no threat to its security from the east. Its dominion over India’s oceans was unchallenged.

It is said that history does not repeat itself but often rhymes. One may, I think, be forgiven for perceiving some resonance in India’s strategic thinking today with that of its British past. And one cannot help but observe that many of the conflicts that trouble India and Pakistan have their roots in lines that British bureaucrats in Delhi drew on maps of terrain they had never seen, in dispensations of communal power they made or failed to make, and in dispositions of territory they proposed but never made effective. But let us leave the Johnson, McMahon, and Durand lines, the pain of the partition, and the continuing insurgency in Kashmir aside in order to focus on the realities they helped create and the relevance of these realities to India’s foreign relations today.

Sixty-three years after the subcontinent’s partition, the Delhi-centered hegemony of the British Raj lives on, with all in the region except Pakistan and Chinese Tibet subordinate to some measure of Indian tutelage. Still, the contours of India’s strategic environment are in rapid evolution. More important still, the balances of wealth and power on the great Eurasian landmass and in the world as a whole are visibly shifting.

To the northwest, secular India's Muslim sister state of Pakistan remains locked in sibling rivalry with it over the unsettled status of Kashmir, Pakistan's fears of Hindu hegemony, and Islamabad's apprehension of yet another Indian vivisection of its territory. The emergence of a nuclear stand-off between Pakistan and India has pushed this rivalry into asymmetric modes. These avoid the nuclear threshold but entail terrorism, low intensity conflict, and a contest for strategic denial or presence in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Pakistan functions not as a friendly buffer state, as India might wish, but as an obstacle to Indian access to Central Asia. India is ever-more dependent on energy imports from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. India's need for energy and access to inner Asia as well as its impulse to flank Pakistan have led it to seek close ties with Iran. Piracy has returned to the Gulf of Aden, and there is fear that the Strait of Hormuz might be closed by a war begun by Israel or the United States.

These considerations have revived India's awareness of its vital interests in freedom of navigation and the security of lines of communication in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. They have also underscored India's stake in the peace and stability of the region to which the American naval strategist, Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, thinking of India in relation to Europe, first applied the name "Middle East." It is not hard to imagine India having to step forward in future to play a role in offshore balancing in the Persian Gulf region, especially in the wake of any significant reduction in the American military presence there.

With the notable exception of India's attachment to Iran, India's interests largely resemble those of the United States. America too has been troubled by terrorism from Pakistan and its turbulent border regions. The United States is engaged in low intensity conflict in Afghanistan, where it has sought to bolster the Indian-aligned government of Hamid Karzai. Americans too seek a Central Asia open to the world and free of great power rivalry. The United States shares India's interest in reliable access to energy supplies in Arabia and adjacent areas and her concern to assure the security of navigation to and from there. So, by the way, do China and other nations. Any attempt from any quarter to interfere with the energy trade for whatever reason would quickly evoke a widening coalition against its perpetrator.

The obvious overlaps as well as the contradictions in American and Indian interests in West Asia nicely illustrate both the potential and the limitations of Indo-American relations. Where our interests are parallel, it will be to our respective advantage to coordinate parallel policies. Where our interests differ, we may find ourselves in contention or even cooperating with others against each other. In this regard, Indo-American relations will not be at all exceptional. We appear to be entering an era in which entente – limited cooperation on limited issues for limited periods of time – rather than fixed alliances will be the norm. The coordinated pursuit of shared interests will be a great challenge to our respective democracies, each of which has an unrealistic habit of expecting uncritical commitments – even public adoration – from foreign partners.

To India's east, the rise to wealth and power of Japan, south Korea, and now the various parts of Greater China is well along in moving the world's economic center of gravity from the Atlantic to eastern Asia. The combination of globalization and supply-chain-based business relationships is rapidly integrating northeast Asian economies with those of Southeast Asia. Although India is still not fully part of this process, it is being pulled eastward into complex relationships with nations beyond the Andaman Sea. In many respects, these relationships have no historical precedent.

China is now India's largest trading partner. Projections by Goldman Sachs and others suggest that in 2050, a mere forty years from now, the Indian GDP may have grown to well over \$35 trillion in current dollars, matching that of the United States then, but, at \$70 trillion, China's economy could be almost twice as large as either India's or America's. The Indian government's decision to offer training in Chinese to the coming generation reflects awareness of this prospect and its effects on the country's future interests and orientation.

Of course, any projection – even one from a very clever banker – is simply an extrapolation into the future of our imperfect understanding of the present. We can be sure that the world of 2050 will not be as we now imagine it. Still, a look back at the world of forty years ago underscores that astonishing changes cannot be ruled out over the next forty years.

In 1970, the world was dominated by the contest between the U.S. and an apparently ascendant

USSR. The dominant political concern everywhere was the war in Vietnam. China was poor and isolated by its own ideology as well as by an embargo originally imposed by the United Nations. Europe was divided and seen as the possible epicenter of the next world war. Bangladesh was still East Pakistan. The global economy was still on the indirect gold standard crafted at Bretton Woods. Japan had yet to become a great economic power. There was no internet and no such thing as outsourcing. India's economists, like those elsewhere, were earnestly studying the supposedly inevitable transition from capitalism to socialism rather than, as turned out to be much more relevant, the transition from socialism to various forms of capitalism. And so forth. No one then foresaw the world of today.

Clearly, we cannot predict with precision what is to come. But for much of history India and China were, respectively, one fifth and one third or more of the global economy. This lends credence to the thesis that they are in the process of regaining such weight in world affairs. And it strongly suggests that Sino-Indian interaction will be a major factor shaping not just the future of Asia but of the globe. Is that something to be welcomed or feared? It is certainly something of concern to all the world's peoples, not just Indians and Chinese. Hence the new global attention to India's views.

In both India and the United States, there are now scholars who earn their keep and think tanks that make their way by urging us to be afraid, very afraid, of China's return to wealth and power. There is a ready market for titillating alarmism and there are always people ready to exploit it, especially when it serves the interests of military-industrial complexes. In the resulting debate, speculation is transformed into supposed fact and conjecture becomes imminent certainty. Thus India is said to be about to be strangled by a Chinese string of pearls, though this concept originates with a Washington consultancy, not with the Chinese General Staff, and does not compute. The Indian Navy is told its primary mission is to fend off a Chinese Indian Ocean fleet that does not yet exist – and may never exist. India justly condemns longstanding but outmoded and absurdly impractical Chinese claims to what is now a fully integrated part of India – Arunachal Pradesh – even as it continues to press equally outmoded and impractical claims to what is now a fully integrated part of Chinese Tibet – Aksai Chin. Chinese push-back against reinvigorated Indian patrolling along the line of control in the Himalayas and Karakoram is said

to be evidence of Chinese assertiveness, not just truculence or a negative feedback loop. And as the pundits issue dire predictions, the Indian and Chinese economies become ever more interdependent.

Paranoia can be self-fulfilling, and there is plenty of it to go around. The Sino-Indian border war of 1962 reminds us how aggressive patrols intended either to challenge or bolster lines of actual control can provoke both unintended conflict and strategic realignment. That war poisoned Indo-Chinese relations and catalyzed China's support of Pakistan as a hedge against Indian hegemony in South Asia. It is distressing that, as Sino-Indian talks about fixing a frontier drone on, many of the same warning signs that preceded conflict five decades ago are reappearing.

Whatever its outcome, renewed conflict in the Himalayas would be a strategic disaster. It would not gain either side's acceptance of the *de facto* border of nearly six decades, nor would it achieve a permanent alteration of that frontier. It could instead create an intra-Asian Cold War. It would likely deepen the Chinese partnership with Pakistan, stimulate Chinese efforts to undermine Indian dominance of the South Asian region, and lead to precisely the sort of Chinese naval challenges that Indian Sinophobes keep predicting.

There is nothing inevitable about such a scenario. Demarcating the Sino-Indian frontier more or less on the basis of the *status quo* rather than by reference to the capricious cartography of colonial bureaucrats would be politically difficult but strategically wise. It would remove a major flashpoint. Even then, however, some measure of competition between India and China is surely to be expected. Both Northeast and Southeast Asians seem likely to seek more robust relationships with India, as well as with the United States and others, to help offset the pull of a vastly larger and more powerful China. India will almost certainly be drawn into more active political, economic, cultural and other relationships – including military relationships – with countries on China's periphery.

India will derive its own benefits from such ties, as will China from comparable links to some of India's neighbors. But neither balancing nor competition need mean antagonism, still less enmity. This is all the more so given the wide range of interests that India, China, and other East

Asian nations have in common with each other and with the United States. Prominent among these, as previously mentioned, are the need to preclude disruptive conflict in the Middle East, reliable access to energy there, and safe passage to and from the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. These tasks demand multinational diplomatic and naval cooperation rather than rivalry in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere.

Similarly, as densely populated, rapidly growing countries, India and China share an interest in the efficient access to commodities and the expanded markets that only a globally open trading and investment regime can provide. It's hard to imagine a country with a greater stake in Africa's stability and progress than India, unless it is now China. The two countries have parallel concerns about transnational issues like climate change, pandemic disease, and the functioning of many aspects of international law. Their economies are broadly complementary in ways that invite cross-investment, with India disproportionately strong in services and China in industrial production. Then, too, as an economic great power, India – like China, Europe, Japan, and the United States – will be called upon to contribute, in its own interest, to sustaining global financial health and economic prosperity. This will entail cooperation with wider coalitions of countries.

The world in which India is coming into its own is one that no longer has a paramount political or economic power. The United States has built and deployed armed forces structured to enforce its will throughout the globe. In the years since the Soviet collapse, preserving global military supremacy against all comers has, willy nilly, become the barely questioned goal of American national security policy. But the fiscal hole at the heart of America's body politic raises serious questions about the sustainability of so expansive a mission. In the years to come, the United States is more likely to be in search of new partners to assist its diplomacy than new military interventions to undertake. The same is true of other established powers as well as newly rising or resurgent regional actors from Brazil to South Africa or Indonesia to Turkey.

In this context, the prospect of America's relinquishment of its self-appointed role as the world's policeman simply accentuates already troubling questions about how to assure the protection of the global commons. The central institutions for managing world affairs no longer perform with

adequacy the tasks for which they were established. The Security Council does not enforce the U.N. Charter or international law. The Geneva Conventions no longer protect combatants against torture or other abuses. The World Trade Organization (WTO) provides a forum to which to refer trade disputes but no longer leads a credible process for liberalizing trade and investment flows. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) does not even pretend to regulate the global monetary system or its financial imbalances. The newly formed G-20 has yet to prove its capacity to promote the prosperity of the global economy. No mechanism has been devised to put together an effective international response to global warming and climate change. The world is in the midst of a crisis of global governance.

It seems more likely that this gap in the world's problem-solving capacity will be filled by cooperation within and between regions through ad hoc arrangements rather than by the restoration or creation of global institutions. We see this pattern in last year's Turkish-Brazilian diplomatic cooperation vis-à-vis Iran. It is also evident in processes like the six-party talks on Korean denuclearization, the Quartet's intermittent activities on peace between Israel and its captive Arab populations, recent Latin American efforts to bolster the international community's recognition of a Palestinian state that might coexist with Israel, the EU lead on nuclear talks with Iran, and many other less well-known situations. Ironically, just as an international consensus that India should be accorded a permanent seat on the UN Security Council is consolidating, the relevance of this status to world affairs is visibly lessening. India deserves the prestige of such a seat. But it is not an alternative to the coalition-building that is the essence of sound diplomacy and the central feature of the emerging international system.

Given the growing weight of India in world affairs, it will increasingly be called upon to form and lead coalitions to address both regional and global problems. In many but not all such efforts, the United States can and – I am confident – *will* play a significant supporting role. But, this pattern of entente rather than alliance challenges longstanding strategic predispositions in both countries. The United States needs to understand that cooperation with India on various matters will not be translated into and cannot be equated with alliance. India needs to recognize that cooperation with America in pursuit of common interests, far from compromising its non-alignment, is in fact an affirmation of its independent sovereignty. And, if America must learn to

accept the leadership of others, including India, on an expanding range of matters, India must accustom itself to sometimes taking the lead with regard to issues beyond its immediate environs.

I first lived and worked in India forty-five years ago. It is impossible not to be encouraged by what India has accomplished in the interim and by the spirit with which it now faces the future. There is a sense of dynamism here, as in other reemerging great powers, that inspires optimism that the new international order that is taking shape will be able in time effectively to address issues that are currently neglected or deferred. Most Americans take pleasure in India's return to wealth and power. The world at large is ready – I believe – for India to play a leading role in regional and world affairs. But only Indians can determine whether India itself is ready for such responsibilities. I for one, hope that it is.