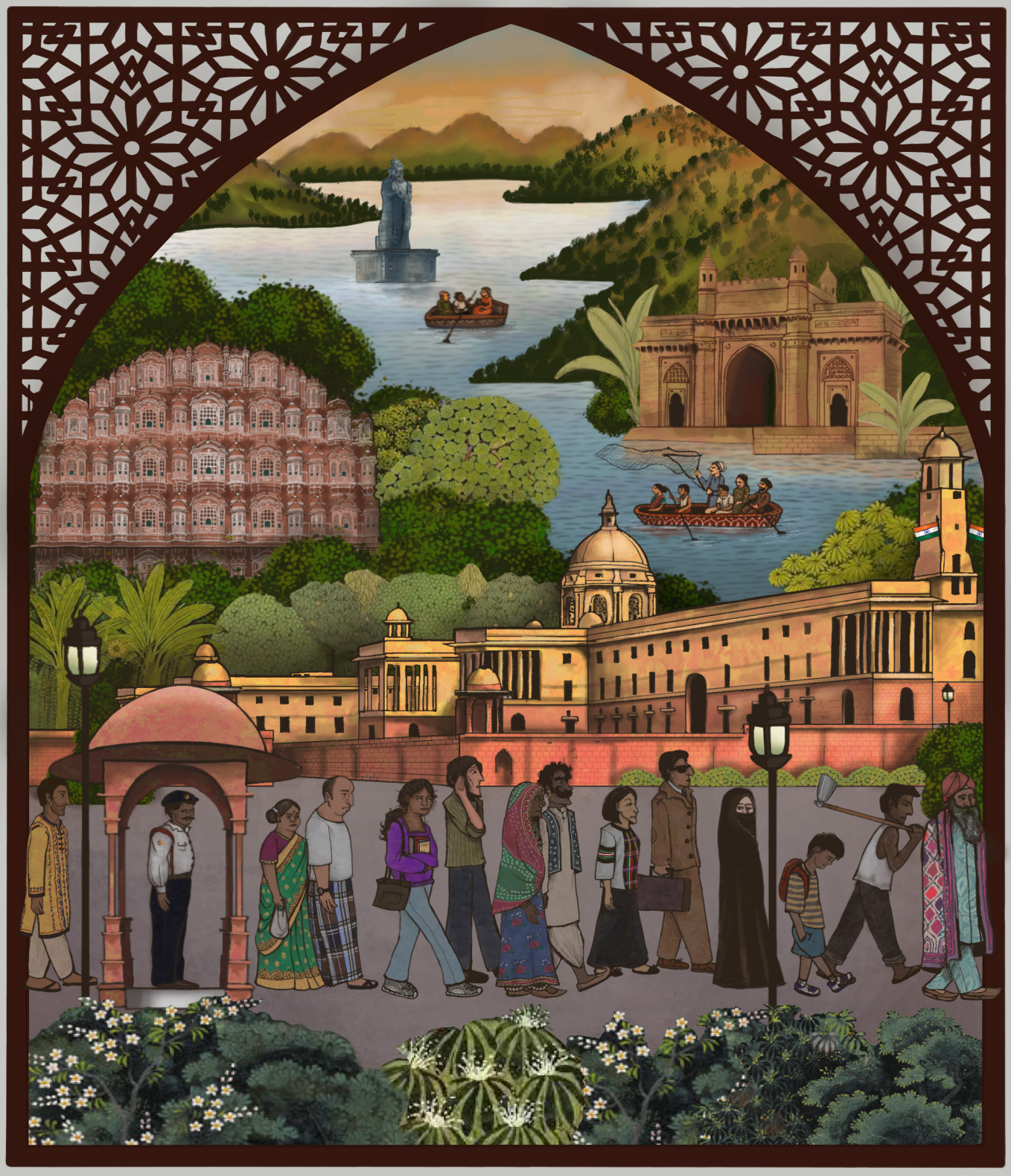
India's World

International Affairs • Indian Interests



Delhi's Grand Strategy

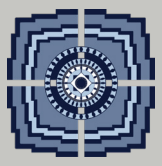
Volume 1 Issue 1

January - February 2025

ABOUT US

INDIA'S WORLD provides a platform for incisive, analytical, and thought-provoking discussions on India's role in international affairs. Our mission is to give voice to Indian perspectives on international issues, fostering debates and discussions that reflect India's growing influence in the world.

Each issue is carefully curated, featuring contributions from leading thinkers, academics, policymakers, and journalists. The magazine is a trusted source for those looking to understand the complexities of international politics, economics, and diplomacy from an Indian viewpoint.



OUR LOGO

Our logo is inspired by the mandala architecture of the Borobudur Temple in Central Java, Indonesia, an architectural marvel symbolizing the brilliant outcome from the deep philosophical and spiritual interaction between India and the world around it.

India's World

January-February 2025
Volume 1, Number 1

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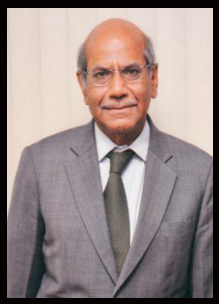
"Delighted to hear of the launch of **INDIA'S WORLD**. In our increasingly interconnected planet, global literacy is essential for all thinking Indians. The new magazine should fulfil a vital need."

Shashi Tharoor
Member of Parliament and Chairperson, Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs

"**INDIA'S WORLD** is a vital initiative, amplifying Indian perspectives and underscoring the nation's pivotal role in shaping the evolving global order. In a world increasingly defined by complex geopolitical shifts and rising multi-stakeholderism, this initiative will provide a platform to articulate Indian perspectives on international politics and national interests. This magazine will fill a critical gap in the global discourse on India's role as an emerging power. My best wishes to Dr. Raja Mohan and Dr. Jacob for the magazine to emerge as more than just a publication - a beacon of India's intellectual leadership on the world stage."

Ram Madhav
Author, and President, India Foundation



"Foreign policy and strategic issues are no longer the stuff of elite deliberations in smoke-filled chambers. The age of instant communications, live reporting and snap judgements is upon us. Foreign affairs have become everybody's business and public opinion may often drive decision making by the state. The need for reflective deliberation and informed and well-rounded analysis that reaches out to an educated and even curious public has never been greater. The initiative taken by two of India's leading strategic thinkers to create precisely such a platform for sober and reasoned debate fills a much needed gap in an India more engaged with the world than ever before. I wish them much success."

Shyam Saran
Former Foreign Secretary, former Chairman of the National Security Advisory Board, and President, India International Centre

"Throughout history, India's engagement with the world has been open and multi-faceted. Today, that engagement is marked by India's rising comprehensive national strength, the power of our example as a resilient, thriving, stable democracy and as a leading voice of an aspirational global majority in Asia and beyond. "**INDIA'S WORLD**" provides an excellent platform that explains India's global engagement, values and national interest in a contemporary world order that is at a critical inflection point."

Nirupama Rao
Former Foreign Secretary, and Ambassador to China and the United States.

"**INDIA'S WORLD** opens up a unique space for a range of conversations on the contours of India's Foreign Policy. Exploring the myriad facets of the shaping and enhancement of India's "Smart Power" potential, it foregrounds insightful and refreshing perspectives on its political, economic, cultural, and social moorings. Providing a much-needed platform for 'democratization' by bringing together voices that break the mould of purely 'formalistic' discussions on Foreign Policy, this timely publication seeks to capture the rhythms and resonances of the 'Indian Way' in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. It opens a new page in the 're-discovery of India's Foreign Policy."

Meenakshi Gopinath
Foounder & Director, WISCOMP

"Foreign Policy is not 'Foreign" anymore in an interconnected world, shrunk even more by technological churn and advances. India's fiercely independent, multilateral doctrine also makes us an important voice on every significant global issue. Never was there a greater need for a magazine like this, focused, sharp, informative and engaging."

Barkha Dutt
Award-winning journalist and Editor-in-Chief, Mojo News

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Contributors

C. Raja Mohan

C. Raja Mohan is a visiting professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and a non-resident distinguished fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute, Delhi. He is an advisor to the Council on Strategic and Defence Research (CSDR) and the chair of the editorial advisory board of **India's World**.

Shashi Tharoor

Shashi Tharoor, a fourth-term Member of Parliament for Thiruvananthapuram, is the bestselling author of twenty-six books, both fiction and non-fiction, besides being a former Under Secretary-General of the United Nations and a former Minister of State for Human Resource Development and for External Affairs in the Government of India. In 2019, Tharoor was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in the category of 'English Non-Fiction' for his book An Era of Darkness. Tharoor currently chairs the Indian Parliament's Standing Committee on External Affairs.

Happymon Jacob

Editor of **India's World**, Jacob teaches India's foreign policy at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). He is the founder and director of the Council for Strategic and Defence Research (CSDR), New Delhi, and a columnist for Hindustan Times. He is deeply committed to bridging the gap between policy and scholarship—a pursuit he candidly admits has seen limited success thus far.

Rajat Kathuria

Rajat Kathuria is an Economist by training, currently serving as Dean in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Shiv Nadar University. He loves the interface between economics and politics because it explains so much that happens globally and locally. Besides his passion for political economy, he is an avid table tennis player even now, having represented India in the sport in his youth.

Pranay Kotasthane

Pranay Kotasthane is deputy director at the Takshashila Institution, and chairs its High Tech Geopolitics Programme. A public policy nerd, he co-writes the Anticipating the Unintended newsletter, co-hosts the Puliyabaazi Hindi Podcast, and is the co-author of three public policy books.

Rajesh Rajagopalan

Rajesh Rajagopalan teaches international politics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. In addition to teaching and supervising PhD students, he writes occasionally for ThePrint. in. His main interests are international politics theory, security studies–especially as it relates to nuclear strategy and politics–and Indian foreign policy.

Tanvi Madan

Tanvi Madan is a senior fellow in the Center for Asia Policy Studies in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. She is also the host of the Global India podcast. She has authored the book Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped US-India Relations during the Cold War (Brookings Institution Press, 2020) and her ongoing work includes a book project on the recent past, present, and future of the China-India-US triangle, and a monograph on India's foreign policy diversification strategy.

D.S. Hooda

Lt. Gen. Hooda was commissioned into the 4th Battalion of the 4th Gorkha Rifles in 1976. Between 2012 to 2016, he was stationed in Jammu and Kashmir and retired as the Army Commander of Northern Command in 2016. In 2019, he authored a comprehensive National Security Strategy document. Today, he is one of India's foremost commentators on the country's national security. He co-founded the Council for Strategic and Defence Research.

T. C. A. Raghavan

T. C. A. Raghavan is a former Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan (2013-15) and Singapore (2009 – 2013). He was Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi from 2018 to 2021. He likes historical research and his latest book is *Circles of Freedom: Friendship, Love and Loyalty in the Indian National Struggle* (Juggernaut, 2024).

Vineet Thakur

Vineet Thakur teaches history and international relations at Leiden University. He studies diplomatic history because that's where one finds the best gossip.

Rakesh Sood

Rakesh Sood joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1976. He has served as India's first Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva and later as Ambassador to Afghanistan, Nepal and France. After retiring in 2013, Ambassador Sood was Special Envoy of the Prime Minister for Disarmament and Non – Proliferation till May 2014.

Barkha Dutt

Barkha Dutt is one of India's foremost broadcast journalists with 30 years of reporting experience. Starting with her frontline reporting of the Kargil war in 1999, Dutt has reported extensively from conflict zones across the world, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, Libya and Israel. She is an Emmy nominated reporter and the winner of 50 national and international awards including the Padmashri. She is the editor of the digital video platform Mojo Story and a columnist with the Washington Post, Hindustan Times and Dainik Bhaskar.

Atul Mishra

Atul Mishra teaches international relations at Shiv Nadar University, Delhi-NCR. He studies IR theory because it is better to go up the ladder of abstraction than the ladder of escalation.

Jabin T. Jacob

Jabin T. Jacob teaches courses at the Shiv Nadar University, Delhi National Capital Region on Chinese foreign policy, the role of science and technology in international relations, and political thought in science fiction. He has subscriptions to altogether too many streaming platforms.

Shiv M. Sahai

Shiv Sahai is a retired Indian Police Service Officer of J&K cadre. He has addressed issues of traditional and non-traditional security during his stint at the National Security Council Secretariat. He is a Distinguished Fellow at the Council for Strategic and Defence Research.

Sidharth Raimedhi

Sidharth Raimedhi is a Fellow at CSDR, where he rakes up traditional security issues while also writing strategic wargames. He is a columnist for the Print, and likes to coin new terms and in niche circles. He is known as somewhat of a coinnoisseur.

Jonathan Koshy Verghese

Jonathan Koshy Varghese is Assistant Professor at the English Department of Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi. He was awarded his PhD from the History and Civilizations department at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), Paris. He is an Associate Researcher at the French national research center, Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH). He occasionally writes for The Hindu on aspects of writing, aesthetics and visual culture. He is, when times permits, a portraitist.

Devika Makkat

Devika Makkat is a Program Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi where she focuses her research efforts on the Europe vertical, and the intersections of Indian domestic and foreign policy. She enjoys dabbling with the politics of cinema - at a highly armchair expert level - exploring the sociological narratives driving popular culture.

Bashir Ali Abbas

Bashir Ali Abbas is a Research Associate at CSDR and a South Asia Visiting Fellow at the Stimson Center. He writes analysis on the Middle East for various platforms, including The Indian Express. In his free time, he talks to himself and asks whether it's the Middle East or West Asia.

Sukanya Sharma

Sukanya Sharma is an Editorial Associate at **INDIA'S WORLD** magazine, where she weaponises a keen eye for detail and a passion for storytelling. With a personal motto to "wing it," Sukanya embraces the art of improvisation, trusting in creativity and spontaneity to guide the way.

Ankit Tiwari

Ankit is a Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research and an Editorial Associate at India's World magazine. His research work focuses primarily on Indian Foreign Policy and Tech Policy, but his research interests vary widely, as befitting a self-styled 'Jack of all trades, Master of none.' In his spare time, Ankit likes to tinkle on his guitar and word-polish a novel he never plans to publish.

Prabhash Ranjan

Prabhash Ranjan is a Professor at the Jindal Global Law School. He teaches, reads, and writes in international law, international investment law, and international trade law. When not teaching and researching, Prabhash loves reading about politics, economics, and democracy, listening to Kishore Kumar and Mohammed Rafi songs, and watching Hrishikesh Mukherjee movies.

Tishya Khillare

Tishya Khillare is a Fellow at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research where she leads the programme on Inclusive Foreign and Security Policy. As a Feminist International Relations scholar, Khillare brings over 10 years of research experience in gender based analysis. She enjoys researching, writing and working on Women Peace and Security and Feminist Foreign Policy.

Cover Art & Illustrations: Tara Isha

Tara Isha is a painter, fine artist and freelance illustrator based in New Delhi, with over ten years of experience. She works in a variety of mediums, and specialises in acrylic painting and espressive portraiture.

From The Editor

Historically, Indians have struggled to define the terms of their engagement with the world, just as the world has struggled to engage with India. These interactions were often clouded by mutual suspicion, disinterest, ideological biases, colonial encounters, and historical baggage–making those interactions hesitant and distracted. In the Indian consciousness, the country was destined to play a vital role in the community of nations, yet its rightful place was long denied. To the international community—largely the developed West—India was not a 'strategic actor' but a complicated Third World country, difficult to engage with.

That was the past. Three-quarters of a century since Indian independence, India's *weltanschauung* on the world has been fundamentally transformed.

From a dissatisfied power on the margins of revisionist global politics, it has emerged as a proactive force, carving out a distinct role for itself on the global stage. The world's perception of India has shifted too—it is seen as a mediator in global conflicts, a pivotal state in the Indo-Pacific, and a key player in global governance in an age of systemic instability.

Today, India is an indispensable actor in the international system. **India's World** seeks to chronicle this transformation—and the nation's fast-paced engagement with the global order, while recalling the country's historical contributions to making the world a better place.

The age of negation—what some might call the long period of non-alignment—in India's foreign policy is over. The refrain of "We don't like that, and we won't do that" has been replaced by an era of ambition, articulation, and agency.

India's World is dedicated to capturing this ambition, articulation, and agency.

Clearly, India's engagement with the world is not new, but today it has taken on a proactive dimension, rooted in historical context, cultural heritage, and civilizational depth. Simultaneously, the world's interest in India has intensified, viewing it as a significant actor on the international stage. This evolving story of India's deepening global role deserves to be chronicled—told, interpreted through Indian voices.

Capturing and amplifying this narrative is the mission of this magazine.

India's World aims to tell the story of India's engagement with the world from uniquely Indian perspectives. In doing so, we take a non-traditional approach: international affairs extend beyond foreign policy, and India's interests cannot be confined to bilateral relations. We are keen on transcending the tyranny of the present, offering a holistic view that explores history, culture, cuisine, music, movies, art, and, of course, diplomacy. "Why such a large canvas?" you might ask. Because, India's engagement with the world, reflected in its varied dimensions, encompasses far more than just bilateral relations.

The print edition of **India's World** will be published once every two months. In the intervening period, our website (**www.indiasworld.in**) will offer fresh, timely essays on India's engagement with the world at large. Each week, we will feature two pieces on key issues in India's international relations, along with weekly briefs on global developments relevant to India's interests. Give us some time, and we'll bring you state-of-the-art podcasts and videos too.

This Issue

The inaugural issue of **India's World** explores the various dimensions of India's Grand Strategy – the challenges, choices, and opportunities. It features thoughtful takes on India's diplomatic history, relationships with neighbors like China and Bangladesh, and broader global engagements, such as with the Middle East. This issue also highlights the intersections of culture and international relations—through interviews with authors, film reviews, and reflections on how the arts and media shape India's global image. In the coming months, India's World will delve deeper into sports, music, arts, and their intersections with foreign policy.

I hope you enjoy **India's World**—its art, style, layout, and, most importantly, the thought-provoking essays. As an independent, non-partisan initiative, **India's World** is dedicated to amplifying Indian voices in international relations. Your subscriptions are essential to sustaining this effort. Please subscribe, support, and share your feedback—we look forward to hearing from you!

Happymon Jacob

Key Developments

Headlines That You Must Not Miss

Quad Summit in Delaware

On 21 September, PM Modi participated in the Quad Summit 2024. Notably, the visit to the United States came two months after Modi's high-profile trip to Russia, which created fresh diplomatic tensions between New Delhi and Washington, as the latter took to scrutinise the India-Russia relationship heavily amidst the Ukraine war. Nevertheless, the summit and parallel bilateral agreements, such as the decision to establish a joint US-India strategic chip fabrication unit in India, were widely viewed as a success despite New Delhi's 'diplomatic tightrope' and (re)demonstrated the US-India relationship's ability to withstand political pressure.

Elections in Sri Lanka

On 21 September, Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) was sworn in as the President of Sri Lanka. Two months later, his political party, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP,) once considered a left-extremist and violent force in the country, swept the parliamentary elections. Given JVP's history of anti-India activism and its 'Marxist-Lenninist' ideology, concerns around further Chinese inroads into the island nation and related setbacks to Indian interests are widespread. At the same time, however, Indian diplomacy has been quick on its feet and ostensibly built a relationship with the party (ahead of the elections and after).

India-Maldives Bilateral Reset

On 6 October, Maldives President Muizzu travelled to India for a four-day state visit (his first) and launched a comprehensive effort to repair the diplomatic relationship between New Delhi and Male. This followed India's emergency assistance to 'bail out' the archipelago after it came under heavy financial stress. Consequently, the India-Maldives ties were bumped up to "Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership." With this, Muizzu effectively reversed his "India Out" stance, and for New Delhi, the bilateral reset came as sharp relief amidst multiple recent setbacks to Indian interests in the neighbourhood.

EAM Jaishankar's Visit to Pakistan

On 15 and 16 October, Pakistan hosted the 23rd SCO Summit in Islamabad. Notably, EAM S Jaishankar attended the same, which marked the first trip to Pakistan by an Indian foreign minister in almost a decade. Despite fresh Assembly elections in Kashmir, the visit was characterised by an unusual lack of diplomatic hostility and tensions, which in turn raised hopes for an eventual bilateral rapprochement. Even if this possibility remains far-fetched for the foreseeable future, the visit did demonstrate that India and Pakistan can continue to, at least, co-exist and function together in multilateral organisations.

BRICS Summit in Kazan

On 22 October, PM Modi landed in Kazan, Russia, to attend the 16th BRICS Summit, or the '1st BRICS + Summit,' as it expanded last year to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the UAE. Despite New Delhi's anxiety last year that an expanded BRICS could dilute its influence within the bloc and give the group an 'anti-Western' flavour, India appeared comfortable with the summit. Regardless of the bloc's economic utility for India, on the optical level, the Indian 'multi-alignment' strategy saw traction, as PM Modi met President Xi and President Putin on the sidelines, and New Delhi demonstrated its 'options' in the backdrop of diplomatic tensions with the West.

German Chancellor and Spanish PM's Back-to-Back Visits to India

German Chancellor Scholz visited India on 24 October to co-chair the 7th Intergovernmental Consultations (IGC) alongside PM Modi. In the aftermath of the German government's "Focus on India" policy document – a comprehensive effort to de-risk Germany's 'China-centric' approach to Asia – bilateral cooperation in security, climate action, trade, and technology is expected to receive a boost. More broadly, the whole-of-government approach, as envisioned in the policy paper and seen in Scholz's delegation, demonstrates the new heights of India's relationship with Europe. That the Spanish PM Sanchez visited India immediately after, on 28 October, and became the first Spanish leader to do so in 18 years, was further evidence for the same.

India-China Disengagement Deal

On 30 October, India and China completed disengagement at the two friction points in Depsang and Demchok, along the LAC, amidst a diplomatic reset that carries vast implications for India's strategic calculus. Notably, the development came after PM Modi and President Xi met officially for the first time in four years. Although the resumption of 'normal ties' was widely welcomed for regional stability and will allow for greater and easier bilateral economic cooperation in the short term, over the long term, strategic competition and contestation will likely continue to define the trajectory of the India-China relationship.

President Trump's Comeback

Donald Trump's decisive victory in the 2024 US presidential election triggered both optimism and concern in New Delhi. On the one hand, Trump's aggressive position on China and anticipated increase in tariffs could accelerate strategic opportunities (such as 'China+1') for India. On the other hand, trade tensions loom large over the India-US relationship itself, given Trump's characterisation of India as a 'very big abuser,' which makes $77 billion worth of Indian exports vulnerable to potential disruption. On the geopolitical level, however, Indian experts largely expect continuity and even some relief over Western scrutiny of India's strategic partnership with Russia.

PM Oli's Visit to China

On 2 December, Nepali PM K.P. Sharma Oli broke tradition and became the second Prime Minister to visit China ahead of India (after PM Prachanda in 2008) for bilateral talks with President Xi. That they signed nine deals, coupled with Oli's politicisation of anti-India sentiments in Nepal, left New Delhi wary that Nepal had moved closer to China, despite Oli's dependency on a coalition with Nepali Congress (broadly a pro-India party). Most importantly, more than seven years after the BRI Framework Agreement, the BRI Implementation Plan was signed and is likely to help deepen Beijing's influence within Kathmandu.

Indian Semiconductor Mission's Steady Pace

Amidst global re-configuration in semiconductor supply chains and the 'Chip Wars' between the US and China, the 'Indian Semiconductor Mission' maintained a steady pace. On 5 September, the Maharashtra Govt. approved a $10 billion semiconductor project, pitched by an Adani Group and Tower Semiconductors (Israeli) Joint Venture, to set up a fabrication plant in Panvel (contingent on final approval by the centre). The ISM

has already approved another fabrication unit and four ATMP and OSAT facilities within the country. Coupled with India's existent capacity in semiconductor design, this is significant progress, even as India's semiconductor ecosystem remains a long way off from the production of advanced chips, where true Atmanirbharta arguably lies.

Quantum Key Distribution for National Security

On 1 October, the Indian Army signed a procurement contract, under the Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) initiative to source 'Quantum Secure Key Generation' technology from the Indian company QuNU Labs. As cyber security concerns over breakthroughs in Quantum Computing mount around the world, given that an adequately powerful Quantum Computer could completely upend the advanced encryption methods in use today, the procurement may prove critical to eventually establish long 'quantum key distribution' networks and protect sensitive data from future attacks. It bodes well for both national security preparedness and the increasing role played by innovative defence startups in India that work with niche technologies.

(Some) Clarity on Satellite Spectrum Allocation

On 15 October, Indian Telecom Minister Scindia said, "The Telecom Act 2023 clearly stated that satellite spectrum would be allocated administratively…" but to assuage the concerns of Indian telecom giants such as Reliance that allocations may become handouts for satcom companies such as Starlink, Mr Scindia added, "Now, that does not mean that spectrum does not come at a cost. What that cost is… will be decided by the TRAI." Even as the GoI signalled policy certainty, much will now depend on the TRAI's math as it attempts to strike the delicate balance between encouraging foreign investment and fostering 'healthy' tech disruptions and the concerns of domestic players for a 'level playing field.'

NVIDIA's Entry Into India

On 24 October, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang addressed the Artificial Intelligence Summit 2024 in Mumbai and declared, "2024 will see 20 times growth in compute capacities in India." This highlighted a wide range of announced partnerships between the American chip giant and Indian firms such as Reliance, Tata Consultancy, and several other high-profile names, which can be expected to give a significant boost to India's nascent AI ecosystem. In particular, Reliance and Tata both announced plans to incorporate Nvidia's Blackwell and Hopper GPUs—by far, the most powerful AI chips in the world, which are part of US export controls on China.

India Maiden Test for Hypersonic

On 17 November, DRDO conducted the maiden test of its long-range (1500 km) hypersonic missile – a class of highly manoeuvrable weapons that can fly at speeds of at least Mach 5 (or five times the speed of sound). In contrast to ballistic missiles, which follow a fixed trajectory and travel outside the atmosphere to re-enter only near impact, hypersonic missiles that travel within the atmosphere can manoeuvre midway. Coupled with their high speed, hypersonic missiles are consequently much harder to detect and intercept.

India-Australia Space Agreement

Although India's first-ever manned space mission, Gaganyaan, was delayed to 2026, a significant development occurred on 20 November, when the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and the Australian Space Agency signed an Implementation Agreement to strengthen space cooperation between the two countries further. Notably, the IA will enable the Australian authorities to work with Indian authorities to ensure support for the search and rescue of the Gaganyaan crew and recovery of the crew module in the event of a contingency, such as ascent phase aborts near Australian waters. Separately, the Indian astronauts have completed their initial training phase for the mission.

Indian Criticism of NCQC Decision at COP29

On 21 November, at COP29, India issued a strongly worded critical statement on the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) text, which was suddenly gavelled without time and room to hear objections on the floor. The targeted USD 300 billion per year (by 2035) climate finance goal fell way short of the USD 1.3 trillion that developing countries had rallied for, and to signal and cement its solidarity with the Global South, India rejected the decision, "We are disappointed with the outcome, which clearly brings out the unwillingness of the developed country parties to fulfil their responsibilities," and called the amount "abysmally poor" and "paltry." Consequently, India's objection was supported by several developing nations.

The Indian Pursuit of Mineral Security

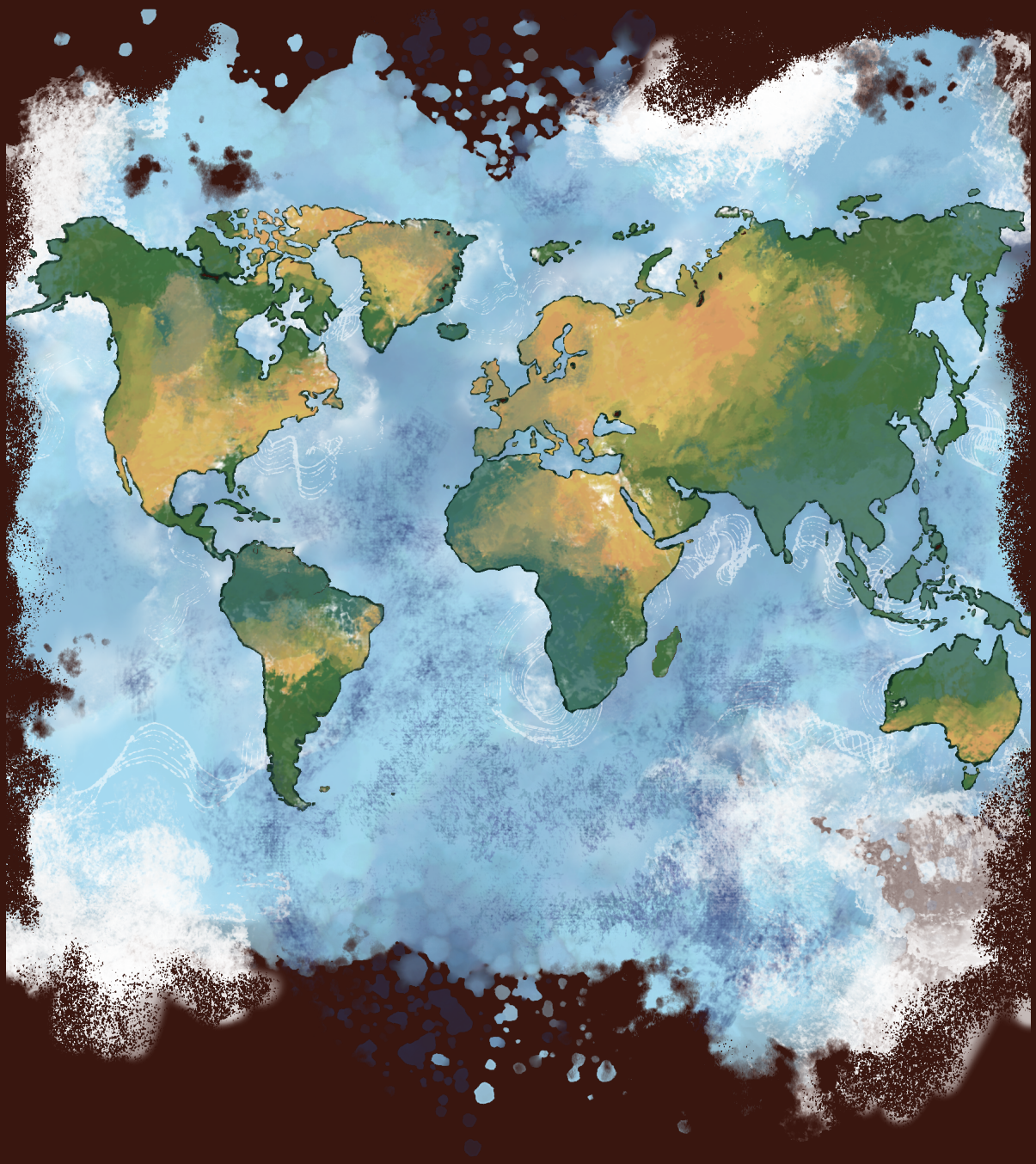
Even as domestic auctions indicated the commercial infeasibility for many of India's critical mineral blocks this year, India launched a first-of-its-kind 'offshore' mineral blocks auction for 13 blocks spread across its exclusive economic zones on 28 November. More importantly and parallelly, New Delhi has accelerated overseas acquisitions of critical mineral blocks in South America and Africa, as well as joined the US-backed Mineral Security Finance Network – made up of 14 (mostly Western) countries and the European Union, which collectively aim to secure critical minerals supply chains through a network of development finance institutions and export credit agencies, to curb worrisome import dependencies (largely on China).

K4 Ballistic Missile Launched by Submarine

On 28 November, India became part of a small group of elite nations that can fire a long-range nuclear missile from land, air, or undersea (known as the nuclear triad). After extensive trials by the DRDO, the Indian navy finally test-fired the K4 ballistic missile (with a 3500 km range) from a newly-inducted nuclear submarine, INS Arighaat. Even as the DRDO plans to conduct further tests on the missile system, India has arguably validated its second-strike capability and enhanced its nuclear deterrence.

India's EV Policy To Be Augmented

On 29 November, Reuters reported that India plans to augment its EV policy. Under the policy announced in March, if an automaker invested at least $500 million to build a plant and manufacture EVs in India with 50% of components sourced locally, then they would be entitled to a huge cut on import taxes - a drop to 15% from as high as 100% for up to 8,000 electric cars per year. The new policy would consider incentives for investments in existing factories as well, even if they produce gasoline engines and hybrid cars, as long as a new production line for EVs is set up and other conditions are met. ■



The Argument

Grand Strategy For A *Viksit Bharat*

C. Raja Mohan

India has set for itself a grand strategic goal—to become a 'developed nation'—or '*Viksit Bharat*'—by the time the nation celebrates the centenary of its independence in 2047.

The goal is a demanding one, even when we assess it against a relaxed definition of a developed state—a per capita income of at least $12,000, compared to about $2,700 currently. The low per capita income underlines the persistent and multiple unmet challenges of under-development.

The principal focus of the endeavour—to become a developed state, is internal and tied to the comprehensive reforms—social, economic, political, military and institutional—that will help accelerate India's rise.

The reforms of the last few decades which have made India's ambition to become a developed state a plausible one, have also transformed India's relationship with the world. With nearly 40 per cent of its GDP tied to imports and exports, India has never been as intricately interconnected with the world as it is today.

Leveraging this interdependence with the world, then, is a critical element of India's grand strategy to become a developed nation. It involves deploying its growing economic size, military potential, and technological talent to negotiate better terms in engaging with the world. It also involves the mobilisation of the external world and its resources as well as the exploitation of international contradictions to accelerate India's internal transformation.

FOUR ELEMENTS OF GRAND STRATEGY

We need to review four elements of this external strategy to generate wealth and power for India. These are: growing the salience of the West for the Indian economy; lending the idea of 'strategic autonomy' a pragmatic basis; expanding India's role in a multipolar world; and deepening its ties to the non-Western world or the Global South. In many of these areas, there has been a significant forward movement in India's practice of its international relations during the last decade, but the elite discourse on India's international relations remains rooted in the past. The growing gap between the two tends to mask the unfolding structural changes in India's engagement with the world.

ECONOMIC STRATEGY AND GEOPOLITICAL ORIENTATION

India's foreign policy discourse is conducted as if the changes in Delhi's economic strategy at the turn of the 1990s have had nothing to do with its altered geopolitical orientation. The choice of the domestic economic strategy has a significant bearing on the external relations of any large nation. This is true of India as well.

When the Nehru era adopted elements of the Soviet model of planning and economic growth, it inevitably became closer to Moscow in the geopolitical domain. Although the alignments of the Cold War moved India closer to Moscow, the domestic economic orientation and the deliberate rejection of a capitalist model of development by the Indian political class had a powerful impact on India's external relations.

During the Cold War, the focus on state-led economic growth, import substitution, controls over the private sector, opposition to foreign direct investment, and rejection of export-led growth, saw the erosion of commercial links with the most dynamic parts of the global economy in North America, Europe, and East Asia. It also removed the potential for leveraging the economic dimension to limit the serious political divergence between post-colonial India on the one hand and the West on the other.

Above all, it led to the relative decline of India's economic standing in the world.

The domestic economic orientation and the deliberate rejection of a capitalist model of development by the Indian political class had a powerful impact on India's external relations.

The breakdown of this model at the turn of the 1990s led to a restructuring of the Indian economy with a new emphasis on economic liberalisation and globalisation. The turn towards economic liberalism led to greater commercial engagement with Western capital and stronger political ties with the U.S. and its allies in Europe and Asia.

If the Soviet Union loomed large over the Indian economy during the Cold War, the U.S., Europe, and the Anglosphere now dominate India's trade and investment flows.

On the technological front, India's ties with the U.S. have become deep in the reform era thanks to the organic relationship that has emerged between Bengaluru and the Silicon Valley. The movement of Indian tourists, professionals, and students is largely towards the West, especially to the English-speaking world. India's new economic orientation at home has altered the commercial priorities and political preferences abroad.

The salience of the Western capital, markets, and technology for India's growth, prosperity and power will continue to grow in the coming years. Although nurturing ties with the West and preventing political differences from coming in the way of this, is now at the top of India's strategic priorities, its strategic community continues to debate its external strategy through a lens of the past.

Many words from the old lexicon of India's grand strategy have acquired new meaning amid the changing structure of its economy, the nature of the external environment, and the definition of national interests. No other words are more important in this context than 'strategic autonomy', 'multipolarity', and 'Global South'. Parsing the evolution of these concepts helps explain the transformation of India's grand strategy.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

India's pursuit of 'strategic autonomy' is widely viewed as the cornerstone of its post-Cold War engagement with the world. How Delhi interprets that concept, however, has begun to change. The emphasis on non-alignment during the second half of the 20th century morphed into the articulation of strategic autonomy as the principal goal of India's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War.

Although strategic autonomy is presented as a special attribute of India's foreign policy, we do know that all sovereigns in the international system seek to expand their room for manoeuvre in accordance with their capabilities and interests. In the Indian case, the enduring focus on the idea of strategic autonomy must be viewed simply as a preference for 'independent' foreign policy rather than as an anti-Western ideology.

In the past, when Delhi's relations with Washington were poor, India's strategic autonomy, in practice, meant keeping reasonable political distance from the United States. Today, we can affirm that the U.S. partnership has become critical for maintaining India's 'strategic autonomy'.

For example, Delhi's ties with Washington are critical today for managing the growing military and economic threats from China. It is no surprise that as security challenges from China mounted since the early 2010s, India's defence cooperation with the United States has expanded continuously. And as India copes with the growing economic challenge—marked by a massive annual trade deficit of more than $100 billion—Delhi has moved closer to the U.S. and its allies in seeking a rearrangement of global supply chains and reducing the reliance on a single source (China) for the import of manufactured goods. It is also seeking to attract more investment from the West into India's manufacturing sector.

The current convergence of interests between India and the U.S. does not mean Delhi's core interest in relation to Beijing—peaceful co-existence and normal ties—will diminish.

What about Russia? Delhi recognises that Russia, a critical element in India's effort to balance China during the period between the 1960s and 1980s, can not play that role in the current environment amid Moscow's deepening ties with Beijing. Although India holds on to the relationship with Russia as a long-term player in the Eurasian balance of power, India relies more on the West to balance China.

Russia will remain a major supplier of natural resources—including energy and mineral resources—for the economic growth of India. But Delhi is acutely conscious that it needs to reduce its long-standing dependence on Russia for its military supplies. It has sought to increase indigenous production as well as invite Western capital to invest in India's defence production.

A developed India will need to have a significant manufacturing base and the capacity to produce weapons at home. India's strategic autonomy is no longer about keeping distance from the U.S., but about reducing its vulnerabilities in relation to China and Russia. It is about enhancing India's comprehensive national power in partnership with the West. But is India trading its dependence on Russia and China to a greater reliance on the U.S.?

As India's relative weight in the international system continues to rise, its ability to manage the complex relationship with the U.S. and the West will also improve. This would involve more intensive engagement with the U.S. domestic politics and winning the support of key constituencies that can insure against potential hostility of the U.S. government of the day. It would also entail developing deeper ties with Europe, the Anglosphere, Japan, and South Korea within the Western camp. As its relative weight in the international system improves, Delhi's ability to shape the international system too would continue to improve.

> **In the Indian case, the enduring focus on the idea of strategic autonomy must be viewed simply as a preference for 'independent' foreign policy rather than as an anti-Western ideology.**

MULTIPOLAR WORLD

The promotion of a 'multipolar' world has been an important feature of India's international relations since the end of the Cold War. But how India thinks about the multipolar world has begun to change in the last decade. When India embarked on the project of constructing a multipolar world in the 1990s, in partnership with Russia and China, the goal was to hedge against the extant unipolar moment and the danger of America threatening India's core national security interests—on questioning the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India and the policy of rolling back India's nuclear weapons programme. By the mid 2010s, India's relations with the U.S. had significantly improved while those with China were on a downward path.

As the China threat began to dominate Indian policy making, Delhi moved away from hedging against the U.S. to balancing China in partnership with Washington. The quest for a multipolar world transformed into the search for a 'multipolar Asia'.

Meanwhile, the evolving global order is increasingly characterised by a paradox. Although several new non-

Western powers have risen and have acquired greater agency in shaping the world order, the U.S. remains the most important power in the world, thanks to a near constant 25 per cent share in the global GDP since the turn of the millennium. This is unlikely to change any time soon.

The rise of the non-Western powers has been at the expense of Europe and Japan who have been losing their share of the GDP, rather than the United States. Even more consequential is the fact that China's economy has slowed in the 2020s. The conventional wisdom that China is all set to overtake the U.S. as the largest economy any time soon, if at all, has come under a cloud.

Although India holds on to the relationship with Russia as a long-term player in the Eurasian balance of power, India relies more on the West to balance China.

The Indian discourse on institutions like the BRICS that came out of the effort to promote a multipolar world suggests that Delhi might be interested in overthrowing the global order led by the U.S. But in practice, though, there is little to suggest that Delhi is interested in jumping from a global economic order led by the U.S. to one dominated by China.

On the political institutional front too, China has been the principal obstacle to India's global aspirations, whether it is the membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group or a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council. Delhi today is working closely with many U.S.-led groupings—like the Combined Maritime Forces in the Arabian Sea, the Quad, the Mineral Security Partnership, the Artemis Accords, and the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence.

Delhi is acutely conscious that the current contestation between the 'Collective West' led by the U.S. on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other is not a permanent feature of the international system.

Over the last century, the West's relationship with China and Russia has frequently changed—from partnership to confrontation. So have the ties between Beijing and Moscow. It also knows that for all their anti-Western rhetoric, both Beijing and Moscow are eager to cut deals with the United States.

The problem has not been ideological principles but the terms of a grand bargain. History also tells us that there are strong pro-Western elites in both Beijing and Moscow. India's objective, then, is to elevate its own standing in the international system through effective navigation between the major powers rather than any presumed ideological obligation to bring down the world order led by the U.S.

GLOBAL SOUTH

India's renewed claim since the 2023 summit of the G-20 nations in Delhi on championing the Global South has certainly caught the political imagination of the Indian strategic community. There is much enthusiasm in the Indian discourse about the idea of reclaiming leadership of the developing world and building a platform against the developed nations. The legacy from the colonial and the immediate post-colonial era continues to resonate and seems to put India on the same page as China and Russia, which seek to mobilise genuine anti-Western resentment in their efforts in the non-Western world.

Although it sits together with China and Russia in many forums, Delhi is not willing to adopt their anti-Western rhetoric. The 'Voice of the Global South' summits that India held during 2023 and 2024 have consciously avoided any anti-Western rhetoric.

There is a new recognition in Delhi that the challenges facing the Global South cannot be addressed through a confrontation with the West and that international cooperation between the South and the North holds the key. India is eager to become a bridge between the North and the South by focusing on practical outcomes rather than returning to old ideological battles.

In recent years, New Delhi has often talked of itself as a "South-Western power" capable of building deep partnerships with the U.S. and Europe and, simultaneously, championing the interests of the Global South. Even more important is the objective of expanding India's own economic, security, and technological engagement with the non-Western world. India's trade with Africa, Latin America, and Oceania has been growing in the reform era. Delhi now senses a big opportunity to boost this through the campaign on

the Global South.

In the past, India's ideological enthusiasm for the Global South was neither matched by material power nor political will.

Today, India's material capabilities have grown, and its leadership is brimming with political ambition. India must, however, come to terms with the fact that the Global South is not a coherent group and does not have a single shared agenda. Nor is it looking for a single leader.

Most of the ruling regimes in the Global South are quite adept at bargaining with the great powers, including China and India, for national benefit. There is much differentiation within the South today with respect to wealth, power, needs, and capabilities. This demands a tailored Indian policy for different regions and groups of the developing world.

Multiple internal and regional conflicts within the Global South undermined India's Third World strategy in the Cold War era. As a result, India simply ducked them in the past or hid behind overarching slogans. Championing the Global South today would demand a more active Indian engagement with the messy regional politics within the developing world.

India's new Global South Strategy demands promoting trade, investment and technology transfers, as well as security cooperation with the key nations of the non-Western world. It is the strength in these areas that has made China a powerful player today in the Global South. Political rhetoric on the Global South is no substitute for the deployment of hard power in the non-Western world.

Implicit in the ambition for a *Viksit Bharat* are two ideas that did not figure much in the articulation of independent India's foreign policy—wealth and power. In the 20th century, the emerging Indian political elite had convinced itself that prosperity was beyond the reach of the developing nations and the pursuit of power was not a worthy goal. In making wealth and power important goals for India, Delhi has created the basis for an interest-driven foreign policy. Although the burden of past ideologies has not fully disappeared, the leadership's realistic reinterpretation of the old vocabulary has reinforced strategic pragmatism in Delhi. ■

Grand Strategy

'Multi-Alignment': Towards a 'Grand Strategy' for India in the Twenty-First Century

Shashi Tharoor

When researching in 1977 the doctoral dissertation that became my first book, Reasons of State, I was told by a (then already retired) Indian diplomat that 'Indian diplomacy is like the love-making of an elephant: it is conducted at a very high level, accompanied by much bellowing, and the results are not known for two years.' Indian diplomacy has become somewhat sprightlier since those days, but the gentle indictment of a style of foreign policy-making that was widely considered to be long on rhetoric and short of hard-headed substance no longer echoes through the corridors of New Delhi's South Block.

At the time, I lamented the low correlation between foreign policy as conceived and articulated by decision-makers and national interests in security and geopolitical terms. This point was obviously a rather contentious one. It was presumptuous of me, in my early twenties, to decry the lack, as I saw it, of a strategic vision on the part of India's policymakers beyond the bromides of non-alignment. I wrote passionately about the failure to define a conception of the Indian national interest in other than universalist-ideological terms—itself a manifestation, no doubt, of my academic over-reliance on public declarations and official statements, albeit supplemented by several astonishingly candid interviews (Mrs Gandhi's government had just fallen in the elections of 1977 after her disastrous experiment with Emergency rule, and every one of her key advisers and foreign ministers was available and willing to talk freely, never expecting her to come back to power). India's declaratory effulgences about non-alignment featured rather too many references to 'peace' and 'friendship' as cardinal motivations and attributes of foreign policy, which I argued were scarcely adequate substitutes for a clear conception of the nation's specific goals in foreign policy, their realizability and the tasks to be performed in order to attain them. In Nehru's time, I averred, the Sino-Indian war was the most dramatic, but not the only, demonstration of this failure; and yet just nine years later, India's masterly handling of its foreign policy objectives in the 1971 Bangladesh crisis offered a convincing counter-narrative.

My argument was all the more sustainable because of the widely prevalent view of Nehru's foreign policy as a value in itself, as (in one Indian scholar's formulation) an 'imperative' not to be judged by the 'mundane criteria of success'. Indeed, after 1962, success was an inappropriate criterion to apply to Nehru's foreign policy. As a global stratagem, non-alignment might

initially have gained India some freedom of manoeuvre between the superpowers and brought it a prestige and influence out of proportion to India's true strength, but it did not serve Nehru well in his hour of crisis. No wonder non-aligned scruples were quietly jettisoned by his own daughter in 1971, when realpolitik, rather than woolly declarations of non-aligned solidarity, was needed and pursued, and India rushed willingly into the Soviet embrace as a shield against a possible Pakistani-Chinese alliance. Though New Delhi proceeded gently to distance itself from Moscow thereafter (including concluding defence deals with France, the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1980s), the lingering effects of that embrace remained apparent in Indian policies on Cambodia and Afghanistan, and it was only with the end of the Cold War in 1991 that India once again became truly non-aligned—at a time when there no longer were two powers to be non-aligned between.

It should go without saying that every country needs a foreign policy that is linked to national interests concretely defined. To meet this test, the Indian government should always be able to develop and possess a view of the national interest in regional and international affairs, and to apply it in practice; the 'national interest', in this formulation, should be a concept transcending the mere enunciation of foreign policy principles. It is worthwhile to advocate peace and good neighbourliness as a national principle, for instance, but such advocacy becomes irrelevant if there is a belligerent army marching across one's borders; national interests then demand capable military self-defence. This may seem self-evident, but the distinction has been blurred in less clear-cut situations over the years by the makers and articulators of India's foreign policy. Indian diplomacy has often been seen by close observers as more concerned with principles than interests—a tendency that infects Indian negotiating strategies as well, making New Delhi less likely to compromise, since principles are usually immutable while interests can be negotiable.

In defining the Indian national interest, there are fundamental domestic verities that foreign policy must either promote or at least not undermine: India's liberal democracy; its religious, ethnic and cultural pluralism (a term I prefer to the more traditional Nehruvian 'secularism'); and its overriding priority of pulling its people out of poverty and ensuring their economic well-being. These are as fundamental to our national interest as preserving an effective, well-trained and non-political military that will secure and protect our borders, as well

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as security forces that will deal with domestic sources of conflict, from misguided Maoists to secessionist insurgencies. If all of these elements and objectives constitute India's core national interests, New Delhi must maintain the domestic structures and capacities to pursue them, as well as strive to ensure the shaping of a world order that permits, and ideally facilitates, their fulfilment.

This requires, as Jawaharlal Nehru presciently noted nearly seventy years ago, that priority be given to success on the domestic front: 'I do not pretend to say that India, as she is, can make a vital difference to world affairs,' he said. 'So long as we have not solved most of our own problems, our voice cannot carry the weight that it normally will and should.' His words remain true six and a half decades later, though India's recent economic successes have already given its voice more weight than it has possessed for some time, and this process should continue unless India slips backward drastically at home.

India's basic approach in international affairs goes back to the days of the Constituent Assembly: as the doyen of Indian strategic studies, the late K. Subrahmanyam, put it, India's grand strategy during the second half of the twentieth century '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'. This was fine in the initial years, but is no longer adequate as a grand strategy and seems very much in need of updating in the third decade of the twenty-first century.

Today India has the world's largest population; it is the world's third-largest economy in purchasing power parity terms, and poised to reach that rank in dollar terms before the decade is out; and it has a formidable military, better-organised with the development of theatre commands and a Chief of Defence Staff (a reform I had long clamoured for myself), with a growing navy ready to take on some of the responsibilities that come with its maritime geography. To these key elements of a grand strategy we have begun to add a changed vision of our place in the world. The metaphor for today's globalized world is really that of the World Wide Web. In this increasingly networked world, India must work through multiple networks. Those networks will sometimes overlap with each other with common memberships, but sometimes they will be distinct; they all serve our interests in different ways and for different

purposes. Thus India can play an influential role with both the United Nations, a universal organization that has 193 member states, and with BRICS, that till its recent expansion had only its five eponymous members. It belongs both to the non-aligned movement, which reflects our experience of colonialism, and the Community of Democracies, which reflects its decades of experience as a democracy. India is a leading light of the "Global South", the principal voice of developing countries, whose last summit saw some 125 countries in attendance, and also of the G-20 (Group of 20 developed and developing countries in charge of global macro-economic policy). India has the ability to be in all these institutional networks pursuing different objectives with different allies and partners, and in each finding a valid purpose that suits us and to which we can contribute. This is why India has moved beyond non-alignment to what, two decades ago, I first called "multi-alignment." Today the concept of "multi-alignment", increasingly a leitmotiv of our grand strategy, reflects a changed reality. But there is much more to be done before India can truly be said to playing a role fully in consonance with its global potential. ■

Grand Strategy

Five Paradoxes In India's Grand Strategy

Happymon Jacob

Contemporary Indian grand strategic practices are a study in paradoxes, as the nation carefully navigates an unstable international system. It attempts to utilise global instability, and leverage contradictions to advance its ambitious, interest-driven foreign policy agenda.

Much like its overall grand strategic approach, these paradoxes in India's practices are revealing, shining a light on the country's underlying directions and broad foreign policy goals.

Three elements of India's approach stand out: First, multi-alignment has emerged as a central tenet, gradually replacing the earlier policy of non-alignment, which served as the country's grand strategic pivot for several decades after independence.

The second feature is India's new geo-economic approach, highlighted by its determined pursuit of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and technological partnerships with a range of foreign partners.

Finally, India's grand strategy is also deeply characterised by an interest-based outlook, emphasising pragmatic and dynamic engagement with the international system, free from dogmatic ideologies or moralising rhetoric.

Yet within these ideas live a series of paradoxes, which this essay examines. I recognize that no grand strategy is free from paradoxes; indeed, the grander the strategy–the more contradictions it tends to have given the almost unavoidable tension between praxis and strategy.

And yet, it is essential to acknowledge and understand these paradoxes as the country grapples with the challenges of tailoring a grand strategy for itself. I refer to them as paradoxes. Because, while they may appear contradictory, they are, in my assessment, not merely contradictions—they are, for the most part, plain facts that are sometimes unavoidable.

There is another reason why I focus on paradoxes: they reflect India's desire to pursue a bolder foreign policy—one that is willing to explore bigger opportunities and take on greater challenges, moving beyond past ideological hesitations. A less ambitious approach might have been less riddled with such apparent confusion.

INDIA'S REGIONAL DECLINE AND GLOBAL RISE

The most prominent paradox evident in India's grand strategy today is a seeming global rise of the country that is coinciding with a sharp decline of its influence in its own South Asian backyard.

Consider this: Over the past two decades, fuelled by economic growth, and a young demographic, the country proactively participated in an array of influential forums such as the G20, QUAD, BRICS, and the SCO.

Not only is it a key player in the Indo-Pacific, India is increasingly viewed as a potential mediator in conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war and the tensions between the Global South and the developed North. The rising instability in the international system has further strengthened India's ability to shape global developments, solidifying its position as a rising global power.

Yet in its own region, India's influence has declined. For a country that was widely considered to be the legatee state of the erstwhile British Empire which enjoyed unquestioned primacy in the region, its status in the region stands diminished. This is despite the growth in its power and global recognition as a major power.

At its core, this is a function of two factors: The rise of China and its attempts at upending the traditional balance of power in South Asia, have contributed to the growing anti-India sentiment in the region. This shift has been aided, undoubtedly, by Beijing's offer to provide a geopolitical alternative to the smaller states in the region.

THE TWO-FRONT CHALLENGE: MARITIME VS CONTINENTAL

The second paradox in India's grand strategy lies in the competing pressures posed by the strategic spaces it operates in.

On the one hand, India remains continentally constrained by its regional challenges; on the other, it is emerging as a pivotal power in the Indo-Pacific. Both demand a great deal of attention and resources from its leadership.

Let us unpack the various parts of this paradox. For one, across the Indo-Pacific, regardless of how one defines the area, India is an indispensable power and each of the key Indo-Pacific powers seeks to engage New Delhi as a partner. Without India, their Indo-Pacific strategies would at best be incomplete.

On the continental domain, on the other hand, India continues to remain entangled in an array of external and internal conflicts, and has few partners or friends in dealing with them. New Delhi aspires—and is

increasingly expected by its partners—to play a more consequential role in the Indo-Pacific. However, there is little recognition by its partners of India's continental challenges, which inevitably limit its maritime engagement.

One of India's major continental challenges is of course its persistent conflict with Pakistan. However, in tackling this Pakistan challenge, so to speak, India has seen little support from its current maritime partners, and there is no guarantee of their backing in a future conflict with Islamabad.

Secondly, India's efforts to secure continental partners, such as Russia, often face unreasonable disapproval from its maritime partners, even as its Indo-Pacific engagements draw criticism from Russia. This tension underscores the inherent push and pull between India's dual, competing strategic spaces—continental and maritime.

Third, and linked to the previous point, India's maritime strategy involves commitments to platforms like the Quad, Malabar, and the IPAF, which often clash with its continental engagements in forums like the SCO and BRICS+. Put differently, New Delhi's continental partnerships complicate its maritime partnerships–and vice versa.

Finally, with the country's traditional strategic focus tilted toward its land borders, especially with China and Pakistan, India's growing "maritime consciousness" poses a critical dilemma regarding resource reallocation. With long-term maritime interests competing against immediate land-based security needs, crafting a coherent strategy that addresses both fronts without overextending resources poses significant financial, organisational, and political challenges for the Indian political class.

MANAGING THE NEXT-DOOR SUPERPOWER: WAR, TRADE, AND COOPERATION

One of contemporary India's grand strategic challenges is stitching together a plan of action to deal with China.

For the first time in India's long history, a superpower is rising next door—something Indians are not used to. China's ascent and its aggressive attitude towards India is aimed at relegating India to a secondary power in the region, both by default and by design.

China's rise as a superpower on India's borders poses an unprecedented challenge, affecting India's perception of itself as a great civilisational state. China has disrupted India's regional primacy, viewing India as a secondary power rather than a peer. China's avoidance of strategic stability discussions, such as on nuclear security, and its perception of India as a lackey of the U.S. in the region further compounds the challenge.

At the same time, China is also among India's top two trading partners and the current pace of growth of the Indian economy is, at least at the moment, severely dependent on trade with China. The more India trades with China, the more its dependence increases. On the flip side, less trade would constrain its ability to grow its economy and create enough wealth—two things it needs to meet the China challenge head-on.

More so, given that China is a next-door neighbour, it is impossible for India not to deal with it. Developing a strategy to deal with China, then, poses a major paradox in the Indian grand strategy.

GREAT POWER RELATIONS: BALANCING CHINA, THE U.S. AND RUSSIA

India balances, hedges, and builds coalitions–of various intensity–with each of the great powers in the international system, a series of actions that are inherently paradoxical.

China's influence is unmistakably central to India's great power relations and plays a role in New Delhi's adoption of a multi-aligned approach. To wit: The challenge from China drives India to engage closely with the U.S. for support in technology, economic growth, and capitalising on the global Indo-Pacific moment. Simultaneously, India maintains ties with Russia, due to defence and other strategic needs—even as Russia's contribution to India's overall growth remains diminished.

A critical element of India's great power diplomacy is its delicate balancing act between the U.S. and its allies on one side and Russia on the other.

Choosing one over the other is challenging, and managing relationships with both won't be easy either. Aligning too closely with the U.S. risks intensifying the China challenge. Moreover, China may view India as a U.S. proxy, reducing the chances for serious dialogue

between New Delhi and Beijing on the larger questions pertaining to regional stability.

At the same time, if India shows no appetite to challenge China's growing regional hegemony, it won't be taken seriously by Beijing. Finally, if India doesn't build sufficient defences to take on the China challenge, the U.S. and its allies might also refuse to view India as a serious actor.

The China factor also makes it important for India to adopt a dual strategic posture on the Indo-Pacific region and its continental borders. For India, the need of the hour is maintaining "strategic autonomy" through careful balancing and coalition-building, hedging its bets without fully aligning with any one bloc.
A related challenge for India is to balance its approach towards "minilateral" initiatives due to the great power contestations in the "minilateral" space and the failure of multilateralism.

While India has long sought a stronger voice in global institutions, and even as it gains the power to make its mark, the post-war multilateral order is in decline. This pushes India to engage in emerging "minilateral" alliances and coalitions like the QUAD, G20, SCO and BRICS, which reflect the new world geopolitics.

The challenge for India is to manage and participate in a cross-section of emerging minilateral initiatives which are also sharply divided along global geopolitical faultlines.

FULFILLING GRAND AMBITIONS WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

The fifth paradox is meeting the country's grand ambitions with the limited resources at its disposal.

One of the enduring challenges in the Indian case is that the country's aspirations for a prominent global role can simply not be achieved with its existing material and personnel allocations.

Allocations to its foreign assistance program, for instance, have dwindled over time, while India's diplomatic corps remains fairly small in relation to its international commitments and its foreign policy vision.

This merged resource limitation undermines India's ability to position itself as a dependable major power and meet the extensive aims of its grand strategy. India's ability to move from a rising major power to a major power depends a great deal on its willingness and ability to employ more diplomatic and material resources.

While some of this problem is a product of organisational culture and politics, some of it is a function of the fact India is both a developing country with persistent poverty and a rising power with system-shaping potential.

This dual identity of the country–a developing country with an ambitious foreign policy agenda and an influential global role–fosters conflicting expectations. Domestically, its developing status demands a focus on internal growth, while internationally, its size and influence call for assertive engagement. Assertive foreign policy engagement will ultimately depend on domestic growth, and domestic growth is not entirely unrelated to the country's proactive global engagement, especially in emerging areas such as tech governance.

Achieving a balance between internal development and ambitious foreign policy goals then, is essential. The challenge before India's grand strategy is, ultimately, to reconcile these competing demands.

These five paradoxes will continue to shape and constrain India's grand strategy. For the country's policymakers, then, the challenge is to reconcile the various pulls and pressures produced by these unavoidable paradoxes.

After all, grand strategy is about deftly navigating challenges and seizing opportunities—with a recognition that sometimes challenges are opportunities in disguise, and opportunities often harbour new challenges. ■

Grand Strategy

An Economic Strategy For India

Rajat Kathuria

The glass has been half full for India's economy at least since the Cambridge economist Joan Robinson remarked that "whatever you can rightly say about India, the opposite is also true". That was in 1962—or six decades and counting. During this period the Republic of Korea has progressed from a per capita income of about $90, almost the same as India's back in the 60s, to approximately $34,000 in 2024—or around thirteen times that of India. And the case of Korea is not an isolated one.

The example of equally populous China is even more mortifying. In 1990, India's per capita income was $367, while China's was only marginally lower at $317. By 2024, China seems far more advanced than might be suggested by its per capita income, which stands at about five times India's.

Indeed, China seems to be punching far above its weight. At a per capita income of U.S. $13,136 – significantly lower than the U.S. and Western Europe– China is the target of punitive tariffs by the United States that accuses it of subverting the rules-based world trading system and stealing intellectual property to drive its ambition of global technology domination. The trade war between the two is only a smokescreen for the deep anxieties the U.S. harbors over China's transformation into a world leader.

From pioneering advancements in AI and clean energy to dominating telecommunications hardware, Chinese companies are beginning to set global standards and possibly dethrone the U.S. from its virtually uncontested tech supremacy. China now files more patents annually than any other country.

The question for us, of course, is: Why not India?

A QUESTION OF GOVERNANCE

China's unprecedented and uninterrupted growth for three decades since the 1990s has been the subject of much research and reflection. A popular view in India is that China's, and possibly Korea's high performance was because they were ruled by domineering leaders. In other words, the absence of open democracy acted as a catalyst. While this is a facile explanation, it obscures certain critical features of East Asian growth that can serve as an exemplar for India.

Serious academic research has shown that leaders in China and Korea among other East Asian countries had to collaborate with various sectors of their population to create an environment that was conducive to sustained growth.

The business environment promoted stability, a competent bureaucracy balanced autonomy with accountability to serve all interests, including the poor. Investment in skills and access to minimum education standards meant that trade openness could be exploited by labour-intensive exports that led to the creation of jobs, which helped the transition into more productive manufacturing jobs.

In an influential narrative, the American economist Paul Krugman argued that the rapid economic growth of East Asia was not miraculous at all as it was characterised then, but rather the result of doing the right things such as increasing factor inputs, labour and capital along with robust implementation of sensible policies. The accompanying income rise created demand for services and in the process, the economies rapidly urbanized. Labour markets were flexible, policy changes were not random and education was given the highest priority.

THE INDIA QUESTION

So where did we go wrong?

Until 1991, India had an inward-looking Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) policy that predictably failed to industrialise. Import tariffs were a severe tax on exports.

Even after opening up in 1991, labour intensive exports remained limited. India's unique structural transformation is often cited as the reason. The stage of industrialisation in which a country experiences employment-intensive growth driven by manufacturing was bypassed in favour of services-led growth.

The government's data (NSS) show that 45.5% of the workforce is employed in agriculture, 12.4% in construction, and only 11.6% in manufacturing, with the rest in services. India's inability to pull more of its workforce away from agriculture towards more productive and better-paying employment continues to remain a crying need and perhaps the most critical of India's economic challenges as it seeks to leverage its demographic advantage of a young population.

The recent absolute increase in agricultural employment, while perhaps an aberration, is a symptom of a worrying predicament of paucity of jobs growth in the non-farm sector. The share of manufacturing employment, despite firm policies, has remained stagnant at around 12 percent. The share of manufacturing in GDP itself has not gone beyond 15% in the last two decades' despite policies such as "Make in India" and Production Linked Incentives (PLI) being put in place precisely for this reason.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC TRAP

This matters because, if India does not create enough jobs soon, it risks a demographic disaster. It also risks becoming old before it becomes rich. Unemployment among youth with a graduate degree is at an all-time high of 29%, with overall youth unemployment hovering around 10%. Anecdotally, a few young Indians are travelling to war-zone countries in search of employment and higher income opportunities.

In May 2023, India signed an agreement with Israel for 42,000 jobs in construction and nursing. In 2022, the government started *Agnipath*, a programme for recruitment of soldiers, sailors, and air force personnel, marking a departure from past recruitment policy. *Agniveers* (the young recruits) have a four-year tenure with no gratuity or pension benefits for three-fourths of each batch who will be discharged after the period. The announcement of the scheme was met with protests in different parts of the country. In 2018, 28 million applied for 90,000 low-level railway jobs.

The services-led model has created pervasive and immense disparities. Construction and services have absorbed excess labour but on the whole, most people are self-employed or in casual jobs. Nearly 90 per cent of jobs are informal. The share of wages in the

net value added by industries has declined while the share of profits has climbed, reflecting a capital-intensive production process, exactly the opposite of what a labour-abundant country like India needs. In the four decades between 1982 and 2022, the share of the national income going to the top 10% has almost doubled to about 60 per cent. The shares of the bottom 50% and top 1% are estimated to be 15% and 22.6% in 2022. The wealth distribution is even more skewed as one would expect.

There are several factors responsible for these disparities, especially the depressed share of the bottom half of the population, such as the lack of quality broad-based education and all-purpose skills. Benefits of faster GDP growth in India are being undermined by low employment creation and the attendant pro-rich bias. A government report from 2022 drew attention to the fact that the benefits of growth have been concentrated and have marginalised the poor further. There are other harmful spillovers of the growth model – severe local air pollution and damage to health that also affect the poor disproportionately.

Benefits of faster GDP growth in India are being undermined by low employment creation and the attendant pro-rich bias.

THE GOOD STORY

What about the other half of the glass that is full? India is easily the fastest growing major economy in the world and is set to overtake Germany and Japan shortly in aggregate GDP to become the third largest economy after the U.S. and China.

With more than 7% real GDP growth in the last three years, India is the fifth largest economy in the world along with endless bragging rights.

Projections are also optimistic about the future. GDP is poised to touch U.S. $7 trillion by 2030-31. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in August 2024, raised India's GDP growth projection for FY25 by 20 basis points to 7 per cent on the back of strong domestic demand and a good monsoon. Nasscom, the national software industry association, confirms India as the third-largest tech startup ecosystem globally, with more than 31,000 startups in the past decade, 18 per cent of which are women-led. By January 2024, India boasted 111 unicorns valued at over U.S. $350 billion. According to the Hurun Rich List 2024, India is home to three hundred and thirty-four dollar billionaires.

And there is more good news. Digital infrastructure showcased during India's hosting of the G20 presidency in 2023 was high on extravagance but not entirely devoid of substance.

The 'India Stack' is now decidedly a global story. It is a government-backed application programming interface or API, that allows third parties to create software with access to government IDs, payment networks and data. This digital infrastructure is interoperable implying that private companies can build apps integrated with state services to provide citizens access to benefit transfers, and loan applications among a host of other services. It is claimed that India has built the world's first national digital infrastructure, leaping at least two generations of financial technologies. There are justified analogies with spillover impacts of the railroad in the U.K. and the interstate highways in the U.S. The catchphrase 'America has good roads not because it is rich, it is rich because it has good roads' readily comes to mind. The India Stack is also at the heart of a digital diplomacy drive launched by the government to promote it as a template for other countries to follow.

LEANING INTO INDIA'S STRENGTHS—AND AVOIDING TRAPS

There is no doubt that India will be an economic force of reckoning at a future point in time. A young population that will peak in 2050 with a billion strong labour force can however be a double-edged sword. Thus even as India records rapid growth, it must ensure that growth is more inclusive and sustainable. So what can be done?

The examples of Korea and China suggest that a more predictable and better regulatory environment – along

with effective and impartial enforcement — will be critical.

The role of independent regulatory institutions in the process of growth cannot be overemphasised. This year's Nobel citation for Economics awarded to Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson states this clearly: 'Societies with a poor rule of law and institutions that exploit the population do not generate growth or change for the better'.

Most firms in India face a complex regulatory architecture. Manufacturing units have to conform with thousands of compliances which add to costs.

Encouraging scale is another key lesson from China that will boost productivity and therefore competitiveness. As countries attempt to reorient supply chains away from China, India has a golden opportunity to position itself as a viable alternative.

But this would need consistent and credible policy reforms that remove existing bottlenecks so that India can become a reliable partner in global supply chains.

This cannot happen by imposing import tariffs arbitrarily—otherwise countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh, among others, could step in to attract trade and investment that might otherwise be destined for India.

And finally for growth to be equitable and sustained, India desperately needs to upgrade its social infrastructure – education, skilling, healthcare–so that firms do not continue to complain they cannot find adequately skilled, healthy and educated workers for their units.

Unless that happens, along with other reforms suggested above, India's dream to become Viksit by 2047 will remain consigned to the drawing board. The path to 2047 will be shaped by economic policy decisions taken in the coming years. The challenges are enormous but so are the opportunities. Good policy, strategic foresight and resolute implementation can irreversibly alter the destiny of a billion and a half of humanity for the better. ■

Grand Strategy

Why India Needs A Techno-Strategic Doctrine

Pranay Kotasthane

The technology agenda in India's partnerships with the West has undergone a sea change over the last fifteen years.

Consider, for example, the joint statements from the meetings between President Obama and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2009 and 2010. Issues like counterterrorism, global security, climate change, and economic cooperation were prominent. In contrast, high-technology cooperation—focused on the single issue of the India-U.S. civil nuclear agreement—finds only a cursory mention.

Now compare those statements to the joint fact sheet released during PM Modi's visit to Washington in September 2024: technology has come out of the shadows and commands the centre stage. Indeed, the fact sheet begins by highlighting concrete actions in wide-ranging technical areas: semiconductors, critical minerals, telecommunications, space, quantum computing, and artificial intelligence, to name just a few.

In the same vein, no policy analyst would have imagined fifteen years ago that the readout of a meeting by the two National Security Advisors would go beyond traditional areas such as defence cooperation, intelligence sharing, and volatility in India's neighbourhood. Today, however, the two NSAs are steering the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), which includes ideas for building "innovation bridges" through expositions, hackathons, and pitch sessions, developing joint venture partnerships for semiconductor fabrication and biomanufacturing in India, as well as launching a public-private dialogue on telecommunications and regulations. Beyond the U.S., India, and the European Union launched a joint mechanism to deepen coordination on trusted technologies in February 2023, even as significant breakthroughs on issues such as trade and investment remain elusive.

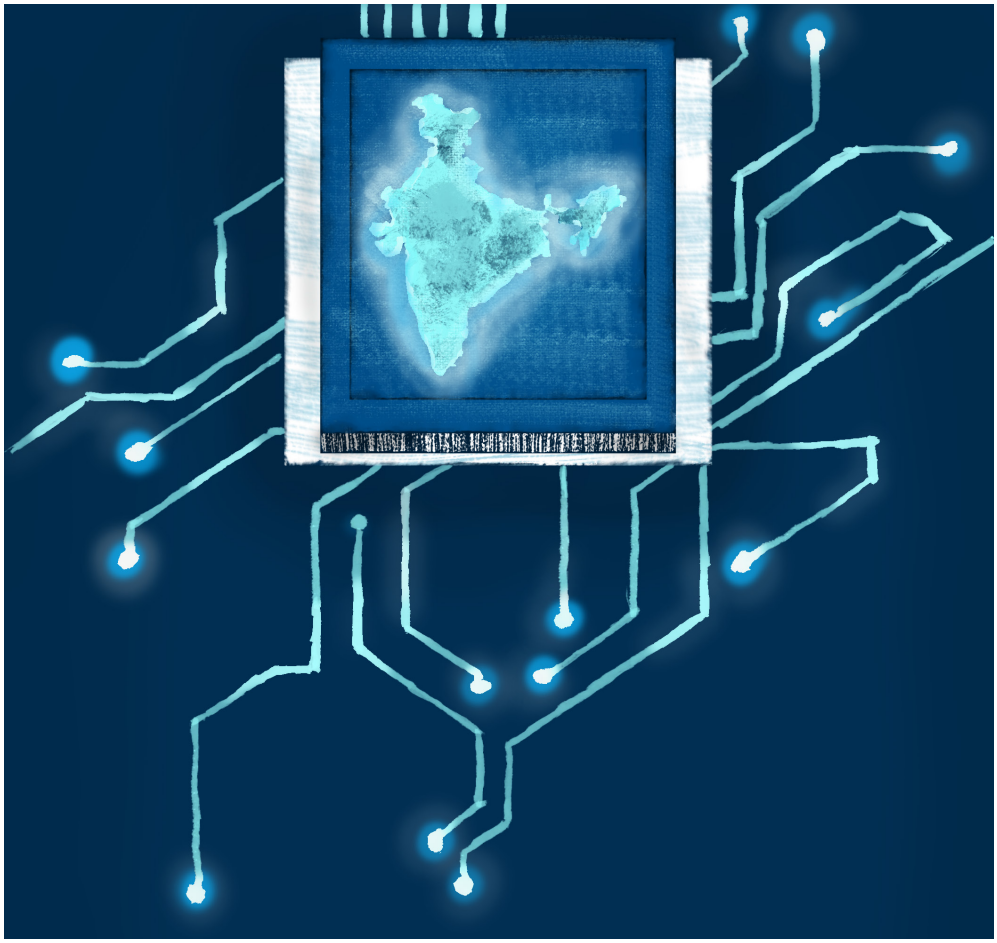
These seemingly implausible developments illustrate that what was once a barrier in the strategic relationship between India and the West has now become a bridge. Technology is in fact the new site for international collaboration, competition, and conflict—which is why India needs a strategic doctrine that takes a long view of technology.

FROM THE STROKE OF THE MIDNIGHT HOUR—TO TODAY

Technology's relationship with Indian diplomacy has gone through many ups and downs.

To be sure, unhindered access to state-of-the-art and foundational knowledge was, and still is, perceived as a core Indian national interest. Since independence, Indian diplomacy's intersection with technology went both ways—foreign policy was deployed to derive technological benefits, and technology was used to reaffirm foreign policy goals.

The first dimension came into play immediately after independence when India engaged with Western powers to gain access to advanced industrial technologies. The second dimension gained shape in 1964 when



India started offering technical courses to students in developing countries via its Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme.

However, the Cold War drastically changed India's techno-strategic outlook. As Dr. C Raja Mohan explains, 'economic populism, anti-Americanism, growing bureaucratisation of science and technology, marginalisation of India's private sector, Delhi's drift towards Moscow, India's nuclear test of 1974, and the consolidation of the global non-proliferation regime' reduced the overlap between technology and diplomacy.

Specifically, multilateral technology-denial regimes in the nuclear and space sectors meant that India's techno-strategic stance became defensive by default—one that involved standing up to the West on technological issues while developing and shielding domestic capabilities. Yet, this low-level equilibrium is unsuitable for the Information Age. We are in an era where nation-states have internalised that technology can disproportionately impact their national power and security.

In recent years, trade wars have increasingly morphed into aggressive technology competitions. Despite the high costs, governments are willing to pursue decoupling in select high-technology domains on one hand and form technology-centred coalitions with trusted partners on the other. Consequently, technology has made a grand comeback in global foreign policy discourse and practice.

A BENIGN CONFLUENCE

The current geopolitical and geoeconomic architecture presents several opportunities for India.

First, today's high-tech industries rely on extensive cross-border movements of intermediate products, talent, and intellectual property. As Research and Development (R&D) costs for technological improvements have risen across sectors, erstwhile 'national' industries have been transformed into global supply chains. Instead of national champions making complete products independently, companies only specialise in specific parts of technological value chains. Thus, even the most technologically advanced nations cannot become technologically *atmanirbhar*; plurilateral cooperation is a necessity and no longer a choice.

The lesson is clear: if India plays its geopolitical cards right, the likelihood of technology collaborations with the West is higher than ever.

Second, high-skill tech talent is the currency of the Information Age. India's globally connected talent base makes it an indispensable node in high-tech supply chains, especially in a world searching for alternatives to China.

> **One component of India's techno-strategic approach could be to champion open hardware and software technologies so that they can compete with bottlenecked proprietary technologies.**

Third, India's deployment of billion-scale digital public infrastructure for payments, identity, and e-commerce has made it apparent to the world that India can also be a technology giver, not just a technology taker. And fourth, the Indian foreign policy establishment realises that autarky is not an option; instead, the concern is to ensure that technological dependence doesn't become a strategic vulnerability.

For these reasons, India's foreign policy establishment now has a far more positive view of the technology domain and its usage in collaboration, competition, and contestation.

A DIGITAL DOCTRINE FOR A DIGITAL INDIA

Over the past decade, India has actively deployed its technology diplomacy tools. Taking a step further, studies by Takshashila Institution observed that India must adopt a techno-strategic doctrine. Given that today's high-tech sector spans governments, private corporations, civil society, academia, and individuals, a doctrine can help these stakeholders work in tandem, each bringing their comparative strengths to the table.

Such a doctrine could have five objectives. The first goal should be to establish India as a major power in international affairs. Second, India must invest in developing advanced scientific and technological capabilities in the public, private, and social sectors. Third, India must harness its technological capabilities to achieve national goals. Fourth, India must promote sustainability using technology, given the long-term threat of climate change. Fifth, to underline the whole-of-society approach, India must ensure that technology empowers citizens and safeguards constitutional rights.

The doctrine should boldly declare that India will be prepared for cooperation, competition, and conflict in knowledge creation, human capital, influence, raw materials, and norms. It should assert that India seeks a global environment where technology is accessible to humanity and that India promotes a global order where technology strengthens the values enshrined in the Indian Constitution and the UN Charter.

Articulating a doctrine would force us to consider the approaches and strategies required to make India a technological powerhouse. For example, the centrality of talent in techno-strategic statecraft means that India must aim to maintain the largest talent pool in every technological sector. This would require India to bat for the free movement of tech talent, knowledge, and capital across national boundaries, as a permissive global environment is better suited to India's technology ambitions. Attracting, developing, and retaining top high-tech talent is a strategic imperative, not just a business goal.

Translating the goal of strategic autonomy to the technological domain is equally important. High-tech supply chains are often global, lean and agile, with just a handful of companies from a select few countries dominating important stages. These bottlenecks can be used as leverage against other countries, as the American export controls against China demonstrate. Thus, one component of India's techno-strategic approach could be to champion open hardware and software technologies so that they can compete with bottlenecked proprietary technologies.

Another approach could be aggressively pursuing international cooperation to widen India's access to technologies, raw materials, and human resources because India will have to build strong links with states that share its interests and values and with which it enjoys economic complementarities.

Finally, strategic autonomy also has a cognitive dimension. Given that today's information ecosystem is global by default, adversaries use information weapons

to achieve disproportional results by "hacking" minds rather than attacking critical or military infrastructure. Thus, India's techno-strategic approach must include developing top-tier capabilities for information warfare.

The last dimension of India's doctrine would be inward-facing. Despite manufacturing capability in most sectors, India is insufficiently integrated into high-tech global value chains. High import tariffs, weak intellectual property enforcement, complex tax regime, low private sector R&D spending and logistical barriers are public policy reasons for its underperformance. Reducing these barriers is a strategic priority.

A doctrinal stance that India will champion governance frameworks that enable research and development, early deployment, and adoption of technological innovation will go a long way in aligning stakeholder perceptions. To gain the confidence of its citizens and international partners, India must commit to a robust legal framework and enforcement mechanism that protects citizens' data, privacy, cybersecurity, and cognitive autonomy. This doctrine could be a statement released by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), like how India's nuclear doctrine was announced.

As the joint statements of various multilateral and bilateral for a bear out, technology is no longer the backwaters of diplomacy; it is quite literally its cutting edge. Translating these impressive announcements into strategic gains is a decadal game that requires institutional support beyond specific individuals and governments. That's where a techno-strategic doctrine can be of immense help. ■

Grand Strategy

India's Strategic Choices: Constrained And Getting Worse

Rajesh Rajagopalan

The strategic choices that any country has, are largely dictated by its circumstances, the most important of which is the relative material power relationship that it has with its neighbours and its other competitors. By this criterion, India's circumstances have worsened over the last couple of decades, and there is little indication that it will get any better in the near future. This means that India's choices are increasingly constrained, though choices are always available.

Choices, of course, are limited only by imagination and political skill. Even states in poor circumstances can play the few cards that they have well, and end up doing better than what would have seemed possible. Pakistan is a good example: a relatively weak power, it was able to leverage its location and international political circumstances to counter India far more successfully than what seemed possible, even if they ultimately overplayed their hand and ruined themselves.

This caveat aside, the choices that states face can broadly be outlined based on the international conditions they face. So, this begs the question: What are the relevant conditions for India?

TAKING STOCK—IN RELATIVE TERMS

The most significant is India's deteriorating security situation. India has been declining in relative power for over three decades when considered against its most significant adversary, China.

Relative power is a broad and somewhat crude measure and it matters with whom the comparison is made. India has been growing rapidly ever since the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the early 1990s, with growth rates consistently over 5% for most years.

There is little question that this was a higher sustained growth rate both in comparison with India's neighbours in South Asia and even global powers beyond the region. India's relative power position could not but have improved given the wealth-generation consequences of this relatively faster growth and its implications for national power.

Except that China, India's other giant neighbour, was growing far faster than even India was. The consequence has been stark: from being of roughly comparable size, the Chinese economy is now more than five times as large as India's (in current USD).

The enormous disparity in wealth is beginning to have very visible direct military consequences. India was once able to count on having a technologically superior military force, but no longer: India is looking abroad for next generation combat jets while China currently has two domestically produced stealth fifth-generation jets in service; China has three aircraft carriers in service and another under construction, compared to India's two, both of which are also smaller. China is considered a leader in critical emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and cyber and space warfare while India is not really in the picture at all.

THE POLITICAL FACTOR

Yet the imbalance doesn't just exist in the military arena—it is possibly even more telling in the political realm.

China has made inroads into India's own neighbourhood, developing deeper ties with all of India's neighbours instead of being confined to just the 'all-weather partnership' with Pakistan. In comparison, India's efforts to cultivate China's neighbours in Southeast Asia have sputtered and smoked but not really progressed very much despite retitling it as 'Act East' instead of 'Look East'.

India's efforts to cultivate China's neighbours in Southeast Asia have sputtered and smoked but not really progressed very much despite retitling it as 'Act East' instead of 'Look East'.

India has fared better in South Asia, where India's diplomatic skills have improved considerably and helped it keep pace with China.

Most importantly, China is already the dominant power in Asia and could become the unchallenged regional hegemon over the continent, if it could push the U.S. out. This political challenge should be even more worrying for New Delhi than just the military balance.

India's relative weakness is thus the most important condition that dictates India's strategic choice and this weakness also means that these are constrained choices. It is possible to outline several choices, some of which India has tried out, but it is also clear that many of these are increasingly unviable.

For example, India has attempted a variant of nonalignment, or 'strategic autonomy', which includes an effort at developing deeper relations with significant powers in Europe as well as the Global South. But it is unclear how this will work in the context of a serious dispute with China, as happened in 2020 in Galwan.

It is difficult to imagine that in such a crisis or something even worse, either European powers or the Global South will be of much help. European powers have more at stake in China than in India, and the Global South will be even less likely to pick India over China. Equally doubtful is the possibility that partners within the larger East Asian region will somehow be a better bet because they understand the danger that China poses better than those farther away. They are leery of getting caught even in the larger U.S.-China tango, let alone an India-China one. These options look

China's role as a rising global power and challenger to the U.S. is actually favourable to India because it means that New Delhi has a partner in the world's most powerful state.

even more unviable in dealing with political hegemony than a military crisis.

Equally, the effort to 'hedge' has not had much success in Indian policy. This involved trying to convince Beijing that India was not a threat by voluntarily limiting its security cooperation with the U.S. and its allies. The effort has not been entirely abandoned, but as with strategic autonomy, its benefits were always doubtful and these doubts cannot but grow.

China has not demonstrated that Indian restraint has had any effect on China's behaviour, either because India has not been restrained enough or because the mechanism itself is more a figment of Indian projection than Chinese calculations.

A QUESTION OF SELF-DEFENCE

A necessary choice under all circumstances is a domestic effort at self-defence. But here the question is of the seriousness and level of effort and sacrifice, all of which suggests that New Delhi currently does not believe that there is any pressing concern. The logic of this choice is less than clear, but it surely cannot be that the current effort is seen as sufficient because there is ample public alarm, from within and without the government, that could not have been missed.

This is also the choice that is most difficult to understand because it is such a vitally necessary supplement to almost any other choice that New Delhi makes.

The other choice is the one that is both the most obvious and the one India is most reluctant to make: partnering with the U.S. and its allies to counter China. It is a choice that India is inching towards half-heartedly, with no haste or clear end state.

China's role as a rising global power and challenger to the U.S. is actually favourable to India because it means that New Delhi has a partner in the world's most powerful state.

Until now, the contradictory fears of entrapment and abandonment have been overcome, at least marginally, by the fear of the consequences of China's hegemony over Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Whether that will continue is far from certain—familiarity breeds contempt and partnerships, resentment. India and the U.S. are no more immune from this than others.

Of course, a final choice remains. It may not be honourable, but pragmatism would suggest that New Delhi could also learn to live with the Middle Kingdom in a manner that is more pleasing to Beijing. This represents a choice that's publicly debated more by others in similar situations, including Australia and even the U.S., than by India, possibly because post-colonial societies are less pragmatic on questions of sovereignty.

But it's also true that it may not be time yet to consider this choice. But if it should get to this point, it would also be an indication that all of India's other choices have fallen by the wayside. ■

Grand Strategy

The US And China In Indian Grand Strategy

Tanvi Madan

In 2003, visiting Beijing, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee declared that India and China had "emerged decisively from this dead-end of mistrust," and that "the combined strength and complementarity of an India-China partnership" was undeniable. A few months later, in the United States, he cited the "irrefutable logic of the India-U.S. partnership," outlining the burgeoning defence and security, economic, science and technology, education, and people-to-people ties.

Much has changed since that time, but then and now (and arguably always), Indian policymakers have recognized that China and the U.S. are among the most—if not the most—consequential countries for India's interests. They have thought about how China (the near behemoth) and the U.S. (the far behemoth) could and would affect, in positive or negative ways, India's quest for security, prosperity, status and autonomy.

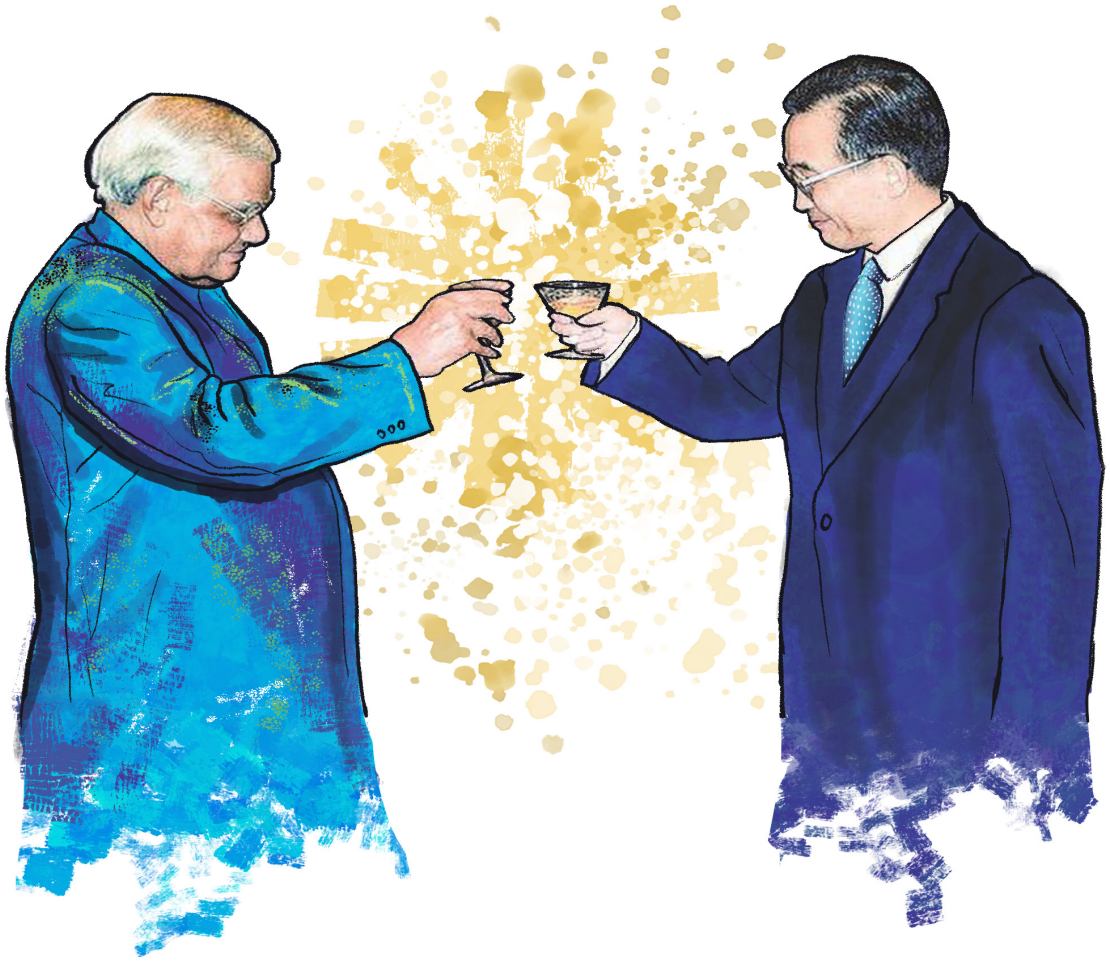
The roles Indian leaders have envisioned for Beijing and for Washington in their strategy have neither been static nor de-linked from each other. The roles China and the U.S. have ended up playing have depended on several factors, including the dynamics between them that affected their view of India. That, in turn, has shaped New Delhi's options as it sought to achieve its objectives.

THE TRIANGLE IN THE PAST

When thinking about grand strategy, one must start with those objectives. India's ends have been security, prosperity, a rightful place on the world stage, and strategic autonomy. Other countries might put the last two in the "ways and means" bucket, but governments of independent India have arguably seen them as goals in their own right. India's "ways and means" have involved a recognition of the need for partners, while pursuing a diversification strategy to maximise its options and minimise the risks, including that of over-dependence on any one of those partners.

At various points, India's view of how China and the U.S. fit into its strategy have changed. In the early years after independence, New Delhi believed both countries could help it achieve its goals (the U.S. with economic development; China with stability and status). That contributed to its rejection of Washington's offer of alignment against China. It also shaped how it perceived Sino-U.S. competition: on the one hand, worried that could adversely affect the regional stability India desired for nation-building; on the other hand, using their rivalry to elicit benefits from both.

From the mid-to-late 1950s, India's view of China as a geopolitical, ideological and regional challenge started converging with that of the U.S. That opened the door to deeper security and economic cooperation between the two democracies, and led to a greater willingness to tolerate and manage their differences. China-U.S. rapprochement in 1971, however, adversely affected India's diversification strategy: Washington no longer saw it as a crucial piece of the puzzle in Asia, and so India was left to rely on its Moscow option. At times in the 1970s and the 1980s, New Delhi also saw the



U.S.-China partnership as harming Indian interests. Washington, after all, was not just bolstering Chinese capabilities, but together with Beijing also backing India's other rival, Pakistan.

Nonetheless, to create options and space for itself, New Delhi re-engaged both Beijing and Washington. From the late 1970s and in the 1980s, this was in part to hedge against overdependence on and uncertainty about the Soviet Union. Easing tensions with China to some extent reduced the need for Moscow, while reigniting its U.S. ties created leverage for India with the Soviet Union.

As time went on, concerns about Sino-Soviet rapprochement contributed to India's own reconciliation with China. And a desire for defence, economic and technological benefits led India to explore cooperation with the U.S. Differences and disputes didn't disappear—nor did India's anxiety about Sino-U.S. cooperation, such as after India's nuclear tests—but they were managed or overcome.

THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY TRIANGLE

This best-of-both-worlds view prevailed for some time, even strengthening in the 2000s. New Delhi saw partnering with China and the U.S. as helpful in reaching its security and economic goals. And it thought that its ties with one would indeed make it more attractive to the other. Some even argued that India could replay its Cold War playbook if U.S.-China competition intensified, eliciting benefits from both while staying above the fray.

These hopes were dashed as a rising China became increasingly assertive from the 2007-09 period—and particularly after Xi Jinping took the helm. Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi did not give up on cooperation with China, but competition eclipsed those efforts. Today, when India looks at China, it sees its most significant external challenge. When it looks at the U.S., it sees an indispensable partner.

Washington's own rivalry with Beijing has meant that it has helped New Delhi during crises, and with internal and external balancing

New Delhi has gone from perceiving China primarily as an enabler to an obstructor vis-à-vis Indian objectives. Any belief that partnership would alleviate India's security concerns—by incentivising Beijing, including to limit Pakistani pressure—has been replaced with the view of China as a critical source of insecurity. Economic and technology ties have gone from being seen as an opportunity to, on balance, a vulnerability. Multilateral cooperation has diminished considerably. Earlier, New Delhi saw China as amplifying India's voice on the multilateral stage, leading to cooperation in trade and climate change negotiations and Indian membership in non-west groupings. Today, China is not only continuing to hinder Indian membership and interests in institutions like the UN Security Council, but also competing for influence with India in the Global South and within groupings like BRICS.

Policymakers see the U.S., meanwhile, as part of the solution to India's China problem. Washington's own rivalry with Beijing has meant that it has helped New Delhi during crises, and with internal and external balancing, i.e., building capabilities and partnerships. The latter has included diplomatic, defence, economic security and technology cooperation with the U.S. Washington has also, at times, helped facilitate India's ties with American allies, and shape a favourable balance of power and influence in the Indo-Pacific. Beyond the China dimension, New Delhi has seen the U.S. to be useful to India's broader economic and technological transformation, and in acquiring a seat at various global high tables.

The current situation has not meant that India sees no role for Beijing in achieving its objectives or Washington as posing no challenges to them. China maintains its role as a top Indian trade partner, for instance. Moreover, New Delhi has an interest in preventing crisis escalation and managing its border with its largest neighbour not just through deterrence but also dialogue. India-U.S. differences also persist, including over partnering with the other's adversaries (Russia, Iran, Pakistan), the best approach in South Asia (Bangladesh), and the right role vis-à-vis the other's internal affairs.

But India's perception of China as a challenge—and their capabilities gap—has meant that India has been willing to work with Washington to manage those differences. This view has contributed to a willingness to experiment with minilaterals such as the Quad, and to make certain tradeoffs (e.g. overcoming a preference for external actors to stay out from the Indian Ocean to encouraging an American one there). It has meant that despite its desire for autonomy, India has recognized its need for deeper alignment.

But while India has recognized it cannot hedge between the U.S. and China in the same way it did between the U.S. and Soviet Union, it will likely continue to hedge against overdependence on and uncertainty about the U.S. It will do so through indigenisation (building its own capabilities) and diversification (investing in other partnerships). The latter has been complicated by Russia's closer ties with China, but India's expanded portfolio of partners now includes Australia, France, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, several like-minded countries in India's extended neighbourhood (Southeast Asia, West Asia), Europe, and the Global South.

THE TRIANGLE AHEAD

The world Vajpayee talked about in 2003, one where "conflict and confrontation do not overshadow the relations among great and emerging powers," no longer exists. They have indeed overshadowed India's ties with China, particularly since 2020. As long as they do—and as long as the U.S. shares India's concerns about China—New Delhi will see the partnership with Washington as crucial. But the nature and extent of those ties are not predetermined. They will depend on the outcome of several debates within India: how far and fast to go with the U.S., how to prioritise India's different objectives, whether alignment enhances or threatens autonomy, whether deepening ties with the U.S. provokes or deters China, whether China or the U.S. is the greater challenge to India's autonomy, and whether the convergences outweigh the divergences. Moreover, ties with the U.S. and other partners will depend on how attractive India is to them as they pursue their own grand strategies. ■

Grand Strategy

Role Of The Military In India's Path To Power

D. S. Hooda

India's journey towards becoming a global power is anchored in its strategic advantages, positioning the nation as a pivotal force in Asia. The 2024 Lowy Institute Asia Power Index shows India overtaking Japan as the third-ranked power in Asia, behind the United States and China. Strategically located in the Indian Ocean, India holds a pivotal position in global and regional geopolitics, with its influence over crucial maritime routes and as a continental bridge between Southeast Asia and the Gulf.

India's rapidly expanding economy, projected to become the world's third-largest within five years, plays a critical role in driving global growth. In 2023 alone, India contributed 16 per cent to worldwide growth, a testament to its economic momentum. With a young and expanding workforce, India enjoys a demographic dividend that offers it a competitive edge in innovation and productivity. These economic and demographic factors provide India with the foundation to assert its influence on the global stage.

Yet even as it rises, India must navigate a range of complex geopolitical challenges that could threaten its national security and economic prosperity. The sharpening rivalry between the United States and China is playing out in areas such as trade, technology, and global governance. Meanwhile, conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have further destabilised global order, while economic nationalism challenges the long-held principles of free trade and open markets.

These factors underline in the starkest possible way the fact that national power is a multidimensional concept—one that includes economic power, diplomatic heft, technology, human capital, soft power, as well as military prowess.

One might even go further. Given the volatile geopolitical environment, military power will be critical in safeguarding and promoting India's rise.

THE NORTHERN FRONT

The primary task of the Indian military is, of course, to ensure national security and territorial integrity, notably by deterring aggression from its adversaries. And at the heart of these concerns is China, India's northern neighbour.

In his book *Why Bharat Matters*, Dr S. Jaishankar writes that both India and China are "committed to a multipolar world" and "there should be an acceptance that a multipolar Asia is one of its constituents." This vision remains contentious as China seeks to assert itself as Asia's dominant power.

Two neighbouring rising powers have rarely been at peace with each other. Historically, the rise of great powers has often been accompanied by tension and conflict, especially when geographical proximity intensifies security concerns. John J. Mearsheimer, in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, asserts that great

powers are inherently revisionist and seek to maximise their relative power to achieve regional hegemony. China will behave no differently.

Here, a clear and present danger exists on our land frontiers. The complete border with China is unsettled, and there is a conflict with Pakistan, which has over the years sought to court Chinese goodwill, over the territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. This is the primary front of any future conflict that India could face. It is also the front where deterrence through military power has to be applied to ensure that any peacetime skirmishes do not escalate to a full-scale war.

China is increasingly using its growing military strength to enforce its territorial and maritime claims or coerce countries into accepting its hegemony in Asia. While the 2020 dispute with India along the border in Eastern Ladakh appears to be on the way to resolution, the fundamentals of the strategic rivalry between the two countries will persist.

In deterring China from using military coercion, the Indian military's land power will be vital in preventing 'salami slicing' along the Line of Actual Control, which, while remaining below the threshold of war, could put political and diplomatic pressure on India. In talking of land power, I do not refer merely to the army, but also to the support of the air force in mobilising forces, gaining situational awareness, and logistics. The efforts of the Indian Air Force following the 2020 Chinese incursions are a stellar example of this.

ACROSS THE OCEANS

But India must also remain focused on the seas, an area where it already has a strategic advantage. The Indian Navy has a dominant position in the Indian Ocean. Despite its impressive growth, the PLA Navy is unlikely to develop the capability in the near future to be able to challenge the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean.

India's naval power and its potential to interdict China's commercial trade, including energy supplies, would serve as a deterrence against any escalation at the Line of Actual Control. The Indian Navy's maritime strategy, Ensuring Secure Seas, aptly states, "The strategic effect of maritime operations will finally be measured upon land."

It must be emphasised here that the balance of power in the Indian Ocean could change in the next 10 to 15 years. If China manages to secure bases in the region,

its formidable fleet could present a much graver threat to the Indian Navy in the future.

Beyond active conflict, maritime power plays an important role in India's stature as a growing power. The Indian Navy, as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean, actively contributes to the overall security and stability of the region. This involves a range of activities, including combating piracy, conducting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, securing sea lines of communication, engaging in maritime diplomacy, and enhancing regional cooperation.

KEEPING THINGS QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

Even as it keeps an eye north, India can not, of course, look away from the principal problem on its western flank—Pakistan. Yet here the aims have changed over the years as India's domestic progress has hastened. The aim for New Delhi is clear: to deter Islamabad from using terrorism as a state policy against India.

The military approach to enforcing this would be deterrence by punishment. Major attacks by Pakistan-based terrorists will, it should be clear to Islamabad, invite a swift, though limited military response.

Escalation would be gradual and attempted to be controlled. With the power differential between the two countries, Pakistan would not push beyond a point in using its military force. India's strategic aims also do not demand a full-scale war with Pakistan.

NEW FRONTS—AND NEW CHALLENGES

In addition to conventional military power, India must strengthen its capabilities in emerging domains such as cyber, information, space, and nuclear technology. In an age where information warfare, space dominance, and nuclear deterrence are critical to national security, India must invest heavily in advanced technologies and human resources. A significant technological gap between India and its adversaries in these areas could undermine India's military deterrence, exposing it to coercive pressure without the need for physical confrontation.

Defence diplomacy plays a pivotal role in elevating India's status as a growing global power. Through initiatives such as joint military exercises, high-level visits, training programs, and defence agreements, India strengthens its ties with other nations, showcasing its commitment to collective security and peace. These engagements enable India to project its soft power, share best practices, and enhance interoperability with various militaries, thereby increasing its influence on the international stage. By actively participating in multinational forums and peacekeeping operations, India demonstrates its dedication to global governance and reinforces its image as a responsible and rising power.

Ultimately, at the core of India's national power projection lies its military strength—and that is inherently relative, assessed by comparing a nation's capabilities against those of its rival states.

As China's military strength expands rapidly, it is imperative for India to keep pace to maintain an effective deterrence strategy. Achieving this necessitates addressing three critical challenges: budgetary constraints, technological limitations, and shortcomings in civil-military integration.

Defence diplomacy plays a pivotal role in elevating India's status as a growing global power.

India's defence budget is heavily skewed towards personnel costs, which consume over 50% of the allocation, leaving limited funds for capital investments needed for modernisation and the acquisition of advanced military equipment. The government must approve a comprehensive, long-term capability development plan for the military and ensure appropriate funding is allocated to support its execution.

While the *Atma Nirbhar Bharat* (Self-Reliant India) initiative aims to bolster domestic defence manufacturing, the sector still lacks the maturity and technological sophistication to produce cutting-edge military hardware independently. This issue is compounded by inadequate investment in defence research and development.

Strategic collaboration with the United States on critical technologies can help, but ultimately India will have to substantially boost its spending on scientific research to overcome these limitations.

The nature of civil-military relations in India has resulted in limited integration of military leadership in strategic policymaking. The absence of a clearly articulated national security strategy further hampers the alignment of military objectives with national goals. India must review its national security decision-making architecture to ensure greater civil-military integration.

The need could not be more pressing. Military power will play a pivotal role in shaping India's rise as a regional and global force. A strong national defence, after all, does more than protect; it empowers the nation to fulfil its broader objectives of economic development, technological innovation, and diplomatic leadership. By maintaining a strong and future-ready military, India will ensure its place as a formidable power in an evolving global order. ■

Diplomatic History

The Rise And Demise Of The MEA's Historical Division

T. C. A. Raghavan

"A Foreign Office is essentially a custodian of precedents"
- KPS Menon, independent India's first foreign secretary,
in his autobiography, *Many Worlds*, 1965.

K.P. S. Menon wrote from long experience: He had joined the Indian Civil Service in 1921 and in 1925 became one of the very few Indians selected for the Indian Political Service whose members served as residents in princely states or in the overseas territories administered by the government of British India. By the 30's, he had worked his way up to the government's Foreign and Political Department—and from there, he would likely have had a clear view of how the British Foreign Office functioned, and the role played by its historical division in the execution of the British government's foreign policy.

Yet, when he arrived at India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in 1948, "we had no precedents to fall back upon because India had no foreign policy of her own till she became independent."

His solution? To build its own repository of precedents there should be a section for historical research at the heart of India's new foreign office.

Putting your narrative out in the form of an academic and evidence-based discourse is therefore one aspect of the importance that many foreign offices accord to their historical and archival teams.

MAKING HISTORY...

Menon outlined his plans in a letter to the newly installed Home Secretary, HVR Iyengar, in August 1948:

> As you are aware we have been trying to establish a Historical and Research Section in the Ministry of External Affairs. The need for it is obvious: it is impossible to formulate foreign policy without a full understanding of the background of current events. In the United Kingdom and elsewhere this section of the Foreign Office is generally in charge of eminent historians.

Menon's first challenge: finding the right person to spearhead the effort. "For over a year we have been trying to find someone to be the Director of the Section," he wrote to Iengar.

The Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC), the predecessor of the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), had interviewed candidates but found none suitable.

"We are anxious that the first incumbent of this post should be outstanding… he must be not only a student of history but a man of sound common sense and administrative ability," Menon added.

And that, he explained, was why he was writing to the Home Secretary: to seek the Home Ministry's help in securing the services of the "only person" Menon considered up to the task—Kuruvila Zachariah, a distinguished historian, who at the time was a member of the FPSC. Could the ministry somehow persuade the FPSC to spare the services of Dr Zachariah for a year?

As Menon explained, "the first year - the formative year - is the most important."

Both the FPSC and the Home Ministry were initially reluctant but finally agreed. There were other bureaucratic issues. The post in the MEA for the newly created Historical Division was at the level of a Director. Zachariah already held the much higher rank of Additional Secretary as a member of the FPSC. The Home Ministry was loath to create a new post at that level for the MEA.

A compromise was found that Zachariah would be Director of the Historical Division but would also be ex-officio Additional Secretary. Clearly then, as now, once the right decision was taken, a way could always be found to take care of bureaucratic procedures.

By December 1948, orders for Dr Zachariah's appointment had been issued. About a year after Menon's proposal to the Home Ministry, the MEA informed its missions and posts that a historical division had been established as an integral part of the Ministry:

> The functions of the division will be to supply the Ministry with information on the past history of the various problems in order to help the Ministry to formulate its policy with adequate knowledge of historical facts. It will also attempt to collect and analyse information on the political and economic conditions of other countries so as to provide reliable data for the guidance of the Ministry.

The idea was that the division would also take charge of the Ministry's archive and manage it professionally, taking informed decisions about declassification in consultation with the main line divisions.

Zachariah would also, this letter said, be assisted by a Deputy Director, Research Officers, and a Librarian.

...AND USING HISTORY

He ranked high in the MEA's hierarchy next only to Secretary General GS Bajpai and Foreign Secretary Menon. Clearly, the intention was that he be consulted on a wide range of issues and wherever some background was required to take a more informed policy decision—and the record shows that he was.

For instance, after the Communist revolution in China an influx of former officials - as many as 80-100 was

expected from Sinkiang into Kashmir as refugees. What should be the Government of India's attitude? There were then emergent complexities arising from the division of Korea and Germany. Even in the very early 1950s the issue of how India's northern boundaries were to be delineated was assuming prominence.

How should Sikkim and Bhutan be depicted in maps? Both, especially the latter, had a status of their own but at the same time that both were within the Indian sphere of influence could not be left understated.

Zachariah's voice comes through in file notings on these and many other issues as a valuable contribution not simply in terms of providing a historical background or a marshalling of historical evidence, but as a cogent third-party view modulated by a historian's skill and sound commonsense.

Zachariah would stay on in the MEA well beyond the one year initially anticipated and till his retirement by the end of 1953. After the brief tenure of another incumbent, he was succeeded by Sarvepalli Gopal who would have a long tenure as Director of the Historical Division from 1954 to 1966.

Gopal was already a well-known historian when he was appointed, and over the years his reputation had grown as an early pioneer in the writing of contemporary history and also as an elegant biographer.

His profile in the MEA also grew as he emerged as a key figure in the boundary negotiations with China as it was on his marshalling of historical evidence that the Indian case on the boundary issue was made. Over time, however, this role has also become controversial.

Years later an obituary would note Gopal's "importance in the foreign policy establishment during the 12 years he was its member and a prominent figure on the New Delhi scene. As it happened this period broadly coincided with his illustrious father, S. Radhakrishnan's tenure as Vice-President first and then as President". In another account during Gopal's tenure the Historical Division "had established itself as an indispensable think tank of the ministry, comprising first rate researchers… its subsequent decay and unlamented demise in the 1990s were much regretted by him."

Post Gopal and into the 1970s also, the competencies of the Historical Division were recognized. B.K. Basu, Director of the Division in the 1970s was consulted on a range of boundary-related issues with Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and also other international issues. The tiny islet of Katchatheevu had assumed some importance in the interface with Sri Lanka.

On 26th June 1974 India and Sri Lanka concluded an agreement to delineate their maritime boundary and by way of this India in effect recognised Sri Lankan sovereignty over Katchatheevu. A few days before the signing of the agreement B.K. Basu had accompanied the then Foreign Secretary T.N. Kaul to Madras (now Chennai) to explain to the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M. Karunanidhi of the impending move and also that India's historical claim to the islet was weak.

THE ROAD TO OBLIVION

From the late seventies it is however evident, that the Historical Division was losing its sheen. This was only in part because of the absence of high profile or highly regarded historians at the head of the division. Other structural issues were emerging. How was a research cadre of historians to be integrated into the normal functioning of the MEA in terms of promotions and postings abroad in diplomatic missions?

Even in the very early 1950s the issue of how India's northern boundaries were to be delineated was assuming prominence.

There was the equally problematic issue of attracting good historians to the MEA - how would their status as civil servants impact their functioning as independent academic scholars? Inevitably doubts about the quality of the Historical Division's output also started mounting. Could not this task, some argued, be better performed by mainstream diplomats of the Indian Foreign Service, many of whom had history degrees from the best colleges and universities in the country?

By 1980 the Historical Division had been merged into the Policy Planning Division. A decade later it was formally wound up. Its small cadre of historians were dispersed to different parts of the Ministry most of the time discharging routine responsibilities. There would be an occasional murmur about the wisdom of

the MEA functioning without a historical division and about the proper management of its rich archive before formal declassification and transfer to the National Archives. But on the whole this demise was largely unnoticed.

THE ROAD AHEAD

It is possible to decipher a multiplicity of motives in the establishment of historical and archival divisions by different foreign offices. In the immediate aftermath of WWI, each of the European belligerents raced to declassify and publish state documents that would establish their relative innocence and lack of culpability for the bloodbath in 1914-18. The establishment in the U.S. State Department of the 'Office of the Historian' dates also to this time.

Putting your narrative out in the form of an academic and evidence-based discourse is therefore one aspect of the importance that many foreign offices accord to their historical and archival teams. In this sense a country's diplomatic history narrative is only part of the larger exercise of public diplomacy that foreign offices today have to be constantly engaged in. Part of this endeavour also translates into encouraging the use of your foreign office archives by independent scholars and historians for what better way is there to ensure that your country's perspective does not go by default.

Professional and competent archival management is part of this exercise. A liberal declassification policy is also key.

K.P.S. Menon had spoken of a foreign office being a "collection or precedents" and how difficult it was to formulate policy without some knowledge of past background. Admittedly, history offers no specific lessons and knowledge of history is in itself not a guide; but thinking historically and having a historic sensibility may lead to more refined and better decisions and policies.

Finally, is there a larger aspect beyond these soundly pragmatic and utilitarian considerations? Perhaps yes. In the case of most historical divisions in foreign offices what is often left unstated is the fact that an effective foreign policy also requires an engaged and informed domestic public opinion underpinning it. If this applied half a century or even a century earlier when the first historical divisions began to be formally established, it is even more true today.

Early declassification and publishing of documents, encouraging historical research and finally facilitating access by scholars to their diplomatic archives is all also part of this exercise of building up an informed and engaged foreign policy community. Perhaps a consciousness of this factor and the pressing concerns of public diplomacy may yet lead to a fresh look at how the MEA's rich history and its diplomatic archive can be better and more productively managed. If this happens then perhaps a baby earlier thrown away with the bath water may somehow be resuscitated. ■

Diplomatic History

A South African Scandal

Vineet Thakur

The stately Carlton Hotel in downtown Johannesburg organised a lavish reception on 18 January 1936. The mining magnate and South Africa's richest man, Ernst Oppenheimer and his wife, Caroline hosted nearly 800 guests, mostly whites, to celebrate the wedding of Syed Raza Ali and Ponnoo Veloo Sammy. Earlier that day, the widower in his 50s and his nine-year younger bride had exchanged vows in a civil ceremony, where the Oppenheimers had acted as chief witnesses.

This wedding stirred a scandal that for South Africa's Indians, according to historian Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, was comparable to events then taking place in England where King Edward was resolved to marry Wallis Simpson. The ensuing constitutional crisis in England had ended with the abdication of the King.

Syed Raza Ali was no king, but as India's chief diplomat – officially designated as 'Agent', or 'Agent General' from January 1936 – in South Africa, his wedding roused public feelings. A late middle-aged widower diplomat falling in love with a much younger woman became more than just a thing of social ridicule and popular gossip. It raised questions about the social role of an Indian diplomat in a racially segregated society. Furthermore, the fact that Raza Ali was a Muslim and Sammy a Hindu exposed deep communal rifts within the local community.

Born in the 1880s near Moradabad, and educated at Aligarh and Allahabad, Raza Ali had cut his political teeth in the All-India Muslim League. Belonging to the emergent Muslim professional salariat that advocated for secular education and closer relationship with the British, he played a role in the Congress-League Pact of 1916 and later participated in the Khilafat Movement. In 1925, he was part of an Indian delegation to South Africa that investigated the conditions of South African Indians. Four years later, he was India's delegate to the League of Nations Assembly.

In 1935, he was once again dispatched to South Africa, this time to serve as India's fourth Agent. Ponnoo Sammy was one half of the well-known Sammy sisters of Kimberley, whose father had been a prosperous businessman with close relationships with both, white and Indian leadership. Oppenheimer, who doubled as the local MP, had been one such close friend of the Sammy family.

The Indian Agency in South Africa was a peculiar diplomatic post. Indians had been hauled across the Indian Ocean as indentured labourers from the 1860s. Later, a class of traders followed them. This resulted in a significantly large Indian population, concentrated mostly in the province of Natal. In response to the systemic racial discrimination, South African Indians formed political organisations to appeal for their political and economic rights, most famously under Gandhi's leadership from the late 1890s to early 1910s. The anti-Indian sentiment agitations by whites grew even stronger after the First World War, as the white South African government passed several laws aimed at repatriating as many Indians as possible and widening the net of racial segregation on the remaining.

The Colonial Indian government initially protested these measures through Britain. But by the mid-1920s, Britain was reluctant to sour its relations with white Commonwealth countries, all of whom tightened their anti-Indian immigration laws. Consequently, the British government kicked the responsibility down the ladder and asked India to approach South Africa directly.

Fortuitously, this meant that India could now conduct bilateral relations with South Africa, thus giving the country its first puff of autonomy in foreign affairs. This led to a bilateral agreement in Cape Town in 1927, where India agreed to send a diplomatic representative to South Africa. In today's parlance, this was a High Commissioner's post, the first ever between two commonwealth countries without involving Britain. But it was an unusual diplomatic position. In addition to being the Indian government's representative, the Agent was also required to liaise between the Indian community and the South African government. Consequently, while diplomats are expected to stay out of local politics, in South Africa they actively intervened in it by attempting to become the chief voice of local Indians.

In doing so, they discouraged and undermined local agitations for political rights and instead cultivated a politically docile Indian elite whose demands were limited to trade concessions and access to European spaces.

Another task of the Agent was to elevate the white population's estimation of local Indians, by appearing as a cultural representative of a superior civilization. The Agent, Raza Ali writes in his autobiography, was a crow covered in peacock feathers.

In order to be accepted by European society, he had to appear like one. So, when he first informed G.S. Bajpai, the Secretary with the Indian government, of his intention to marry Sammy in early December 1935, his six-page letter described Sammy's qualities entirely with

While diplomats are expected to stay out of local politics, in South Africa they actively intervened in it by attempting to become the chief voice of local Indians.

Left: Ponnoo Veloo Sammy
Right: Syed Raza Ali's wedding to Ponnoo Veloo Sammy in 1936. Featured in Dr. Ashwin Desai, Dr. Goolam Vahed and Dr. Thembisa Waetjen's Many Lives. 150 Years of Being Indian in South Africa. Publisher: Shuter & Shooter Publishers (Pty) Ltd

reference to her family's high repute among Europeans. Sammy's family were 'a class by themselves', which often hosted high class Europeans as well as Indians. They were, Raza Ali proudly claimed, 'the only South African Indians to have the privilege' of travelling in European-reserved train compartments, often being readily accommodated in premier hotels from where even a whiff of Indian presence was stamped out. Thus, the Agent claimed that marrying into this Indian royalty in South Africa would help him in the 'discharge of his social functions'.

Bajpai worried about the perceived racial and caste degradation of the Indian diplomat. He wrote to the Viceroy's Secretary that the Oppenheimers' backing notwithstanding, the average European looked at every local Indian as a 'coolie' which would adversely affect the prestige of the Agent. All he remembered of Sammy's culture was her 'cockney accent', Bajpai sniped with a Brahmin's condescension.

The Indian Agent may be of a lower economic status to a South African Indian like Sammy, but the Indian government made sure he was of a 'good birth', i.e. a caste and social status. Considering the stature of the Indian Agent as a 'cultured aristocrat' compromised in European eyes, Bajpai suggested asking Raza Ali to 'seek an early and reasonable excuse for vacating his appointment'.

Enquiries from the South African government however confirmed that Sammy was a 'superior type of Indian woman' who preferred mixing with Europeans to Indians. The European opinion on the marriage, the South African Governor-General messaged, was positive. Bajpai stalled his response for as long as he could, but eventually sent one five days before the wedding. Raza Ali was allowed to marry but was refused an official government authorization.

Strangely, until now, neither the Indian government nor Raza Ali had discussed how the local Indian

community would receive the wedding. As is plain, the Indian policy towards South African Indians reeked of patronising superiority.

The wedding had been opposed by Hindu as well as Muslim organisations in South Africa, who were offended by its interreligious nature. Two days before the wedding, The Natal Mercury, intent on making mischief, reported that the bride will convert to Islam. It inflamed an already agitated Hindu leadership of the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) and the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), who asked Raza Ali to postpone the wedding until the end of his tenure.

They also made frenetic telephone calls to India, to Jagdish Prasad, the member of Viceroy's Council, and to Maharaj Singh, the previous Agent – someone even rang the South African Prime Minister – imploring them to stop this wedding. When that didn't happen, and despite the Agent's assurances that Sammy wasn't converting, a bulk of the Hindu leadership of the two organisations resigned in protest. This crippled these Indian Congresses for several years.

Happily, however, the scandal had little effect on the newlyweds. They remained feverishly in love, until a three-year long illness consumed Sammy who died in March 1942. The Indian government decided against recalling Raza Ali, mostly because an intervention in a private affair would embarrass the government. He completed his South African tenure in early 1938.

Matrimonial concerns invaded again in the choice of his successor. The Indian government contemplated sending M.S.A. Hydari, but was privately dissuaded by the South African minister, Jan Hofmeyr. Hydari's marriage to Sigrid Westling, who was white and Swedish, would embarrass the racist South African government. In the country, interracial marriages were banned some years later. ■

Diplomatic History

How And Why D&ISA Division Was Created In MEA

Rakesh Sood

In early 1992, after five and a half years posted abroad, I returned to India with a growing realisation of the shifting geopolitical equations, its impact on South Asia, and the challenges it would pose for Indian foreign policy that had been crafted during the Cold War years. These realisations were also shared by the Foreign Secretary and the political leadership, eventually leading to the birth of the Disarmament & International Security Affairs Division in the Ministry of External Affairs.

A FARAWAY VIEW

My five and a half years were split between two postings: Geneva, where I served as First Secretary (Disarmament) at the Permanent Mission of India, and then Islamabad, where I was Counsellor (Political) at the High Commission of India.

Both postings provided a ringside view of changing geopolitics and its impact on South Asia.

In Geneva, the negotiations for the Chemical Weapons Convention began to register progress as the Soviet delegation softened its position on-site and challenged inspections. Mandatory and consultative verification was accepted by the United States and the Soviet Union in the bilaterally concluded 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) Treaty. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was completed in February 1989 and in November, the Berlin Wall came down. In Vienna, talks began on setting limits on conventional forces leading to the 1990 Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty the following year.

In 1990, tensions between India and Pakistan began to rise with growing incidents of violence and terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. The camps in Pakistan that had trained the *mujahideen* for *jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan were ready for new recruits.

Following a crisis in the summer of 1990, talks between the Foreign Secretaries were initiated to develop Confidence-Building Measures, the first such talks since the Agreement on Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations/Facilities, concluded in 1988. This led to the operationalising of the Hotline between the Director General of Military Operations (DGMOs) and another was set up between the Indian Coast Guard and the Pakistan Maritime Security Agency.

Two significant conventional Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) concluded in 1991 were the Agreement on Advance Notices on Military Exercises, Manoeuvres, and Troop Movements and an Agreement on Prevention of Air Space Violations and for Permitting Overflights and Landings by Military Aircrafts.

Author at AEC Head Quarters, Mumbai for a meeting of Eminent Persons Group. **From right:** Dr M R Srinivasan, Dr Raja Ramanna, Dr P K Iyengar, Dr H N Sethna, Dr R Chidambaram and author.

COMING HOME

By early 1992, I was back in Delhi and took charge as Director in the United Nations Division, responsible for dealing with Disarmament issues (UND). The work related to the UN in New York (General Assembly, Disarmament Commission), Geneva (negotiations in the Conference on Disarmament and other review conferences), and Vienna (International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA). However, the world was changing rapidly, with new challenges and opportunities.

In December 1991, the Soviet Union broke up into fifteen states with Russia as the successor state. The bipolar world of the Cold War, came to an end. For the first time since its creation in 1945, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) met at summit level (Prime Minister Narasimha Rao participated as India was a non-permanent member) to take stock of the global security environment and concluded, inter-alia, that proliferation posed a major threat to regional and global security.

On the margins of the UNSC meeting in New York, Prime Minister Rao and President George H W Bush held a bilateral meeting, concluded that the end of the Cold War provided India and the U.S. an opportunity to overcome their differences, agreeing to open a dialogue on strategic and nuclear issues that had been a source of friction since the 1974 peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE) by India.

The dialogue commenced a few months later and continued through various ups and downs, culminating in the 123 Agreement permitting civilian nuclear cooperation in 2008.

Meanwhile, restrictions on dual-use items began to get tightened. In 1991, the Nuclear Suppliers Group convened after more than a decade and the following year, added Part 2 to their Guidelines covering nuclear-related-dual-use items and technologies that, in addition to having non-nuclear applications, could also contribute to the nuclear fuel cycle. In 1992, the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) met to add to its Category 2 lists by adding more dual-use items and technologies, as well as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) above a certain threshold. Indian

An empowered group was established to develop lists of dual-use materials, equipment and technologies whose exports should be licensed only after due diligence and end-use assurances.

Space Research Organisation (ISRO) had concluded an agreement with a Russian entity Glavkosmos, for the transfer of technology relating to cryogenic rocket engines.

Despite the fact that cryogenic technology is for satellite launches and not for missiles, the U.S. sanctioned both ISRO and Glavkosmos, reflecting the focus on non-proliferation.

In 1992, India announced full diplomatic recognition to Israel with the opening of embassies in Delhi and Tel Aviv. Under the multi-track Arab-Israeli peace process underway, India became an extra-regional participant in the Arms Control and Regional Security track that worked on CBMs.

Within weeks of returning from Islamabad as Director (UND), I found that nearly three-fourths of my time was devoted not to UN-related disarmament agendas but national and regional security and strategic dialogues as well as handling non-proliferation related sanctions and licensing issues for dual-use items, especially relating to civilian nuclear and space programmes.

To take stock of the changes under way, an Eminent Persons Group was set up with Prime Minister Rao's approval in mid-1992, with serving and former heads of nuclear, space and Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) departments.

Around this time, I put up a note to Foreign Secretary J. N. Dixit, explaining that the designation UND no longer described the changing nature of the work and proposed the establishment of a new division that would, in addition to the disarmament negotiations and the UN and IAEA related work, also deal with national security, non-proliferation and access to dual-use technology related issues. The proposal found acceptance and following some discussions, the new division was named Disarmament & International Security Affairs Division (D&ISA Division).
The nuclear dialogue with the U.S. was the first of many that followed. Discussing threat perceptions was a novel challenge for the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and required much closer coordination with the Ministry of Defence. Soon, the D&ISA Division had to get a Military Advisor and a Science Adviser deputed from the Services and DRDO respectively.

THE EVOLUTION OF AN IDEA

Over the years, the D&ISA Division also became the nodal division for handling the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum, a security dialogue platform that India was invited to join as part of our "Look East" policy. As the global norm of non-proliferation gained greater traction, D&ISA division began to highlight the need for sensitising our private sector entities as some of them had been found exporting dual-use chemicals that led to adverse commentary in international media and U.S. sanctions, even though these companies had not violated any Indian laws.

An empowered group was established to develop lists of dual-use materials, equipment and technologies whose exports should be licensed only after due diligence and end-use assurances, laying the foundation for non-proliferation related export controls administered by the Ministry of Commerce.

India signed the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1993 and the D&ISA Division became responsible for

coordinating industry outreach with the Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilisers and with DRDO about winding down our chemical weapons programme.

The opening of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) negotiations in Geneva added the responsibility of developing the national negotiating position in close coordination with the Department of Atomic Energy.

By 1995, it became clear that in order to keep India's nuclear option viable, India could not rely on the 1974 PNE and needed to carry out a new series of nuclear tests. Withdrawing from the CTBT negotiations in 1996 followed by the nuclear tests in 1998 and working the negotiating strategy for India's emergence as a responsible nuclear power added to D&ISA Division's work load. Together with the concerned territorial divisions, it handled the strategic dialogues with a number of countries including France, UK, Israel etc. that eventually led to the establishment of long-standing strategic partnerships.

AN INSTITUTION IN ITSELF

In late 2000, after nearly a nine-year stint, I left Delhi on a new assignment. India had established a new position of an Ambassador for Disarmament in Geneva and it was my privilege to set up the new office.

Over a quarter century later, it is gratifying to see that D&ISA Division has thrived as has the position of Ambassador for Disarmament. Many of my young colleagues who I had the privilege to work with, went on to serve in Geneva and Vienna, and head the D&ISA Division, (D B Venkatesh Verma, Suchitra Durai, G Dharmendra, Amandeep Singh Gill) with great distinction. ■

Notebook

Reporting India-Pakistan: Smoke, Mirrors, and the Power of Narratives

Barkha Dutt

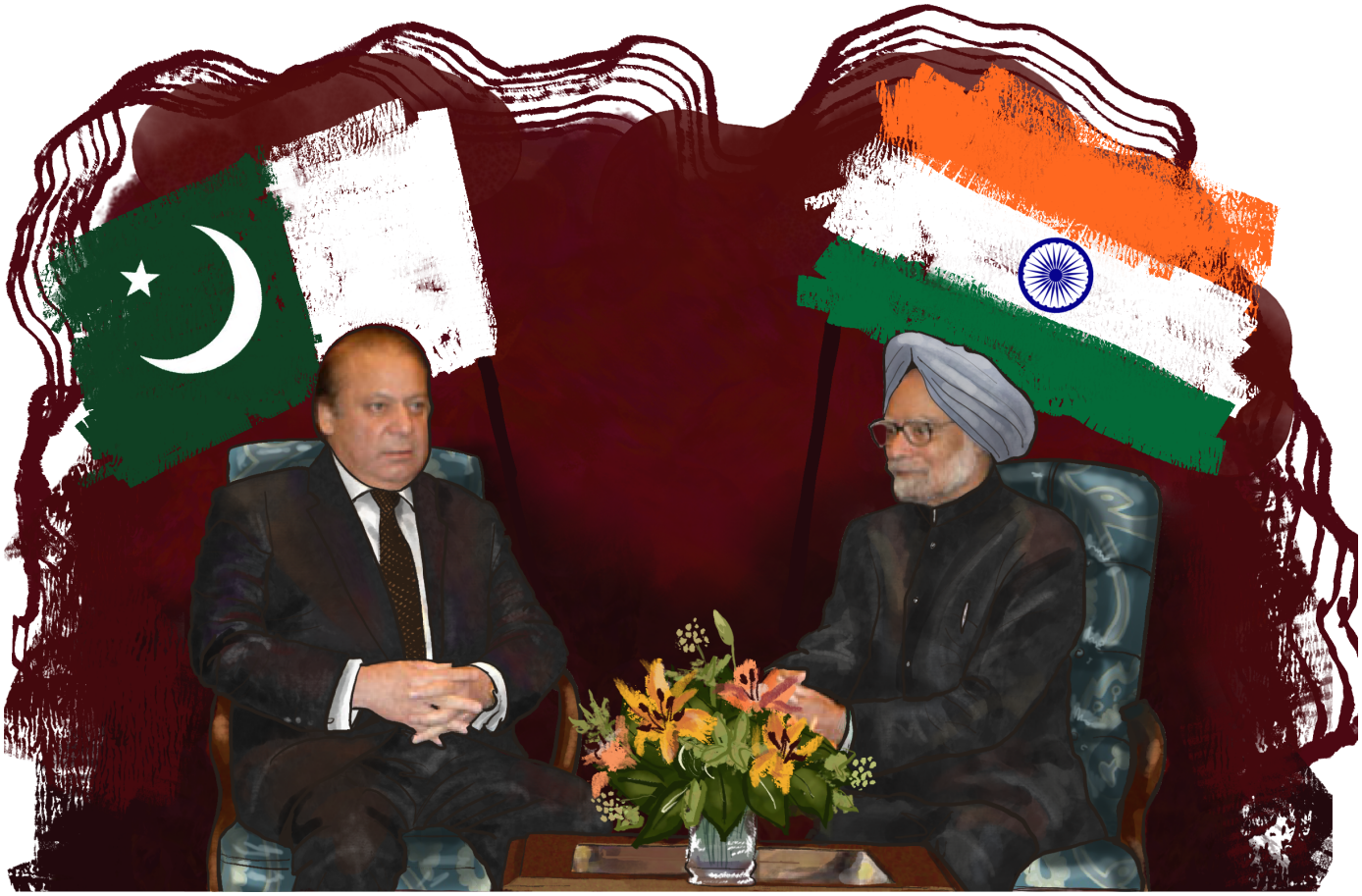
As I walked over the narrow strip of No Man's Land that separates India from Pakistan at the Attari Wagah border in Punjab, a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi just behind me, a portrait of Mohammad Ali Jinnah right in front me; I thought of the acutely surreal quality to reporting on the equation between India and Pakistan.

Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar was to arrive in Islamabad for a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), making him the first external affairs minister to do so, in nearly nine years. Though he had made it clear that his visit was for a multilateral forum, it had generated huge curiosity because of the backdrop: relations between India and Pakistan remain broken.

In Lahore, I was scheduled to call on Pakistan's 3-time former Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif at the office of Maryam Nawaz Sharif, his daughter and the first woman Chief Minister of Punjab. Formalities at the border crossing took longer than expected and I was already running an hour behind my appointment time. To make matters worse, no Indian phone can work on international roaming in Pakistani territory. Effectively, the moment you cross you enter a communication black hole. I borrowed the phone of a Pakistani rangers guard to find the driver of the local car we had hired. And then used his phone to try and place a call to the Sharif's. As we raced to make it, our driver was hauled over by cops and *challan*-ed for speeding, adding hilarity to the urgency.

Inside the lavishly built, multi-pillared mansion that is the Chief Minister's Secretariat, Maryam Sharif made a throwaway compliment about my rather worn out golden coloured flat *chappals* (in sharp contrast to her own sleek footwear) and we had a laugh. And then it was down to work.

I was able to persuade Nawaz Sharif to come on record for an interview.



The India Pakistan story is always interesting, always challenging and always exhausting—it is, given the two nations' histories and proximity, a marathon, not a sprint.

"It would have been wonderful, a great thing if Prime Minister Modi had also come for this summit," he said, without prompting. I took notes furiously knowing I already had my big headline. "I have always been a votary of reviving our relations. I hope we can sit with PM Modi directly in the not too distant future."

This missive for Modi was hugely significant.

TEA AND CHIT-CHAT—AND A NEW POLICY?

Nawaz Sharif was walking back Pakistan from its stated position on Jammu and Kashmir and Article 370. In 2019, two days after the Modi government removed its special status- a long held political position- Pakistan expelled the Indian High Commissioner Ajay Bisaria. It also suspended trade ties. It then took the position that without a reversal of this decision ties would remain downgraded.

Sharif made no mention of Kashmir or Article 370; there were no pre-conditions attached to his olive branch. I quizzed him about his recent statement on the Kargil war between India and Pakistan that followed a much-hyped Lahore declaration in 1999. Sharif had described Musharraf's military intrusion into Indian territory as a violation of the agreement. "Not just a violation, it's a betrayal. I have no hesitation in saying that, I am very plain spoken."

But was Sharif speaking for himself? Or did he have the backing of the Pakistan Army Chief, General Asim Munir? Was his olive branch a political risk? Or was he testing the waters? Was he asserting himself vis-a-vis the Pakistan deep state? Or were they on board?

The structural dissonance in Pakistan around the civil military relationship makes both diplomacy and reporting the story a challenge. There are always as many saboteurs in the room as there are advocates or dialogue.

In 2013, when Sharif was Prime Minister of Pakistan and Narendra Modi was still the ascending challenger to Manmohan Singh, Singh and Sharif were to meet in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. Singh had just concluded a meeting in DC where Barack Obama, then US President, called for the dismantling of the Pakistan hosted Lashkar-e-Taiba, in a joint statement.

It was considered a major moral win for India's position against Pakistan backed terrorism when the joint statement used the reference to the Lashkar in the same sentence as 'disrupting Al Qaeda.'

A day or so later I went for an interview at Nawaz Sharif's hotel in New York. He was having breakfast with a small group of men, in whom one face was instantly recognisable - Hamid Mir, a well known Pakistani news anchor. I was invited to join them as my camera crew set up in the outer room.

Sharif turned around and asked me about the statement issued in Washington. I responded by explaining that Indian public opinion could not back initiatives at dialogue with Pakistan in the shadow of terror attacks.

He argued that India should have brought our grievances to Pakistan directly. We clearly disagreed. A few minutes later, Sharif, addressing the rest of the table, speaking in a mix of Punjabi and Urdu, recounted an allegorical tale of a dispute in a village between two neighbours, one of whom was a woman. The moral of the story was that arguments should be resolved directly and not involve third parties. We wrapped up breakfast and proceeded with the interview. Sharif called Manmohan Singh "a good man' and expressed the hope that Singh would visit Pakistan. I filed my report, pleased at my exclusive and went to sleep.

In the middle of that New York night I was woken up by persistent calls from New Delhi where it was still the middle of the day. My producers were calling me, half panic-stricken, to inform me that my meeting with Nawaz Sharif had blown up into a major controversy and was now the subject of a big domestic headline in India.

Still groggy, I was barely able to follow how a pretty routine interview with Sharif could be controversial.

I was told to check Hamid Mir's Twitter (now X) page. Mir had gone public with his distorted version of the informal breakfast chatter at Sharif's table. He claimed that Nawaz Sharif had called Manmohan Singh a *'Dehati Aurat'* (Village Woman) and that I had been present when this swipe was used. The story was viral across Indian and Pakistan TV networks.

> **Sharif had described Musharraf's military intrusion into Indian territory as a violation of the agreement.**

And in Delhi, where Narendra Modi, then Gujarat Chief Minister, but already the BJP's prime ministerial contender and the favourite to win the general election, was addressing an election rally. Modi slammed Sharif for making what sounded like an insulting swipe at the Indian Prime Minister. "How dare you address my country's PM as a village woman" Modi warned Sharif, in a blistering attack. The BJP could take Manmohan Singh on at home but would not tolerate an insult from a foreigner- that was the upshot of Modi's message.

I had to go live immediately with what I had witnessed at the breakfast table.

I repeated what I had witnessed. I said the story Sharif told seemed to be a parable to me. In my presence at least, he had not said anything insulting about the Indian PM. The reference to a village woman was part of the fable he shared.

The meeting between the Pakistan and Indian PMs was now just a few hours away. I realised that Mir's version of events could possibly lead to the entire meeting being called off. I called the officials I knew in the Prime

Minister's Office and shared whatever I had witnessed.

Did someone want to sabotage the meeting?

No one knew why Mir had told the story in the distorted way that he did.

A few hours later Mir retracted his original account and confirmed that nothing pejorative had been said about the Indian PM. Another Pakistani journalist present at the breakfast independently said the same.

But the damage had been done.

The two prime ministers did meet as planned but the backdrop was a cloud of controversy.

A MARATHON, NOT A SPRINT

After making a couple of high voltage attempts to improve ties with Pakistan-inviting SAARC leaders to Modi's first swearing in or the Prime minister's dramatic unannounced visit to Lahore on Sharif's birthday in 2015; the government appears to have shifted gear and entered a different, more reserved approach to Pakistan. New red lines were drawn after the surgical strike that followed the Uri terror attack and the Balakot strike that followed the Pulwama terror attack. And Pakistan no longer occupies the same diplomatic bandwidth as before.

But from an Indian journalist's perspective, every India-Pakistan story one reports, is marked by smoke and mirrors. While you are decoding what you think is a frosty and cold encounter, you may discover months later that behind the cameras, there was a convivial and warm unreported conversation. When you think things are cheery, you learn of the complete collapse at the talks. And then there are the wheels within wheels in Pakistan, where the men wielding actual power do so from the wings.

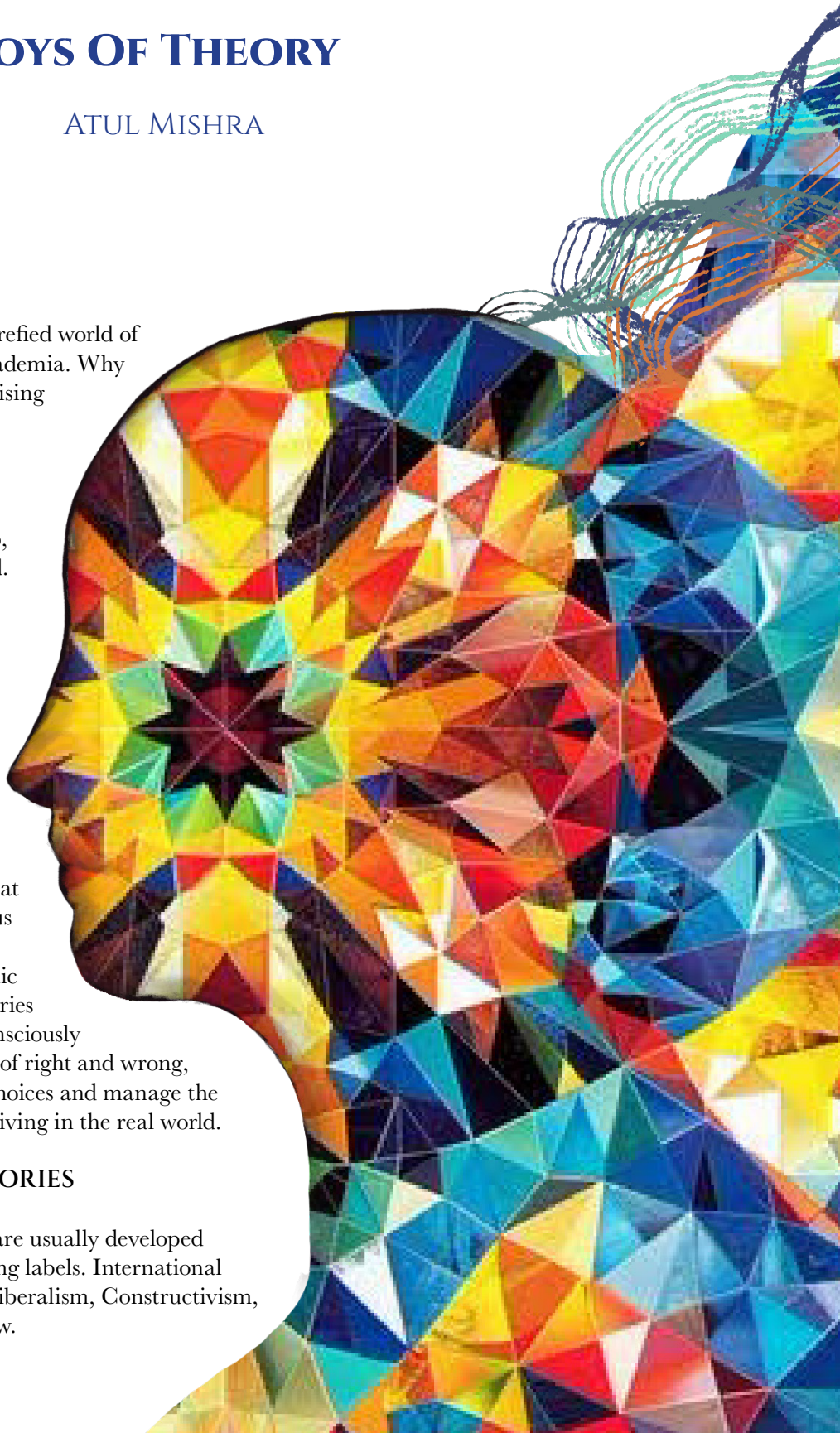
And let's not forget there is the emotion that one feels as an Indian. Interviews can be hostile, shows can see meltdowns and sometimes the very choice of doing an interview or not is a loaded one.

The India Pakistan story is always interesting, always challenging and always exhausting—it is, given the two nations' histories and proximity, a marathon, not a sprint. ■

Theory

Joys Of Theory

Atul Mishra



The conventional view is that the rarefied world of theory is firmly the province of academia. Why then is there a column about theorising international affairs in this magazine?

The short answer is that awareness of theory can make us better thinkers. Theoretical thinking makes analysis sharp, understanding deep, and judgement sound.

But let me say more.

All comprehension of the world is theory. It is a framework of understanding, or a story if one may, to explain the goings-on, whether in our personal lives or in the world around us.

We unconsciously learn and build theories around situations. We do this based on what we pick up during our lifetime from various influencers and influences around us–be they parents, family, educators, news, public personalities or various media. These theories that are picked up subconsciously or unconsciously never leave us. They show up in our sense of right and wrong, obligation and purpose. They shape our choices and manage the contradictions that invariably come from living in the real world.

CONSCIOUS THEORIES

Then there are conscious theories, which are usually developed in academia and come with grand-sounding labels. International Relations (IR) theories include Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, Marxism and Feminism, to name just a few.

Each of these theories uses a unique vantage point or perspective to draw out its picture of world affairs. Realism claims that we must pay close attention to conflict amongst nations and the struggle for power that drives their relations. Liberalism focuses on human rights and democracy. Constructivism on how identities are formed and shape notions of national interest. Marxism explains global politics in terms of the workings of the capitalist economic system. And Feminism argues that patriarchy operates at the global level, shaping war, trade and diplomacy alike. Familiarity with these theories can be helpful in figuring out which perspective or point of view works for any of us.

These theories don't just coexist. True to the nature of international relations, they compete to become the user's preferred tool to make sense of global politics. The great joy of international relations theory is that the same phenomenon can be explained from different points of view.

And you do not just have a variety of perspectives, you also have the possibility to horse-race them.

Consider India-Pakistan relations. Realism explains its dynamics in terms of the power differential between the two countries. A more powerful India spooks Pakistan, causing the latter to look for great power allies—the U.S. in the past, China these days—and use cross-border terrorism. Constructivism explains the same dynamic in terms of the clash of national identities: a secular India versus a Muslim/Islamic Pakistan. And Liberalism points to—and laments—the lack of bilateral trade, people-to-people contact, and South Asian regionalism.

Bad generalisation can produce racist and sexist ideas; good generalisation can help liberal democracies become resilient to blows from the far-right.

An exercise like this provides one with a multiplicity of lenses and clarifies, deepens and enriches understanding and action. If you know the theories, you can debate like a realist, vote like a liberal, think like a Marxist and be an ally of feminist causes.

A more powerful India spooks Pakistan, causing the latter to look for great power allies—the US in the past, China these days—and use cross-border terrorism.

A BIG WORD CALLED THEORISATION

Theoretical understanding of international affairs is generated through a process called theorisation. The word is heavy, and the activities that fall under it are hard to grasp but inescapable.

To theorise is to arrange a set of facts in any number of ways to see if they reveal a coherent picture. We engage in this form of theorisation when we see regional instability in falling stock markets, soaring inflation, street protests and falling governments in any part of the world.

To theorise is also abstract. We can remove the regime change that recently took place in Bangladesh from its context to ask if it was a manifestation of a deeper trend. That trend could be the desire for political change in Muslim-majority countries, as illustrated in the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 and the Arab Spring of the early 2010s. Or it could be the restlessness of the Bengali

masses, which has been witnessed since the agitation against Bengal's first partition of 1905.

And finally, to theorise is to generalise. We generalise when we say that a trend or a trait found in a limited number of instances holds true or valid for a larger or potentially infinite number of instances. Bad generalisation can produce racist and sexist ideas; good generalisation can help liberal democracies become resilient to blows from the far-right.

To theorise is to be playful—systematising, abstracting and generalising in any number of ways to see which picture of international politics works for you. Theory makes world affairs clay.

Bad generalisation can produce racist and sexist ideas; good generalisation can help liberal democracies become resilient to blows from the far-right.

CONCEPTS

One way to think theoretically is to use concepts. Concepts are the building blocks of theory. They are words that capture complex social reality. Power is a concept in a way that plough is not. Concepts are contested, slippery and clashing. These features make them attractive, for they give us opportunities to sift through textures of reality.

Ask yourself why the same region is called 'West Asia' in India and 'the Middle East' in the West. And if the Middle East is a Euro-centric concept, then why are the West Asians calling their own region the Middle East? Why is it a 'special military operation' for Russia and 'war' for the West? Why was there no 'Indo-Pacific' in the past? And do the Quad countries who accept the term live in a reality different from China's and Russia's, who prefer the old 'Asia-Pacific'? Why do some prefer 'South America' over 'Latin America' and some 'Southern Asia' over 'South Asia'; why has 'the Indo-Pak subcontinent' lost traction while some in India prefer *'Akhand Bharat'* over 'the Indian subcontinent'? Why has 'decolonisation' made a comeback in policy and public discourse five decades after most of humanity liberated itself from European colonialism?

Someone who confuses the rigidity of imagination with conviction may call the concepts they disagree with as misrepresentations of reality. But thinking about these questions with an open mind can make us see that humans share the same physical environment but live in different realities that imperfectly overlap. Conflict and cooperation, war and diplomacy, fist-thumping, shoe-flinging, all the hugging and shrugging–the stuff of international politics–are generated by this imperfect overlap. This column will reveal the pleasures of such imperfections.

HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

Finally, theory offers segues into history and philosophy.

No understanding of international affairs escapes history, which depends on how we interpret the past. Theoretical awareness can be helpful in telling us when our approach to something that happened in the past is in error.

We frequently read the present into the past, interpreting and judging the latter in terms of the former. Theory helps us avoid these pitfalls. It helps us understand which associations between the past and the present are valid and which are contrived. It can make us ask good 'what-if' questions and become better at counterfactual reasoning.

No understanding of international affairs escapes history, which depends on how we interpret the past.

It can also help us understand the historical logic, that is, which development in the past has caused something that is taking place today and what is the nature of that causation. The India-China boundary dispute is a legacy issue, but whether its current form is traceable to the lousy boundary-making of the British, the postcolonial intransigence of India and China in the 1950s or the great power dynamics of recent years matters to India-China relations. Answering the question would mean establishing causation, and that is the stuff of theory.

Historical reasoning and theoretical thinking are two expressions of the same activity. And since the past matters, this column will keep you on the right side of history.

Philosophy examines the assumptions that theoretical thinking takes for granted. Realism advises states to pursue national interest, and Constructivism tells us how that interest gets shaped. But philosophy makes us probe the concept's moral worth. If all states prioritise national interest, then what happens to the problem of the global commons? What sorts of obligations do we

have towards strangers? And should we have a world government? These are moral questions, which do not have a one true answer. But by compelling us to think about them deeply and extensively, philosophy gives us the opportunity to sharpen our moral antennae. Don't we need a moral compass in a rough world?

Academia is rightly the proper home of theory. But theory has a wanderlust, and it makes for a great travel companion for anyone with an adventurous imagination. ■

China

For China, Age Is More than A Number

Jabin T. Jacob

On one of his state visits to Egypt in the 1990s, the then Chinese President Jiang Zemin is said to have discovered that the Egyptians showcased their civilisation as being 5,000 years old. On his return, he ordered that Chinese history–until then merely between 3,000 and 4,000 years old according to the prevailing record–claim similar antiquity with the Egyptians.

The story may be apocryphal, but it tells us a great deal about how Beijing sees the world, and more importantly, how it sees its own place in it.

In an age of intense geopolitical competition with the United States-led West and with other Asian powers such as India and Japan, China's communist leaders have deployed the great age of Chinese civilisation as a tool to promote the narrative of their country's supposedly inevitable rise to the top of global heap and displacement of the U.S. Age, they appear to convey, is more than a number. And their number is bigger than that of their rivals. While such a stark distinction is not possible in the case of a peer civilisation like India, there are other methods adopted – both subtle and overt – to convey the idea of inherent Chinese superiority.

YANKEE COME LATELY

While the Greek civilisation can claim similar antiquity as the Chinese one – Greece and China initiated the Forum of Ancient Civilisations in 2017–it is no longer the locus of Western political and economic dominance. That locus now lies in the U.S. which, however, is a 'new' nation by comparison. As a result, the Chinese have begun to highlight what might be considered as a certain lack of American decorum or proper behaviour that apparently only old civilisations and societies possess.

This was most famously conveyed in a diatribe by Yang Jiechi, the then Politburo member of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and head of its Foreign Affairs Commission Office during the first high-level talks between the Chinese and the new Joe Biden administration in Anchorage, Alaska in March 2021. The Chinese had been reeling from hard line policies under Donald Trump which his successor showed no signs of shifting from. Yang declared, "we thought too well of the United States, we thought the U.S. side will follow the necessary diplomatic protocols" arguing that "in front of the Chinese side, the United States does not have the qualification to say that it wants to speak to China from a position of strength."

The implication might have been largely lost on the Americans but at least to his audience at home and to those others classified as great civilisations, Yang was suggesting that China was capable of following diplomatic niceties even under the greatest pressure owing to its culture and length of history while the Americans lacked the ability owing to their own short history of existence. Thus, despite China's gaps in capacity with the U.S. or a weaker hand at the negotiating table, the Chinese were signalling they were somehow superior to the Americans.

A LONG ROAD... BEHIND

These signals aren't accidental. In sharp contrast to the iconoclast Mao Zedong and the widespread destruction of China's cultural artefacts and heritage during the Cultural Revolution, the present CPC General Secretary and Chinese President, Xi Jinping, has followed his immediate predecessors in embracing and weaponsing Chinese history and culture in the interests of regime survival and legitimacy. He has frequently highlighted "fine traditional Chinese culture" and "Chinese wisdom" at home and abroad, and "confidence in culture" and "confidence in history" now form part of China's "confidence doctrine".

Chinese Premier Li Qiang's call at the 27th ASEAN Plus Three Summit in Laos in October this year to "strengthen the Asian Consciousness" and "to better apply the Oriental Wisdom" is simply international packaging for Chinese cultural confidence and "Chinese wisdom" – a continuation of the "Asian values" trope.

HISTORY WARS

But how does China communicate superiority over India, a civilisation of similar age and achievement as the Chinese one? There are at least three ways in which China attempts to chip away at India's pedigree.

How does China communicate superiority over India, a civilisation of similar age and achievement as the Chinese one? There are at least three ways in which China attempts to chip away at India's pedigree.

First, while Chinese statements and documents continue to declare "China and India are both ancient civilisations" possessing "long histories", there appears to be a careful and gradual shift in emphasis. Whilst saying that the two countries are similar in age or "equally old", or acknowledging other ancient civilisations, there is separate and specific mention of China as being "more than 5,000 years old".

Chinese interlocutors claim that New Delhi is using the U.S. against China, and that India is a partner of the U.S. in trying to stop or block China's development goals.

Over time, in public documents related to India-China relations, references to India's antiquity have come down while multiple references are made to "5,000 years of Chinese civilisation". China's apparent "pursuit of peace and harmony" is also portrayed as being the result of its age of "more than 5000 years", though consideration on similar grounds for India is not explicitly forthcoming.

China's second tactic is less subtle. As India has employed, in recent years, its own civilisation-based vocabulary in international discourse, China has openly expressed its opposition. Indeed, it speaks to China's awareness of the uses of such vocabulary that it quickly objected to India using the expression *"Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam"*(the world is one family) in documents of G20 meetings India hosted in 2023. Unresolved bilateral tensions over China's 2020 transgressions along their disputed boundary apart Xi skipped the G20 leaders' summit in New Delhi in September perhaps also because he would appear simply as just another leader at an event where the Indian Prime Minister would be the centre of all attention. He sent the lower-ranked Chinese Premier instead.

And finally, there is the explicit portrayal of India as lacking agency in its foreign policy. Chinese interlocutors claim that New Delhi is using the U.S. against China, and that India is a partner of the U.S. in trying to stop or block China's development goals. This portrayal of India as both, using the U.S. and being subservient to it also offers the useful function of undercutting India's identity as an

ancient civilisation on par with that of the Chinese because it is no longer able to hold its own and must depend on another stronger power. This is, in fact, an attitude with a long historical provenance.

Writing from exile in Darjeeling in the early 20th century, the Chinese intellectual Kang Youwei used India's descent into a colonised country as a warning to the Chinese people and as a prompt for internal reform. His writings have deeply influenced Chinese views on India since.

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK AHEAD

The ease with which Chinese scholars and diplomats appear to dismiss Indian agency in its foreign policy despite polite references to India's 'strategic autonomy' must also be ascribed in large measure to an ideological worldview of the CPC regime in which it sees itself in existential conflict with liberal, democratic regimes everywhere. A simple China-versus-the U.S. approach in which everybody else who opposes China for whatever reason can simply be classified as working at the behest of the U.S. is also easier to work with at a conceptual and operational level for China's foreign policymakers.

It is for these reasons that the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) – one of the three new subsidiaries of the Belt and Road Initiative that China has launched in recent years–needs to be taken more seriously. Even as it proclaims, "the diversity and beauty of different civilisations", the GCI is seen as a showcase for "traditional Chinese culture as derived from ancient Chinese wisdom" and "equal dialogue and mutual respect" among different civilisations does not appear in practice to mean that all civilisations are equal to that of the Chinese one.

Thus, the GCI is not simply an abstract concept without real world consequences; rather, it highlights a close linkage between China's domestic political narratives and actions and its external ones and underlines more sharply than anything the Chinese have done so far, their sense of cultural superiority. Ignoring and not countering these developments as India and the rest of the world have done until now is to turn a blind eye to an evolving new form of hegemony in global politics. ■

Neighbourhood

Post-Hasina Security Challenges For India

Shiv M. Sahai

As Sheikh Hasina's long tenure in Bangladesh has come to its end, India must confront a host of security challenges that will likely emerge in the post-Hasina era. Under Hasina's government, the picture was a mixed bag: internally, Bangladesh has seen a significant decline in Islamist militancy—but for India, her administration has also been a crucial partner in curbing cross-border insurgencies. The question now, following her departure, is what happens next. Could the political shifts in Bangladesh lead to a reversal of these security gains, triggering instability that could spill over into India, particularly in its sensitive North-East region?

The reverberations could be far-reaching. As it was, the effects of Bangladesh-based militancy were felt as far afield as Jammu and Kashmir. When I was posted as Deputy Inspector General of Police in Rajouri, I remember, Ilyas Kashmiri, the Commander of the 313 Brigade of the Harakat-ul Jihad Islami (HUJI) was responsible for the deadly attacks on the Army on Tanda camp in 2004 leading to the death of a Brigadier. They also carried out attacks on the army's border posts.

The upshot: political upheaval in Bangladesh could be destabilising for India beyond its immediate border with its eastern neighbour.

THE RISE OF ISLAMIST GROUPS IN BANGLADESH

The history of militancy inside Bangladesh is long. HUJI is a rechristened version of the Jamaat Ansarul Afghaneen, formed in 1984 to fight the Soviet forces. Its Bangladesh chapter was started soon after the American invasion forced them out, bringing to the region pan-Islamic forces like Al Qaeda and its affiliates like the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT).

These organisations, till recently, have carried out attacks both within Bangladesh and against India. Shortly after Sheikh Hasina's ouster, Mohammad Jasimuddin Rahmani, leader of the Ansarullah Bangla Team and a vocal Al-Qaeda supporter, was released. He has openly called for India's disintegration, advocating independence for Kashmir, Khalistan, and the North-East, even suggesting that Mamata Banerjee should rebel. His ultimate goal? Raising the Islamic flag over the Red Fort.

Sheikh Hasina had cracked down on these groups which also extended to groups harbouring Indian militants, particularly those from the North-East, who had been using Bangladesh as a safe haven for decades. However, with her departure, there is a real possibility of a resurgence of these radical elements. Radicalisation amongst the border populations of Assam and West Bengal would only increase providing safe havens and operational bases, as seen at the time of the attacks in Burdwan, Gaya, or earlier on the American Cultural Centre and the Indian Institute of Science.

BANGLADESH'S POLITICAL TRANSITION AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIA

It is because of this background that the political divide inside Bangladesh, between the secularist Awami League (AL) led by Hasina and the Islamist-leaning Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is not just a domestic issue but one that holds significant security implications for India.

While the AL's 1971 narrative aligns with India's strategic interests, the BNP and its Islamist allies look to the 1947 partition narrative, which could result in a hostile government toward India. If the BNP or another Islamist-aligned government comes to power, India could face renewed threats from insurgent groups who thrive on cross-border collaboration.

This ideological divide has broader implications for India's internal security. Islamist forces that align with the 1947 partition legacy view India as an adversary. Islam has been deep-rooted in the Chittagong area, where it is speculated to have been brought by the companions of the Prophet Mohammad around the 7th or 8th centuries. India's history with these movements has shown that instability in Bangladesh almost always finds an echo in India's border regions, North-East and Jammu and Kashmir.

> **A destabilised Bangladesh could see these groups re-establish bases in regions like Sylhet, Rangamati, and Bandarban, threatening India's hard-won peace in the North-East.**

THREATS TO INDIA'S NORTH-EAST AND CROSS-BORDER TERRORISM

For India, the most immediate concern is how the changing political landscape in Bangladesh could embolden insurgent groups in the North-East. Historically, Bangladesh provided sanctuary to groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), who used these safe havens to wage campaigns of violence within India.

While Hasina's government helped curb much of this activity, there is no guarantee that future regimes will continue this policy.

A destabilised Bangladesh could see these groups re-establish bases in regions like Sylhet, Rangamati, and Bandarban, threatening India's hard-won peace in the North-East. Insurgencies in states like Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam, which have been relatively dormant in the recent years, could gain new momentum.

Furthermore, the porous India-Bangladesh border remains a significant challenge. With over 4,000 kilometres of largely unmanageable terrain, cross-border terrorism, smuggling, and the trafficking of arms and drugs are persistent threats that could worsen with a less cooperative government in Dhaka.

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES FOR INDIA

Mohammad Yunus, the Chief Adviser of Bangladesh, speaking during the Global Clinton Initiative, admitted to a 'design and conspiracy' behind Sheikh Hasina's ouster. Read together with her own claim that she was ousted as she refused to give St Martin's island to the Americans leaves many a doubt. But why would the U.S. act contrary to Indian interests, given that Sheikh Hasina was India's closest — and perhaps sole — ally in the region?

The primary U.S. security focus today is China. By 2025, China is projected to have over 600 satellites in orbit by 2025. It may be on its way to achieve military parity with the United States, potentially initiating operations in Taiwan.

For the U.S., South Asia offers vital strategic depth for military operations against China, leading to the narrative shift from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific." However, after initial enthusiasm for the QUAD, inconsistencies have emerged.

Has the West begun softening its stance towards Pakistan, Russia has advocated for Pakistan's inclusion in BRICS, which would dilute India's position. India is struggling to maintain influence in its neighbourhood, even as Bhutan draws closer to China.

Given these circumstances, India must question whether the West will overlook a hostile Bangladesh government that foments unrest within India, as it did during military and BNP rule in Bangladesh.

INDIA'S OPTIONS

Given these evolving threats, India must show strategic patience while adopting a proactive, multi-pronged strategy to secure its internal borders and mitigate the risks of a volatile political transition in Bangladesh. First, India must deepen its diplomatic engagement with all political factions in Bangladesh to ensure that its security interests are protected regardless of which party holds power in Dhaka.

Relying solely on one leader, such as Hasina, risks leaving India vulnerable in the event of political change.

Second, India needs to strengthen its intelligence and counter-terrorism cooperation with Bangladesh. Enhancing joint security operations, sharing real-time intelligence on terrorist movements, and establishing a framework for continued security collaboration will be essential.

Bangladesh's internal stability directly impacts India's security, and fostering strong institutional links between the two countries' security forces can help mitigate the risks posed by any political transition.

Additionally, India must reinforce its internal security apparatus, particularly in the North-East. Enhancing border security through advanced surveillance technologies, boosting counter-insurgency operations, and improving infrastructure in border areas will be key to preventing cross-border militancy. This includes upgrading policing and crisis response mechanisms to ensure that Indian security forces can act swiftly to counter any resurgence of terrorist activity.

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While security is paramount, India should also focus on building stronger economic ties with Bangladesh to promote regional stability. Expanding trade, infrastructure development, and energy cooperation can serve as stabilising factors, reducing the likelihood of radical elements gaining a foothold in Bangladesh. Furthermore, cultural and educational exchanges can foster people-to-people ties, helping to counter extremist narratives that seek to pit Bangladesh against India.

India must also be prepared to address transnational issues like the Rohingya refugee crisis, which has significant security and humanitarian implications for both countries. Cooperation on refugee management, coupled with efforts to resolve environmental challenges that affect both nations, will be key to maintaining regional stability. ■

China

Indian Democracy And The Package Deal With China

Sidharth Raimedhi

Among the truisms that dominate discourse in the foreign policy world, this might be the one that most exercises minds in New Delhi: that India and China will either stumble into conflict or they will manage to engage in mutual cooperation through mutual understanding and dialogue. Alternatively, and perhaps more realistically, the two Asian giants will engage in managed competition over security and influence while cooperating on issues where such cooperation is feasible. Geopolitical factors, economic heft as well as bilateral military balance, will play key roles in determining which path the relationship takes. Hence, most analyses on the contemporary 'abnormal' relationship rightly focuses on these factors.

Yet there is another variable, albeit one more hidden from the forefront as well as insufficiently dissected by analysts, that will play a crucial role going forward: the prospect of a package deal between India and China and the ability of Indian democracy to come to terms with the same.

There is precedent for this. Over the last few years, there has been a growing consensus that the 1960 package deal on the border offered by China—namely, India's recognition of China's control over Aksai Chin in exchange for China's acceptance of Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory—was a missed opportunity. India's national interests required Delhi to accept such an offer. It was a combination of domestic political constraints faced by Prime Minister Nehru, mistrust towards China as well as concerns over acquiring a reputation of weakness that led India to reject the offer and replace it with the forward policy subsequently.

It is also understood that a future package deal is likely to be much less attractive than the one offered in 1960. However, there are clear strategic reasons for India to try to achieve a more stable national consensus on such an arrangement–especially as the Line of Actual Control (LAC) appears to be undergoing churn and alterations.

DEMOCRACY AND ITS SHADOW OVER INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

Given that the Indian voter has had a strong preference for a government that is able to stand tall against China's 'bullying' at the LAC, the pressure on any government at the centre to come across as tough and assertive has often taken precedence over more strategic considerations when it comes to India's China policy.

When in 2013, China encroached 19 kilometres beyond the LAC and into Indian territory–leading to a three-week standoff–it led to the strong impression in the voter's mind that it was the weakness of the government that had enabled such a flagrant violation of India's national boundaries. Such a perception could not have been helpful just a year prior to elections, with significant implications for electoral outcomes. As China's power continues to grow, the spectre of a

border conflagration leading to domestic loss of face is likely to remain a salient factor in determining foreign policy. This aspect, in turn, allows China an outsized ability to blackmail or coerce Indian governments, given Delhi's sensitivities to a perceived 'loss' at the border. Needless to say, such a China 'overhang' leads to a perverse form of leverage in the hands of Beijing and an ability to use Indian democracy against itself.

The most reliable antidote to the same is a democratic and clear-eyed conversation on the India-China strategic equation.

Indian democracy also affects relations at a much deeper level. It has been widely known that a final resolution of the boundary question will require some form of a swap arrangement. It is worth noting that China had altered the terms of this arrangement somewhat abruptly in 1985 when it included Tawang as a core part of its demands. But there is still a sense that such an inclusion could be a bargaining tactic, to put pressure on India to accept the original swap while the terms are still benign.

As importantly, it is well-acknowledged that such a swap deal is in the clear interest of India as it was an offer that tempted Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1983-84. What caused her to defer a response to the probing offer was the spectre of upcoming general elections. A strong ruler with nationalist credentials, PM Gandhi could have theoretically carried the nation with her towards a final resolution of the long-standing boundary dispute.

With PM Modi's arrival in Delhi in 2014, there was a period of similarly reasoned optimism.

The then External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj articulated the same and said during a press conference that "an out of the box solution may still come on this (Sino-Indian boundary) issue" and that the issue "would not be handed over to the next generation". Former National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon echoed the same a month earlier (Dec. 2014) and argued that the context was more permissive since both countries now had leaders that had "strong mandates" and "very clear strategic ideas where they want to take their countries".

THE BACKBURNER AND ITS RATIONALE

The question of a final resolution had been famously put in the backburner since the late 1980s when PM Rajiv Gandhi was offered a variant of the same in the wake of the Sumdorongchu stand-off when the Indian military

proved its mettle.

However, instead of pursuing a risky and complicated settlement, India and China decided to focus on internal economic growth and achieving stable mutually beneficial relations. The rationale was the following and to paraphrase, 'we shall not put forward our claims on the border, acknowledge the existing patterns of control at the border (LAC) and return to the question once relations have improved over time'. This was a modus vivendi that was perfectly tailored to the needs of both India and China (strategic and economic) and in line with international trends towards globalisation, open markets and a global peace dividend. Moreover, relatively weaker coalition governments at the centre during this period (1991-2014) could not afford a serious consideration of a 'package deal' that was likely to be politically contentious, if not fatal. There were enough reasons to continue with the new relative stability in relations and leave various cans of worms unopened.

FROM THE BACKBURNER TO THE FRYING PAN!

Yet today, the strategic landscape has fundamentally shifted since the early 90s in terms of both emerging Chinese strategic goals as well as the international strategic zeitgeist. In the intervening decades, American unipolarity has receded, China has emerged as an expansionist great power, and a security dilemma between India and China has gradually emerged and then exacerbated at the LAC. Even as the primary question remained in the backburner, growing mistrust led to attempts at shifting the LAC–at first tactically (2006-2020) and since 2020 strategically. Since May 2020, China has attempted to shift the LAC westwards for greater strategic depth and to control the security dilemma from a stronger vantage point.

In such a context, does India still have the luxury to overlook the primary question? Should India limit itself to merely addressing the unfavorable shifts in the status quo at the LAC since 2020? Given that the LAC was understood to be a temporary arrangement in lieu of a final agreement, can India's active position be limited only to the preservation of the LAC? Or, should it try to achieve a national consensus on the primary question (swap deal) even as it resists Chinese misadventures across the LAC in the shorter term. This question has become greatly pertinent because the eventual outcome of the ongoing stand-off will have a great bearing on any final resolution. Furthermore, the original question (a modified swap agreement) could itself play a part in stand-off termination.

A CLEAR ROADMAP

The ideal guarantee against inadvertently signaling weakness is appropriate attention to military capabilities and a modification of the existing balance of power in India's favour.

A clarity on this question confers several advantages to India.

It would discipline India's employment of military leverages and power. The power to make peace, after all, complements the power to make war and vice versa. India's military buildup could then be aimed at both short to medium term deterrence as well as creating a military balance that favours a peaceful resolution based on the three mutuals as enunciated by India's External Affairs Minister.

Clarity would also prevent the intensification of dangerous escalatory dynamics between India and China by reminding participants that a larger peaceful off-ramp is still theoretically available. India could also claim the higher moral ground, given that Delhi has a peace plan and an ability to make the grand bargain. Chinese provocations and belligerence in light of the same would only hurt Beijing's cause, morale and reputation.

Defining the parameters of a new swap arrangement would also entail delineation and demarcation, thus in turn removing opportunities for Beijing to engage in indefinite expansion of claims and military pressure into the future.

In other words, the ability to present and then stomach the political consequences of a new and realistic 'package deal' (if it actually comes to that) confers strong advantages to India regardless of China's immediate response or receptivity to the same. It prepares India to efficiently exploit windows of opportunity to settle the

border along favourable lines, when they emerge. India-China competition in the Indian Ocean Region as well as in South Asia is likely to continue even subsequent to a theoretical boundary agreement. However, such a competition is likely to be more manageable (and thereby sustainable) with an agreed upon border between the rivals than with an interim line that has over time struggled to retain its sanctity.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

Despite the clear advantages, there are some costs and risks. Firstly, a national consensus behind a package deal could signal weakness to Beijing. Secondly, a consensus could move the nation towards a position of irreversibly forsaking territorial claims over Aksai Chin. However, there are pathways towards addressing such concerns. The ideal guarantee against inadvertently signalling weakness is appropriate attention to military capabilities and a modification of the existing balance of power in India's favour. This is arguably the aim of India's ongoing civil-military efforts. Hence, timing will be key and an approach towards China during a disadvantageous period will have to be avoided. This concern only further reinforces the need to pay attention to military preparedness and does not weaken the rationale for a new consensus.

The second concern and risk is comparatively weaker. This is because Indian decision-makers do not consider the takeover of Aksai Chin to be a realistic possibility or even very desirable in its own right. Forsaking what one does not possess and most likely never will (same logic applies to Chinese claims over Arunachal and Tawang) does not count as a prohibitively forbidding cost– especially compared to the gains and advantages.

A clear enunciation of India's interests and hence its ability to partake in a fair swap agreement will centre greatly on national opinion, the quality of media and public debates, as well as a bi-partisan national consensus. This is, in essence, a larger democratic conversation and one whose time has come. ■

Souza presents a version of The Last Supper that is a religious commentary and a profound exploration of the human condition.

F.N. Souza And The Last Supper: Religion Reimagined

Jonathan Koshy Verghese

A few months ago, a controversial tableau from the Paris Olympics' opening ceremony—a provocative portrayal of Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper (1495-98)—faced significant criticism for its perceived mockery of a widely revered symbol of Christian iconography. The recurring theme in all criticisms was the bold interpretation of what is a household, albeit a dominant scene in Christian myth.

The episode from the opening ceremony, along with the ensuing debates, underscored the importance of artists and their role in manoeuvring visual culture. The ceremony sparked a debate on interpretation and its boundaries.

Leonardo da Vinci had made the episode a fixture in every household. He captured a moment of divine resignation—a god who chose to die as a man. It was no ordinary death, after all. The death belonged to a punitive scheme, a punishment for a Jew who challenged and subverted the foundations of Judaism. Da Vinci's Christ was condemned to death for his daring interpretation of Moses' laws and his bold questioning of traditions that belied institutions. In response to his defiance, the Jewish priests clamoured for his blood. Vinci's Christ, facing impending death, exudes fortitude. His disciples' varied expressions highlight the sacrifice's impact.

The painting is an interpretation, albeit the most famous interpretation. Before Vinci, we had Andrea del Castagno (1421-1457) and Dieric Bouts (1415-1475). In the 2024 ceremony, Thomas Jolly took the stage, invoking the richness of diversity and the joy of feasting, inviting us to grasp the enduring habit of representing gods alongside abundance, of which food was a metaphor. He shifted the focus from Christ to Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and revelry. In a nod to his critics, Jolly declared that at the heart of the much-maligned tableau was Dionysus, father of Sequana, goddess of the Seine. Christianity was supplanted by paganism. The critics, especially the Church, had not anticipated this.

The daring and, perhaps, the willingness to interpret religion is at the heart of this essay.

Francis Newton Souza, a founding member of the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group, is known as one of India's most provocative modern artists for his bold exploration of religious themes. The noted British art critic Edwin Mullins called him a "dedicated vulgarian," while Christopher P. Wood hailed him as India's first modern artist. Souza always intended to disrupt and provoke.

Among his works, The Last Supper (1990) is a striking interpretation that merges the sacred with the profane, deconstructing traditional religious iconography to express his views on power and human frailty. Souza treats the subject of divinity boldly. In his Crucifixion (1959), Christ is defaced. The underlying violence of the theme is barely concealed, and Christ's disfiguration is a commentary on the human capacity for violence.

The reasons may have been personal. One can likely trace Souza's relationship with Christianity to his upbringing in a devout Roman Catholic household in Goa and his later disillusionment with the institutional aspects of the Church. Much like James Joyce, Souza's Catholicism was marked by rebellion. He used his profound understanding of Christian theology and

ritual to challenge the Church's moral authority. If betrayal is at the heart of Souza's The Last Supper, it may be that he saw Christ's betrayal by one of the apostles as a reflection of his own disillusionment with the religious institutions he once revered but later came to view as hypocritical and corrupt. The disillusionment distorts everyone except Christ. In Christ, perhaps, Souza saw the only figure that could be salvaged.

Souza's use of distortion echoes Picasso's radical Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907), while the imposing "vulgarity" is a likely homage to de Kooning's Woman series from the 1950s. Picasso transformed our relationship with perception, while de Kooning, alongside the Abstract Expressionists, helped establish New York as the epicentre of the Western art world. Souza embraced vulgarity and provocation as foundational elements of his vision for modern Indian art. Souza introduced Western modernism's violent and distorted aesthetics into the newly formed nation.

In this sense, it is a testament to Souza's commitment to freedom of expression and modernism. Souza, a pivotal figure in the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group (1947), worked alongside M.F. Husain, Akbar Padamsee, and Tyeb Mehta.

In Souza's canvas, one of Christianity's most revered themes is reimagined through harsh brush strokes. He strips the figures of their saintly facade, decisively grounding them in the human condition. The apostles are grotesque, their bodies and faces exaggerated and contorted, imbued with a sense of suffering and anguish. Souza emphasises their imperfections, their angular features suggestive of inner turmoil and existential anxiety. The apostles are not saintly figures but flawed, fallible men, personifying the tensions between spiritual aspiration and human shortcomings.

This distortion mirrors the artist's longstanding interest in the dualities of human experience—piety and sin, divinity and baseness, sanctity and the physical body. Christ is no longer the ethereal, composed figure often celebrated in Christian iconography. The scene is claustrophobic. Instead, we see a Christ burdened by the weight of impending betrayal. God in Souza's painting is pensive and restrained with an underlying promise of aggression. By distorting the figures and imbuing the scene with emotional intensity, Souza presents a version of The Last Supper that is a religious commentary and a profound exploration of the human condition.

Souza is a Christian questioning Christianity.

This brings us to another aspect of Souza and his role in India. He was a minority who boldly critiqued and commented on his own religion. Considering the times, this was a daring choice. Souza, an Indian artist, embraces a religion often seen as a Western import to the subcontinent. Yet, he defies this narrative by making Christianity uniquely his own.

This is not the first time such reclamations surfaced in the subcontinent's history. The Syrian Christian community of Kerala offers a striking example of a defiant reclamation of faith. While Charles Buchanan's Christian Researches (1806) cleared the path for the Anglican-Protestants' mission to craft obedient Protestant subjects for the Empire, this initiative collided with a faith tradition far older and more resilient, one that had long resisted outside attempts to reshape its identity.

In the early stages, the Protestant mission was met with a degree of curiosity. However, the Syrian Christians soon stood firm, asserting their autonomy. As tensions mounted, the community fractured along the lines of religious reform, culminating in a landmark legal case in 1879. With quiet defiance, the Syrian Christians reminded the Empire that Christianity was not theirs to claim.

Seen as such, Souza's emerges as an anticolonial reassertion – a "painting" back to the Empire. His uniquely personalised and distorted interpretation of The Last Supper emerges as a defiant act—a bold assertion of one's right to reinterpret religion. Even in an era marked by the rise of majoritarianism, he remained undeterred in his exploration of identity, challenging conventions and embracing the complexity of his beliefs. Souza's painting emphasises that religion is not immune to critique and reimagination. ■

Culture

The Shifting Sands Of Migration And Memory: The Indo-Gulf Story In Cinema

A review of Aadujeevitham - The Goat Life

Devika Makkat

If you grew up in coastal Malabar in the early 2000s, like I did, you too would have been hard-pressed to find a family without a loved one in "the Gulf".

The "suffering rich" is what Kerala's Gulf migrants are often called. It is a reference to the endeavour's nature as simultaneously aspirational, a status symbol, a ladder to social mobility, yet a necessary evil. The overwhelming narrative of sacrifice associated with Gulf migration has a long memory – one that has not quite moved on from the notions of separation and distance that coloured the early migrant experiences of the 70s. It persists in popular imagination as the sacrificial voyage to the promised land of prosperity. In the span of time when I went from having friends' fathers working in the Gulf to childhood friends working in the Gulf, the more things have changed, the more they have remained the same.

Take, for instance, Blessy's *Aadujeevitham* – The Goat Life, an adaptation of the popular 2008 Malayalam novel by Benyamin. It narrates the real-life story of Najeeb Mohammad of Haripad, Kerala, who has to leave behind his mother and pregnant wife to work at a company in Saudi Arabia. Upon arrival in Riyadh, he is abducted by an Arab man he believes to be his work sponsor and ends up a bonded labourer at a livestock farm in the desert. Over 3 years, Najeeb is held captive at gunpoint and the threat of physical abuse, tending to the goats, increasingly becoming one among them in his isolation and dehumanisation. Tracing Najeeb's arduous journey to freedom, the movie is a lasting testament to the promise of migration—and an ode to the thousands who have fallen through the cracks of the systems governing international migration.

It's why Benyamin's telling of Najeeb's story captured the popular imagination when it first came out. It lent voice to the seedy underbelly of Gulf migration, which, while all too familiar to the expats, was a far cry from its glamorous popular perception. Yet Goat Life is only the latest in a long line of popular Malayalam movies that have explored the state's Gulf migration.

The zeitgeist of the 1980s and 90s decidedly tended toward the Gulf region as a beacon of hope for Kerala's economic challenges and high youth unemployment. Films of the time, such as *Nadodikkattu* (1987) and *Varavelpu* (1989), effectively captured the frustrations of young men who viewed the Gulf as their salvation. However, the 2000s witnessed an increasing reckoning with the darker realities of migrant life. A slew of movies—from *Perumazhakkalam* (2004), *Arabikatha* (2007), *Gaddama* (2011) to most recently, C U Soon (2020)—highlighted an array of issues faced by migrants in the Gulf, shining a light on the severe penalties faced by Malayali prisoners languishing in Gulf jails, the working conditions of blue-collar migrants, and the particular vulnerabilities of female migrants to trafficking and sexual abuse. But perhaps the most demonstrative example of this reckoning is the popular investigative reality TV show *Pravasalokamor* - World

A still from the film trailer on YouTube. The movie is streaming on Netflix India

of Expatriates, which, starting in 2000, documented and sought out Malayalis gone missing or incommunicado in the Gulf region. Malayalam cinema has delved into nearly every facet of the Gulf migrant experience, wherein we locate The Goat Life amongst the most acute manifestations.

The Good, Bad And The Ugly

The Kerala-Gulf corridor is among those rare exchanges in modern-day global migration that have transformed the social landscape of the parties involved in the span of a couple of generations.

The Kerala-Gulf corridor is among those rare exchanges in modern-day global migration that have transformed the social landscape of the parties involved in the span of a couple of generations.

The Arabian Sea has always been Kerala's window out into the world, as the surviving dhows of Beypore would testify. Gulf migration from Kerala as we know it today exploded in the 70s after the oil boom, fundamentally altering the state's cultural and economic fabric. Remittances became a mainstay of the economy, facilitated massive upward mobility across social strata, and overturned a feudal economy already under strain from revolutionary forces. The prosperity it brought peppered the countryside. Today, its presence is everywhere in Kerala – from religious life, to the proliferation of Arabian *Mandhi* restaurants, and the only comprehensible reason a narrow strip on the Western coast, merely a sixth the size of Uttar Pradesh, has 4 international airports. In that way, the Gulf story is decidedly one of financial liberation. Today, Kerala is also the land of golden visas and the origin story of its most notable millionaires.

But, as the books and movies of recent decades highlight, there are also darker realities behind the "instant" riches of the Gulf. The vagaries of the *Kafala* system – with its stringent employment terms that leave migrants vulnerable to exploitation – have long been quietly acknowledged in Kerala. It acquired global scrutiny more recently in the background of Qatar's

2022 FIFA World Cup. The tournament triggered international concerns regarding the living and working conditions of the blue-collar immigrants, primarily from South Asia and North Africa, who were constructing the tournament infrastructure. The laws have seemingly improved since Najeeb's days – albeit the only temporal indication in the movie is a passing mention that the Kuwait war had just taken place the previous year, placing Najeeb's ordeal beginning sometime in 1992. The Goat Life has particularly stark portrayals of the difficulties posed by the *Kafala* system as a product of both loopholes within the system and institutional structures.

The movie also provides a glimpse into the informal networks that then come up in place. At the end of his great escape, Najeeb collapses next to a Malayalam signboard – "Malabar Hotel", where he is rescued by its owner, referred to as Kunjikka. A bystander jokingly notes how all who find themselves in precarious situations in the Gulf eventually find their way to him. The figure of Kunjikka is a ubiquitous presence in Malayalam cinema and expat narratives - the elderly migrant who provides shelter, community, and, if necessary, escape for recent immigrants who find themselves alone in a strange land.

The Gulf migrant population continues to be a significant stake for India in a volatile region – the foundation of its relations with the Arab states and the central rationale of the area as its extended neighbourhood. However, despite the sheer volume of Indian migrants in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, it has rarely been the emotive issue on the negotiating table that one would imagine it would be. As the criticality of bilateral ties increases, so does the need to preserve the relationship against disruptions. Remittances and Gulf migration still form a major pillar in India's economy and are currently the primary hope of its famed demographic dividend. Consequently, issues like Najeeb come to inhabit the complex grey areas at the intersection of inter-state relations and heavy human elements, untouched in the service of larger leverages.

From Sand to Snow

Of course, Gulf migration from Kerala has dipped significantly since its heydays. Keralites increasingly emigrate to other countries in the Western world - the US, UK, Canada, and Australia. The Kerala Migration Survey 2023 recorded a 10% dip in the share of Gulf countries in Kerala's emigrants between 1998 and 2023. Rising numbers of student emigrants, amidst a decline among other demographics, mostly do not prefer GCC countries for their higher education and are likely driving this shift. While significantly more difficult to emigrate to than the Gulf, these non-GCC countries offer citizenship to migrants, posing considerably different sociological changes than the Gulf.

Nonetheless, even as the landscapes change, the narratives remain.

The protracted nature of Najeeb's suffering is at the core of The Goat Life, albeit so acute that most cannot relate. What it really taps into, then, is the sense of displacement and alienation central to all migration narratives. The Goat Life is steeped in visuals of the endless expanse of Arabia's sandy deserts and their crushing loneliness. In the spirit of the changing times, the 2021 Malayalam movie *Jan.E.Man* opens to visuals of the endless expanse of Canada's cold, snow-covered northern terrains and their echoing loneliness. This is an imagery that resonates with and is deeply intuitive to the average Malayali. Malayalam cinema and Gulf expat narratives are filled with evocative imagery of the stark difference the deserts of the Gulf present to the homeland. The nostalgia for and romanticising Kerala's green, shaded by lanes, ever-looming monsoon, and overflowing rivers, is central to the Malayali migrant's existential displacement. In the opening shots of the Goat Life, we see what initially appears to be the night sky but is revealed to be water—still, confined, and reflective. It is a trough Najeeb is drinking out of, along with the goats. As Najeeb surrenders deeper and deeper into his dehumanisation, the playful rivers and raindrops of Kerala stop making their appearance. All that remains is parched existence and the shifting sand dunes trying to tell time - in his desert, even when it rains, it is hail. ■

Middle East

In the Middle East, India Is Both A fox And A Hedgehog

Bashir Ali Abbas

In the spring of 1978, as Israeli armoured vehicles rolled into Southern Lebanon to eject militants from the Palestine Liberation Organization, Rikhi Jaipal, the Indian delegate at the United Nations Security Council found himself in a curious position.

With the Council debating a draft resolution to call on Israel to withdraw, and establish what would become the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, Jaipal sparred with the Israeli delegate (Chaim Herzog) on India's criticism of Israel's comments at the UN defending its actions in Lebanon. "By what right does he lecture us? By right of the fact that in 1975 his government's forces chose to cross the border of the Kingdom of Sikkim…and annex – no more and no less that kingdom…?" Herzog asked.

India's response was firm – that Sikkim became an integral part of India through self-determination and Indian forces were present due to long-existing treaty arrangements; "It was because Sikkim was our protectorate that Indian defence forces entered Sikkim in 1948, and not, as Ambassador Herzog said, in 1975. He is only 27 years out of date in this regard," Jaipal added.

While this was a time sensitive exchange triggered by Israel's actions in Lebanon, it contained the leitmotif of India's larger approach to the Middle East.

India simply reacted to regional developments and adjusted its position accordingly

The Palestinian question was still potent in the Arab world, with memories of the 1973 OPEC crisis still fresh. Less than a year after Jaipal's confrontation with Herzog, the Iranian Shia revolution upturned the Middle Eastern chess board, giving the Sunni Arab states a non-Israel threat to worry about and allowing them to hand the fight for Palestine over to Palestinians.

"For the first time, an Arab capital was being besieged and the resistance was being mounted not by an Arab army, but by a popular movement. People tried to volunteer, they tried to demonstrate, but in almost every case they were prevented

from doing so by their governments," Thomas Friedman wrote for the New York Times in November 1982, as Israel invaded Lebanon a second time.

THE STORMY PRESENT

46 years since 1978, India's position on Palestine remains firm – but everything around it has changed.

As Israel invaded Lebanon a fourth time, while having killed over 42,000 in Gaza in response to Hamas' October, 2023 terror attacks (which killed 1,200), India's response reflects decades of learning and adapting.

Across the year since last October, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has been vociferous in reiterating India's support for the two-state solution and the necessity of Palestinian sovereignty for enduring peace. Israel on the other hand has moved farther away from the two-state solution, with its Knesset overwhelmingly voting against Palestinian statehood in July. How does one reconcile this fundamental divergence with India's burgeoning relations with Israel?

It is easy to take the latter as the major change in India's Middle East policy across the last year. However, the former proves that the sources of change lie elsewhere. In reality, there is remarkable continuity in India's Middle East policy, and its approach to the region has been shaped by the region itself.

It is counter-productive to think of dualities in India's strategic calculus (Arabs vs Israel/Iran, ideology vs interests, etc). These states have evolving internal and external dynamics and it is difficult to argue that India sacrificed interests at the altar of ideology in the past. India simply reacted to regional developments and adjusted its position accordingly, whether with the secular nationalist regimes in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, or with the six Islamic monarchies in the Gulf, led by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

A MIDDLE PATH

New Delhi's Middle East policy then is best defined through what can be termed 'strategic passivity'. Passivity here does not imply a lack of proactiveness. It is passive in that it nourishes a set of strategic interests, but adapts the expression of these interests based on external and internal changes in the region. It is strategic in that it leaves India with enough room to manoeuvre and take advantage of regional changes without any accountability that would have accrued had it sought to actively shape Middle Eastern politics.

The intensity of India's engagement with Israel then, has always depended less on India's position on Palestine, and more on the degree of opening offered by the Gulf Arab states.

Hence, India is both close enough to the Middle East, and yet far enough. India is intimate with Middle Eastern leaders across geopolitical aisles, but not enough to leverage this intimacy and bring them together to resolve regional crises. In a way, this serves New Delhi well. Indian policymakers recognize the complex web of actors in the region, and moderate and modulate their engagement with the three main poles (Israel, Iran, and Gulf Arab states), while recognizing the limits to India's ability to actively shape their politics.

The definitive interests vis-à-vis the Middle East has not just been India's principled position on Palestine, but also efforts to reduce Arab incentives to support Pakistan's position on Kashmir, garnering support on the issue of terrorism, steady oil supply to meet Indian energy demands, and the well-being of the substantially sized Indian diaspora in Arab states. These interests formed the foundation on which India built its strategic passivity.

Each global and regional event gave India more room to leverage its strategic passivity and slowly engage with all three poles. As Arab leaders grew weary of regional conflicts (having moved far away from military engagement with Israel), worried about Iranian nuclearization, and began to view Pakistan as more of a liability than an asset, key hurdles to India's greater engagement with these states began to be diluted.

The intensity of India's engagement with Israel then, has always depended less on India's position on Palestine, and more on the degree of opening offered by the Gulf Arab states. For perspective, consider a 2013 speech made by the then Indian EAM, Salman Khurshid: "Our past commitment to Palestine was a commitment that came devoid of any relationship with Israel. Our present-day commitment to Palestine comes with a very meaningful relationship with Israel."

Khurshid's statement arguably reflected a policy that India adopted from the moment it established diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992. However, the bilateral relationship did not have enough substance to be deemed an actual strategic partnership.

A QUIET REVOLUTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

When the guard changed in Delhi in 2014 and the Narendra Modi-led government took the reins with a full majority in Parliament, a quiet revolution was also steadily underway in the royal courts at Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Successfully navigating court politics and almost Byzantine succession battles, two princes began changing the Saudi and Emirati outlook towards Israel more overtly than ever before. Fiercely focused on economic diversification away from oil and on making their states the top investment destinations of the world, Mohammad bin Salman and Mohammad bin Zayed (24 years older than MBS) soon became the de-facto rulers of Saudi Arabia and UAE; MBS officially became the Saudi heir apparent in 2017 and MBZ took over the Emirati Presidency in 2022.

The efforts of these leaders to engage Israel with a focus on economic cooperation and regional integration, set in motion a regional reset that allowed India a window to leverage its strategic passivity to significantly expand its ties with both Israel as well as Arab states, especially the UAE. Few things reflect this more than the fact that the Emirates became one among the most-visited destinations by Prime Minister Modi.

The unprecedented watershed that was the evolution in Arabia's Israel policy, cannot be overstated, and India presented itself as a partner that has the framework to engage with all actors, having strategically waited in the wings. India even nourished its Chabahar-specific partnership with Iran despite it being moth-ridden due to Tehran's nuclear programme and the international sanctions regime.

The correlation between the Arabian and Indian attitudes is well evident.

For instance, 2017 is remembered as the year Modi became the first Indian premier to visit Israel (and Palestine in 2018). 2017 was also the year that MBS peppered global media with signs that he was open to engaging Israel, and a desire to extricate Saudi Arabia from the war-ridden politics of the Middle East. The Arab reset climaxed with the Abraham Accords in 2020, with Riyadh not joining it but inching closer to normalising ties with Israel. In the region, Iran was protesting this reset but not combating it. From here, India's strategic passivity took on new life.

The Middle East was now open for grander, proactive frameworks of cooperation (notwithstanding detractors like Erdogan-led Turkey). India threw itself into the fray with new regional economic and strategic initiatives, first with the I2U2 and then the IMEEC.

The strong Arab component in these initiatives with Israel and the United States was the crucial guard-rail that India has always sought. Similarly, in the absence of a breakdown in this guard-rail, India has little reason to re-re-orient ties with Israel – no matter the large-scale disruption since October 7th, 2023.

Very simply, since the larger Arab interest in resetting ties with Israel is proving to be enduring, India's own interest lies in pushing through with the IMEEC (which is the principal project affected by Israel's wars in Gaza and Lebanon). It is not insignificant that the language India deploys to showcase the IMEEC's progress is heavier with cooperation with Saudi Arabia and UAE, rather than other participating states.

Moreover, Arab states are now more respectful towards India's sensitivities on Kashmir, with major UAE companies crucial partners in developmental projects in the valley. Even in their bilateral engagements with Pakistan, these states do not megaphone Islamabad's position on Kashmir as they used to, outside of the OIC framework.

STICKING TO PRINCIPLES

It is no surprise then that India continues to voice support for the two-state solution and Palestinian sovereignty even as Israel moves away from it. Despite India's steady growth in ties with Israel across the last ten years, India has consistently voted in favour of the UN's recurring resolutions calling for Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territory – another instance of continuity.

India's sporadic abstentions are usually motivated by any qualifying factors that palpably look to force a solution (judicially or politically) without a negotiated settlement. There are no longer any face-offs between India and Israel at the UN like that between Jaipal and Herzog, as India's strategic passivity has allowed it to build enough buffer between its ties with Israel and the question of Palestinian statehood. Hence, it keeps the question of Palestine and the focus on countering terrorism in separate siloes.

The new disruption in the Middle East today threatens to upend the stability that all states worked towards before October 7th. Israel's expansion of the war even as global opinion is firmly set against it, its large-scale destruction in Gaza and Lebanon, and the magnitude of human lives lost, might just be the harbinger of more militancy in the region – giving a fresh platform for anti-Israel groups to consolidate despite their loss of leadership. In the long term, India's strategic passivity works best.

To borrow from Isaiah Berlin, in being strategic, India mimics the hedgehog – pushing through with regional connectivity plans and expecting a return to a pre-October 2023 stability. In being passive, India mimics the fox – waiting for the conflicting variables to resolve themselves organically, whether Iran's virulent anti-Israelism or Israel's resistance to a Palestinian state.

In the short term, India would do well to leverage its strategic passivity and call on Israel more explicitly to end the human tragedy unfolding in Gaza and rein in its war for which it faces global scrutiny and a charge of genocide at the World Court. ■

Folio

Reading The Writer: Avinash Paliwal

Bashir Ali Abbas
&
Sukanya Sharma

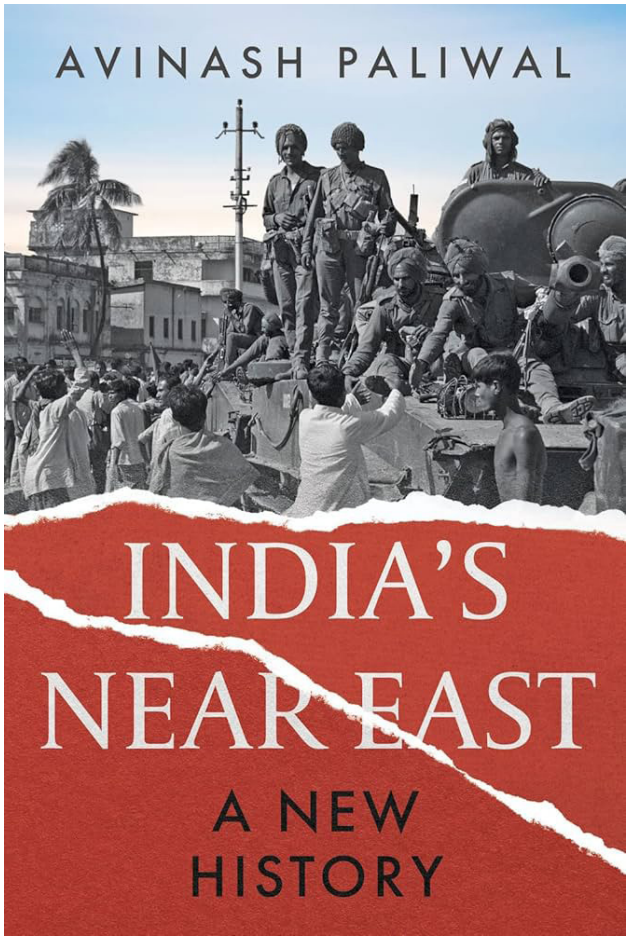
"India does not lose a neighbour. The question is if India can manage its neighbourhood effectively or not."

As two wars continue to destabilise Asia and Europe, and its reverberations are felt across the global economy, India has had to also face trouble closer to home.

With the old structures and perspectives that have long defined South Asia fading away, New Delhi's neighbourhood has been grappling with domestic political and economic churn.

None, perhaps, hit India harder than the downfall of the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government in Dhaka, which exacerbates the crisis in India's near east that, in recent times, began with the civil war in Myanmar. With echoes of the rapid turn of events in Kabul in 2021, India now has to navigate the uncertainties of a new regime in Dhaka – one seemingly poised to test India's comfort in its own neighbourhood. Few are better placed to illuminate these complexities than Dr. Avinash Paliwal, whose latest book, India's Near East: A New History, a masterly survey of how domestic happenings both in India and its Eastern neighbours shaped their bilateral interactions, was published just before Hasina's sudden ejection from Dhaka.

"You can ask me absolutely anything," assured Avinash warmly as he sat with Sukanya Sharma and Bashir Ali Abbas on November 4, 2024, at the Council for Strategic and Defence Research (CSDR) office in New Delhi, India. Dr. Paliwal kept his word as we explored Bangladesh's complex and changing political dynamics and the impact such changes could have on India in this intriguing and insightful conversation.



Why did you choose India's "near east" subject matter? Was the trigger historical commonalities or contemporary developments?

Having looked at India's neighbouring west in My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal and covered, at the very least, Afghanistan and Pakistan, I was in two minds about where to take this—further to the west, towards Iran and West Asia, or look at other areas.

That's where the desire to understand the dynamics of India's eastern neighbourhood came to my mind. Not because it has yet to be studied much but simply because this broader region tells how India came into being and developed. This region is much more nuanced and complex than India's relationship with Pakistan, its approach towards Kashmir, or India's broader strategic dynamics on Afghanistan. By complexity, I do not mean that it should not be studied or comprehended. There are a lot of different ideas that meet divergent realities, informal politics, and social life simultaneously. It is a region that has been partitioned, creating boundaries and borders, where there were none until 1947. I think that is where I got curious about India's eastern neighbourhood.

However, the partition of India's East is less readily recalled despite its lingering effects compared to 1947. Why is that?

This is more an issue of public imagination in India than of experience and scholarship. Pakistan and Kashmir are more foregrounded in public memory and for a good reason, historically. What we are seeing today in the east is a replay of various dynamics that emerged during Bengal's partition in 1905. The 1947 dynamics are traced back to the memory of 1905. And that has been playing ad nauseam until today in different shapes. Even now, India's reaction to a crisis in Bangladesh, for example, the recent Sheikh Hasina's ousting, is anxiety. Sitting outside India, it could almost seem like a case of muscle memory rather than actual anxiety based on grounded evidence. There is a lot of pressure on the interim government in Dhaka on the issue of Hindu minorities. That is a prime real-time example of how historical public memory plays out in an ongoing crisis.

There is clearly a general democratic backsliding in the neighbourhood of the world's largest democracy, likened to a 'ring of fire'. How has this affected our relations with Bangladesh and Myanmar?

In its neighbourhood, India does not promote democracy in its true sense. Democracy promotion, as is understood in the West, is not only flawed but a failed concept. India prefers participatory politics that offers some semblance of social and political stability in multi-ethnic societies. That's the norm across political parties in India. Hence, India is, in some sense, 'regime agnostic'. If you get a strong leader in your neighbourhood who can better secure your national interest and is open to key principles of participatory politics, then you've struck gold. Even if they are not "democratic" as India understands it but can respect India's concerns, that's good enough.

Sheikh Hasina was precisely that until India burned its fingers. In the late 80s and early 90s, India felt that supporting democratic electoral processes in its neighbourhood would not necessarily lead to better strategic outcomes in India. One of the few credible elections in Bangladesh, in 1991, brought the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to power, which was driven by anti-India populism. In Myanmar, the 1990 elections were entirely rejected by the junta.

I would say the foremost thing is ensuring that India has a stable neighbourhood–preventing conflict spillover and maintaining national security. If these two elements are

addressed, connectivity, trade, and infrastructure could follow with participatory politics. That is the hierarchy.

But is India now in turbulent waters as a regional power?

Power and successful application of power are two very different things. Just because India faces the "ring of fire" does not mean it is not a power in the region. Inflating the two would be an error of judgement. India still commands a very important position. I know that might not look like it with the rise of China and Chinese finances, but it's very apparent that keeping Pakistan aside, the relatively smaller neighbours hold India in good faith. Sure, that may change in the future. But in a military and social sense, the equities that India enjoys in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan are way ahead of what the Chinese enjoy. That has to be recognised.

India's continuing refuge to Sheikh Hasina has brought back a "friends vs interests" debate. Is India friends with Sheikh Hasina more than it is friends with Bangladesh?

I would be very cautious using words like "friends". I think India does not have a choice but to support Sheikh Hasina. She has been a very long-trusted ally, and not supporting her now would be odd. At the same time, India has also been able to talk to others. It is, however, always better to foresee these things and try to pre-empt or prevent such violent transitions of power.

> **India is in some sense, 'regime agnostic'. If you get an authoritarian figure in your neighbourhood who is better able to secure your national interest and is able to deliver political stability using participatory politics, then you've struck gold.**

Even if not a big supporter of democracy, a peaceful transition of power, at a bare minimum, is in India's interest. And that is where India is struggling in its neighbourhood. Whenever such transitions happen, the emotions in India are heightened. This creates a corrosive level of tension for India almost every time. And that is not necessarily a very healthy thing to have, especially when you have great power aspirations.

Has India lost Bangladesh?

India cannot lose Bangladesh. India is actively engaging with the interim government. One can argue about India's trust levels with the interim government or their views on Chief Adviser Mohammed Yunus's leadership. That does not mean India is aloof from Bangladesh. Geographically, history is witness that it is not possible. The question is if India can manage its neighbourhood effectively or not, rather than 'losing' a neighbour.

Is the ousting of Sheikh Hasina from power the principal cause of minority attacks in Bangladesh, or are there larger underpinnings?

The Bangladeshi Hindus, as a community, had a stronger political contract with the Awami League as a party. There was a recognition that this community needed protection and space to flourish. The events of 5th August broke that political contract because one side of that deal was now out of power. So the community's fear is real, palpable, and has been recognised by everyone.

For the interim government, I think the contours of that contract are becoming clearer, at least in a political sense. The interim government wants to offer support and protection to the Hindu minorities. They spoke about it.

They have done deeds to protect the community, and so have the other political parties, but there remains acute anxiety about the community's well-being. We saw attacks against the minority communities, not just Hindus, but Ahmediyas and Buddhists in the initial weeks after the regime collapsed when there was a complete breakdown of law and order. How the newly elected government will treat the minority community, and what the new political contract will be, is an open question.

What is the future of the Awami League? Hasina is in India. Where is her party?

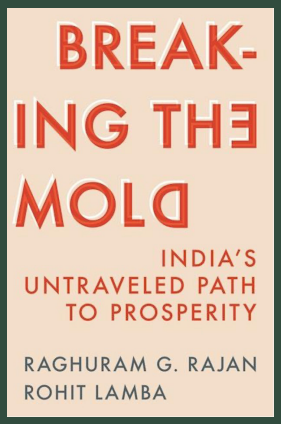
Presently there is a disarray because the Awami League does not have leaders. They are being targeted, hounded, and persecuted. There is a lot of anger among the Bangladeshi public and a political outrage against the Awami League; pent-up against 15 years' worth of excesses.
I do not think it will be able to resurrect itself in its original form in the interim period. It will take some time for political tempers to calm down, or maybe some other issues to come into the fold. That being said, I do not think the Awami League is out of political play in Bangladesh. The party enjoys certain ground, because of the patronage that they offered to certain communities and people.

Should India look to influence the process of creating a new political order in Bangladesh? How does it speak to India's grand strategy in its neighbourhood if there is one?

India is a regional interlocutor, whether it likes it or not. So, India is already influencing the process. India is not a regional, but a domestic part of life in Bangladesh, in a sense. But this role is a serious problem for India. Because it is deeply unpopular in Bangladesh for exactly the same reasons Hasina has been ousted. For India to do that juggling act, to be both, a benign actor and an influencing element, it has to get over its own anxiety, and support and improve its image on the ground.

Very few countries have a grand strategy. India at least has a vision 2047 but I'm always sceptical when things go grand, and that's simply because it is the process, the lived experience that is often of much more value and creates long term positive equities, and sensibilities among your neighbours than having grand strategic ideals that have to be pursued. ■

Avinash Paliwal PhD is Reader in International Relations at SOAS University of London. He is the author of India's Near East: A New History (2024) and My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal (2017) both published by Hurst. Avinash can be found in a squash court, jazz bar, or a London pub when not writing a book or raising a child.



Breaking the Mould: Reimagining India's Economic Future

Raghuram Rajan and Rohit Lamba

In a lucid book with a widely accessible style, Rajan and Lamba press the reader to imagine an alternative development path for India. If the country's policymakers could create "enabling frameworks," they argue, then the world's most underleveraged but equally potent human capital will deliver.

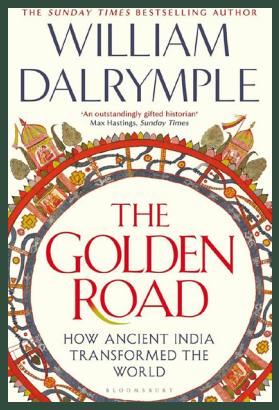
The book is, in great part, powered by the 'smile curve,' which visualizes the nature of a modern-day product's global supply chain – where value-added in the service sector (start and end segments) far exceeds that in the manufacturing sector (middle segment). Consider this: the company that manufactures the iPhone is Foxconn ($50 billion), not Apple ($3 trillion) – which merely researches, designs, markets, and adds digital services (Apple Store, etc.) to it. Yet, the market capitalization of Foxconn is less than sixty times that of Apple!

Can manufacturing then sustain India's growth story? The authors do not just reply in the negative but ask the reader to ponder upon the quality of growth India should seek simultaneously. The glory, for them, lies in the pursuit of progressive development – characterized by high social equity and strong social security.

Inadvertently, the sheer ambition of the book opens it up to contentious debate and counter-arguments. For instance, the authors rightly point out that, despite a decade of focus on "Make in India," domestic value-addition has been far less than desirable. However, the Indian imperative to spend on manufacturing today is equally about the pursuit of economic security in an era of deglobalization and massive trade deficits with China.

Even in the fascinating last chapter, where the authors have an imagined conversation with their naysayers, the authors inadequately address this need, detracting from the force of their related arguments.

Nevertheless, the book's shortcomings pale compared to its vision, and anyone interested in the future of India's story must consume and reflect upon its pages. ■



The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World

William Dalrymple

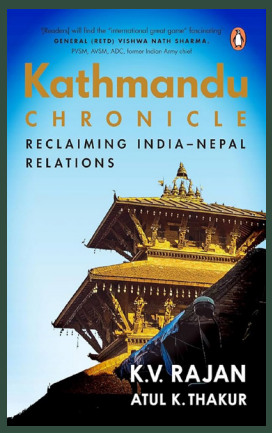
In The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World, William Dalrymple offers a sweeping, erudite account that repositions India—not China—as the fulcrum of ancient global trade through cultural and intellectual exchange.

Eschewing the conventional focus on the Silk Road, Dalrymple introduces the "Golden Road," a maritime network of trade routes that spanned from the Mediterranean to East Asia, with India at its heart. Over the course of more than a millennium, from 250 BCE to 1200 CE, he suggests, India had not only dominated commerce, supplying the world with luxury goods such as spices, ivory, and textiles, but also become a key conduit for the dissemination of ideas, particularly Buddhism, Hinduism, and mathematical innovations. This opportune network powered by the monsoon winds—extending across the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, and beyond he claims, was far more pivotal than the overland Silk Road in shaping the ideas of the ancient world.

Central to his argument is the concept of the "Indosphere," a cultural and economic sphere that highlights India's long-standing pluralism, with its mercantile spirit, philosophical advancements, and commitment to non-violence-shaping global thought. Dalrymple when tracing the spread of Indian culture and knowledge across Asia knits together the accounts of figures like the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, who traversed through the Indian subcontinent to study Buddhism, and the rise of Indian-influenced kingdoms in Southeast Asia, exemplified by the monumental temples of Borobodur and the Khmer monarchs who built Angkor Wat. Dalrymple deftly tethers Indian innovations—such as the decimal system and algebra to the foundations of modern Western thought, tracing the intriguing intellectual legacy of India, through mathematics, astronomy and philosophy.

While Dalrymple's storytelling remains vivid and accessible, The Golden Road occasionally lapses into a more detached, academic tone. It could also benefit from an extensive inspection of the reverberations of European colonialism and the decline of India's maritime dominance. Nonetheless, this ambitious work is a crucial corrective to the conformist historiography of Eurasian trade and cultural exchange, offering a fresh perspective on India's enduring influence on the world.

The Golden Road is a groundbreaking work that challenges prevailing narratives, reasserting India's centrality in shaping global history. It's a must-read for anyone interested in the complexities of cultural exchange and the evolution of human civilisation. ■



Kathmandu Chronicle: Reclaiming India-Nepal Relations

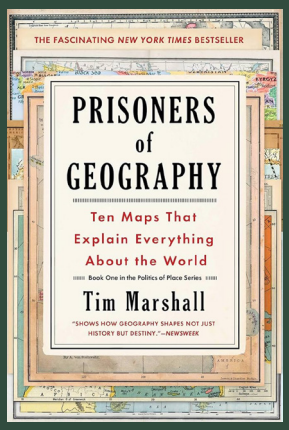
K.V. Rajan & Atul K. Thakur

Kathmandu Chronicle: Reclaiming India-Nepal Relations, co-authored by veteran Indian diplomat K.V. Rajan and policy expert Atul K. Thakur, presents an ingenuous and timely, multifaceted analysis of the advancing, yet often fatigued, dynamic between India and Nepal. Drawing from Rajan's vast diplomatic experience and Thakur's regional policy expertise, the book, structured in three distinct sections, weaves together personal diplomatic reflections, macroeconomic insights and historical perspectives, and policy recommendations to uncover the complexities of this bilateral relationship.

The authors navigate Nepal's political unfolding, from the monarchy's decline to the rise of a federal democratic republic, with elaborate illustrations of both—the internal dynamics and external pressures that are at play. Rajan's firsthand accounts and interpretations of Nepal's political upheavals and multi-party skirmishes, including the Maoist insurgency and the royal massacre, provide valuable context for understanding the inherent tensions that have shaped the India-Nepal alliance. The authors occasionally gloss over India's own missteps—particularly its role in the 2008 republican transition and the subsequent instability.

The book, replete with insightful diplomatic nuances that weave a rich tapestry of cultural and intellectual anecdotes throughout its archives, delves into the persistent irritants in the relationship and its repercussions, such as the contentious 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty, border disputes, and Nepal's increasingly complex ties with China. The authors argue for a shift in India's approach to Nepal—one that asserts economic cooperation, regional integration, and people-centred development rather than the traditional focus on security concerns. This approach, they suggest, is key for catering to Nepal's socio-economic anxieties and in turn addressing the growing distrust between the two neighbours.

Kathmandu Chronicle is a comprehensively curated examination of the thriving relationship between two countries bound by history, culture, and geography but severed by political complexities and strategic uncertainties. Rajan and Thakur's candid scrutiny of past mistakes, combined with their optimistic outlook for future cooperation, makes this book a notable contribution to the discourse on South Asian geopolitics. The authors' call for a more mature, cooperative relationship is compelling, as the book offers crucial insights for policymakers looking to steer through the delicate terrain of South Asian geopolitics. ■



Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics

Tim Marshall

In Prisoners of Geography, Tim Marshall presents a compelling analysis of how geography shapes geopolitical realities, exploring the interplay between natural landscapes and political strategies. Drawing on his extensive experience as a foreign affairs journalist, Marshall masterfully examines the world's geographic forces using ten maps to illuminate historical contexts, modern politics, and the constraints of physical geography in shaping global power dynamics.

The central thesis of the book posits that geography significantly determines a nation's behavior. Physical features such as mountains, rivers, deserts, and seas act as both barriers and enablers, influencing trade routes, military strategies, and political systems. Marshall emphasizes geography's pivotal role in guiding foreign policy, economic success, and national survival, framing it as an enduring force amid technological advances.

Marshall excels in making complex geopolitical discussions accessible. He illustrates how Russia's territorial ambitions, China's resource-driven strategies, and Africa's struggles for cohesion stem from geographic realities. For instance, for India, the Himalayas act as a natural buffer from China, while Tibet's role as a source of vital rivers underpins national security. Similarly, Marshall links the geopolitical importance of natural resources and trade routes to key global issues, such as the strategic value of the Suez Canal and the Arctic's melting ice unlocking new energy reserves and shipping routes.

By connecting contemporary conflicts to geographic factors, Marshall provides profound insights into issues like Ukraine's instability, Africa's developmental challenges, and Western Europe's historical dominance. Ultimately, Prisoners of Geography underscores the enduring relevance of geography in international relations, urging readers to recognize its influence in shaping the world. Marshall's lucid prose and rich historical context make this book a vital resource for understanding global geopolitics. ■

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Reading The Writer: T.V. Paul

Sukanya Sharma

"Can India obtain major power status with adequate international legitimacy in a peaceful manner?"

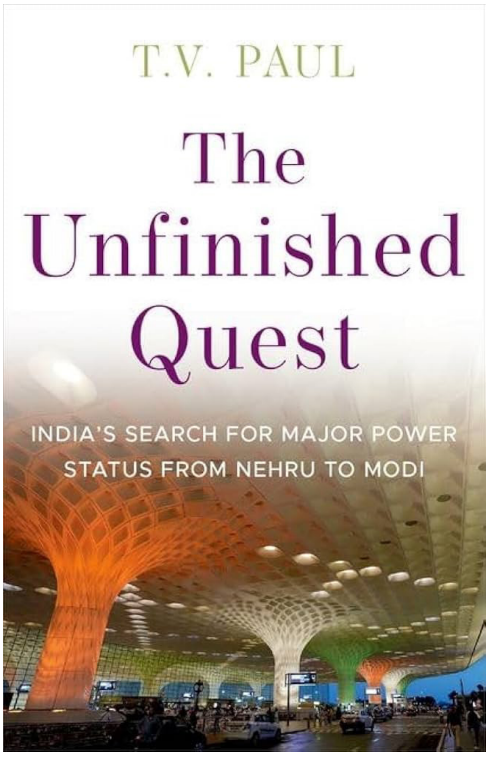
In the 2023 G20 summit, host nation–India's aspirational epithet *"Vishwa Guru"* (Global Leader), used domestically until now, reached the global stage. This quest to secure great power status has been a long-standing ambition for India that shapes its foreign policy, strategic decisions, and diplomatic posture.

In a world with fragmented power structures and crippling international institutions, India's quest to become a leading power is gaining momentum, as it continues to chart its path amid shifting global alliances and rising geopolitical tensions. While India's rise on the global stage is widely acknowledged, it remains an unfinished journey. To understand the complexities and challenges of India's path to great power status, we turn to the work of Prof. T.V. Paul, whose book The Unfinished Quest offers an in-depth analysis of India's aspirations and the broader geopolitical dynamics at play.

What does your book, The Unfinished Quest reveal about the possibility of India attaining great power status and the challenges it faces in gaining international legitimacy?

India's aspiration for great power status has been a long-standing topic of discussion. In The Unfinished Quest, I explore the complex journey, looking at both the historical and contemporary factors shaping India's rise. It is an in-depth yet comprehensive study of the socio-political roots of India's quest for major power status since Jawaharlal Nehru's Prime Ministerial stint. Analysts and political leaders have offered varying conceptions about India's ascension, but few have explored how the world views this rise.

I drew from literature on international relations, development, and social identity to bring an easily comprehensible read on India's quest for great power status. I studied historical moments when rising powers like India faced multiple debilitating challenges in their attempts to enter the "great power" club.
My larger question is: Can India obtain major power status with adequate international legitimacy in a peaceful manner in the foreseeable future?



What does India understand by "great power"? Are the public and state understandings aligned? Is the Indian knowledge of "great power" aligned with the global idea?

India's understanding of great power is inspired by European thought. However, this great power system is today seen as inequitable. Nations outside the "great power" bracket, and critics believe states to be juridically equal without hierarchical privileges–a marked difference from the norm established during European or American imperial eras. However, hierarchical privilege among states is still visible in international relations.

Post global wars, the victors were accepted and legitimised as great powers through membership in the Concert of Europe, the League Council, and the UN Security Council (UNSC) as part of post-war settlements. Therefore, barring a few, most great powers obtained their status through war. We have less scope of a power status being changed by war today. Yet, no proper mechanism to integrate new states peacefully is in place. One way to enhance such inclusion is to give rising powers a voice concomitant with their material advancements and aspirational goals in leading world forums.

As for public understanding in India, a prevalent discourse is that achieving great power status is automatic, and traditional hard power (military and aggregate economic indicators) and civilisational legacy would suffice. Intense nationalistic discourse in recent years may have reinforced such thought but often lacks proper critical analysis.

What is the most exciting aspect of India's quest for great power aspirations?

Given the layers to India's understanding of great power status and the challenges of achieving it in a constantly changing global order, I am most excited about India's rise when a war for power transition is unthinkable. Increase in tensions among major powers in recent years has challenged India's strategic navigation. Economic globalization, on the other hand, has benefited India tremendously. It is rare for a rising power to gain for as long as India has in the international market. Given the challenges that China is facing with the U.S., India's swing power status offers more opportunities than it ever had during the Cold War or immediately after.

The need to accommodate India in the established institutional mechanisms is finding recognition among most leading states, although there is yet to be a plan to achieve this. The biggest challenge is to have China accept India's claims or co-share status with India. This requires more diplomatic engagement with Beijing and other great powers.

How does India's role as a 'swing state' allow it to capitalise on said opportunities amid the ongoing power struggles between the U.S. and China?

Swing state mode works, at present, when the system is not sufficiently polarised. India's soft balancing and hedging strategies have seen some success thus far, but would need re-calibration if a Cold War-like situation crops up. In such a case, fence-sitting may be difficult (although not impossible). Although non-alignment was a swing power strategy, India inclined towards the Soviet side for security and balance of power demands. Today, the balance of power competition is not as intense based on hard balancing as it used to be. But a re-calibration is needed if a Cold War-like situation emerges considering the present U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relations, especially in the Trump era. It may be difficult for India to maintain its swing power role if Beijing and Washington become more aggressive toward each other and Washington becomes enmeshed in a Cold War containment mindset, which is already visible to some extent. But it is unlikely to develop into a typical bipolar system because there are multiple players, including India, with more agency than they had during the Cold War. This allows these states not to be simple proxies or pawns in this chess game between the U.S. and China.

If you could dictate one thing to achieve India's aspirations of great power, what would that be?

Making use of India's demographic dividend effectively on a war footing before it vanishes in two or three decades.

What key historical moments have shaped India's great power aspirations and have they changed over the decades?

Two pivotal events created and reinforced India's great power aspirations. The first was India missing a permanent seat at the Security Council during the latter's formation in 1945. Although Australia, Canada among others supported India's candidacy seat, Britain refused, affecting India's post-war status recognition. India still is not a member of the Security Council. Although the UNSC has failed in its core mission to maintain international security, it is a status symbol and has residual powers, especially during crises. The question is whether India, along with Japan, Germany, and Brazil, can enter the UNSC with or without veto power in future.

The second moment was in 1968 when the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) used the cut-off date of January 1, 1967, to create two categories of states: nuclear weapons-possessing states with special rights and non-nuclear states. India fell into the second category and had to wage an intense struggle against the non-proliferation regime and the P-5 because established nuclear powers were reluctant to new nuclear states gatecrashing their club. Dr. Manmohan Singh once told me, India escaped from this "nuclear apartheid" only in 2006 when he and President George W. Bush signed the nuclear accord.

What are some crucial milestones India needs to become a great power?

At a diplomatic level, the first milestone is to obtain Security Council membership, which would give India a prominent security and economic role. Becoming the third largest world economy will be another milestone, although the low per capita income pulls India's achievement down. A critical milestone will be India's ranking in UNDP's annual Human Development Index (HDI) moving down to below 50 from the abysmal current figure of 132, which would require substantial removal of poverty and improvements in the living conditions of the masses. Another milestone will be obtaining much higher returns from global trade and investment than it is today. A potential widening of U.S.-China, especially if President Trump puts considerably high tariffs on China, could make India more attractive to U.S. corporations. The question often asked is whether India has the infrastructure and skilled workforce to receive such a massive investment. Indian strategists and industrialists should work on this quickly and develop economic zones as China did under Deng and his successors to attract Western capital and multinational production facilities. Investment tied to export and higher employment should be India's key objective while maintaining higher environmental standards.

What is your next big project?

I continue to study status in international politics, especially because it relates to great powers and their conflicting behaviour. I have two ongoing projects. The first looks at what expectations leaders of great powers have of their adversaries' response when they initiate peaceful or confrontational strategies. I am taking a

historical lens and comparing yesteryear's Japan and Germany with today's China and Russia. I am also observing how the United States responds to the two challenges–China and Russia.

My second project is on the extraordinary violence that imperial and colonial powers inflicted upon secondary actors for status assertions. They often ruthlessly suppressed or engaged in killing the weaker party's populations and their infrastructure, for status and other calculations such as territory and resources. Modern-day great powers have continued this violent behaviour. American military interventions in Vietnam, Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine were motivated by hegemonic status assertions, generating immense challenges to the societies of the victims.

This incongruence is also partly because the second-ranking actors/states resist great power intimidations believing in the norms of justice, sovereign equality, territorial integrity, etc., while the great powers are still driven by the idea of 'spheres of influence.' I am interested in how the clash between these two norms, which varies from one historical era to another affects status. I will continue to think about India for future work as the country progresses or faces headwinds in the years to come. ■

T.V. Paul is a Distinguished James McGill Professor in the Department of Political Science at McGill University, Montreal, Canada and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He served as the President of the International Studies Association (ISA) from 2016-17. He is the Founding Director of the Global Research Network on Peaceful Change (GRENPEC). Paul is the author or editor of 24 books and over 80 scholarly articles/book chapters in the fields of International Relations, International Security, and South Asia.

Tibet

Democracy In Exile: The Uncertain Fate of the Tibetan People

Ankit Tiwari

"We may be the only people in the world who were handed democracy [by the Dalai Lama] top-down… We never asked for it…" a Tibetan scholar and former Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) official once told me, spotlighting how, for centuries, Tibetan society has been guided by the leadership of the Dalai Lama.

Considered a manifestation of *Avalokiteshvara*, the patron saint of Tibet, he exercises unparalleled political and spiritual power within Tibet; indeed, today's Tibetan society in exile and their movement at large remain dependent on the revered leader in a myriad of ways.

But as the current Dalai Lama nears the end of his time in the material world, a strongly perceptible sense of uncertainty hangs over the entire community as it ponders what might happen after he is gone. Will the community, for example, remain united after he has left this world? What challenges might it face? And could democracy ever replace divinity as the instrument of government in the future?

Every major Tibetan monastery has a counterpart built in India, which is accessible to anyone and helps foster cultural exchange across the Buddhist world.

A STATE WITHOUT A HOME

For a research field trip earlier this year, I visited many Tibetan settlements across the country, which seemed like a mini-civilization isolated into discrete pockets. A portrait of His Holiness hung in every shop and every house. The community-in-exile stood in stark contrast to the vast majority of the tragically dislocated around the world. Under the protective mantle of India, the Tibetans have taken refuge as a national polity rather than mere persecuted individuals forced to assimilate into a foreign national tradition.

Beyond the extraordinary preservation of their own culture, which enriches Indian society and contributes to the country's soft power abroad, they have simultaneously catalysed a cultural renaissance under the Dalai Lama's leadership within Indian/Himalayan Buddhism.

Every major Tibetan monastery has a counterpart built in India, which is accessible to anyone and helps foster cultural exchange across the Buddhist world. The Tibetan Government-in-Exile (or CTA) looks after them and the larger welfare of the settlements.

Yet a central fact remains: almost every Tibetan I met wants to go home, regardless of whether they were born and raised in India. The rest, who consider this country their home, want to visit at least and have meaningful access to their motherland.

"We are all united behind the movement, and there is no question of an end," a Students for Free Tibet (SFT) activist emphatically stated.

A ROAD TO NOWHERE?

Yet, when pressed, many fail to clearly explain what the 'movement' means today. The confusion is not surprising, when one considers the history of the cause.

In 1988, the Dalai Lama himself gave up on the Tibetans' right to self-determination (*Rangzen* or liberation) in the 'Strasbourg Proposal' delivered to the European Parliament. Instead, he adopted the *Umaylum* (or the Middle-Way) approach–which recognizes Chinese suzerainty over Tibet in exchange for meaningful autonomy and religious rights for its people.

Over the years, contentious differences over the *Umaylum* vs. *Rangzen* approach have emerged as a principal faultline within Tibetan politics.

For instance, in 2013, the largest pro-independence Tibetan NGO, the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), splintered when eight regional chapters (out of more than eighty across ten countries) expressed a collective desire to abandon the *Rangzen* cause: The President of TYC (Bylakuppe Chapter), who led the "rebellion", told me: "For us, the Dalai Lama is even above freedom. How can we go against him?"

For his part, the President of TYC (Dharamshala HQ) offered an entirely alternative explanation and narrative for the rebel chapters' "expulsion."

AUGURIES OF A SPLIT

Even as many Tibetan experts and leaders dismissed this polarisation as part and parcel of democratic organisations and "means to the same end" in any case, others see it as part of a far greater threat that looms over the Tibetan movement.

When the Dalai Lama passes away, they fear Tibetans could descend into discord and disunity. After all, a new Tibetan 'God-King' will take decades to assume the requisite charismatic leadership, if indeed he or she can.

As China prepares for a politico-cultural battle over the Dalai Lama's reincarnation—Beijing plans to identify its own alternate Dalai Lama—it regularly attempts to revive sectarian or provincial fault lines within the

exiled community through covert influence operations as well as overt propaganda.

In this context, the proliferation of institutional democracy, which remains structurally constrained and socio-culturally nascent, holds vital significance in safeguarding Tibetan interests.

That the reincarnation process of the Dalai Lama is shrouded in mystical obscurity—it involves oracles, sacred lakes, divinations, and the interpretation of dreams—is in and of itself a significant challenge. To fight a future narrative war against China's massive global media/propaganda machinery, the Tibetans will need unity and strength within their institutions.

HOLDING THINGS TOGETHER

But paradoxically, the leader who presided over the political transformation of the exiled community of a society may very well be a liability to its democratisation today.

The Dalai Lama's laudable efforts to preserve Tibetan Buddhist culture and promote democracy have strengthened his own supreme position—and in the process, deepened the Tibetan community's implicit dependency on him.

The result: the Dalai Lama's shadow is hard to shake off. The international momentum behind the Tibetan movement remains characterised by his meetings (or lack thereof) with world leaders. At home, it took him a decade to fully abdicate all the political powers and responsibilities of his institution in 2011 to the CTA, which enjoys widespread legitimacy but finds itself significantly constrained by its non-sovereign status. Technically, it remains a non-profit political organisation.

The CTA's diffused mandate and power, as well as its financial dependency on private donations and governmental aid, primarily from the U.S. and India, limits the structural scope of Tibetan politics.

To be sure, the CTA has successfully lobbied for substantial recognition of China's human rights violations within Tibet, as well as for landmark U.S. legislation on the Tibet issue, such as the recently passed Resolve Tibet Act.

Yet, Tibetan leaders find themselves naturally

undermined—though they would baulk at this characterisation—by the Dalai Lama and become entirely unable to replace him.

Take the example of the two-term *Sikyong*, or the Executive Head of the CTA, Dr. Lobsang Sangay, who publicly "begged" for the Dalai Lama's "forgiveness" after displeasure was expressed over "negative" campaigns and alleged "misconduct" by politicians in the 2016 elections.

Such incidents not only underscore the Dalai Lama's unequivocal authority but raise uncertainty over the wide and detrimental impacts of the leadership vacuum that will follow his death.

THE LONG WAR

The exiled community's political and socio-cultural coherence is further undermined by the large-scale outward migration of Tibetans, which many identify as the single greatest threat to the culture and language preservation project.

According to Indian government data, the number of Tibetan refugees in India dropped by 44 per cent, from 150,000 in 2011 to 85,000 in 2018.

In fact, a minor chunk of the outbound has even chosen to return to Tibet, often via the U.S. or Australia, despite the bleak state of affairs in their homeland. China has instituted complete control over every monastic and cultural organisation in Tibet, as well as exerted 'curriculum control' over hundreds of thousands (numbers are disputed and un-verified) of Tibetan children who live in Mandarin-medium residential schools.

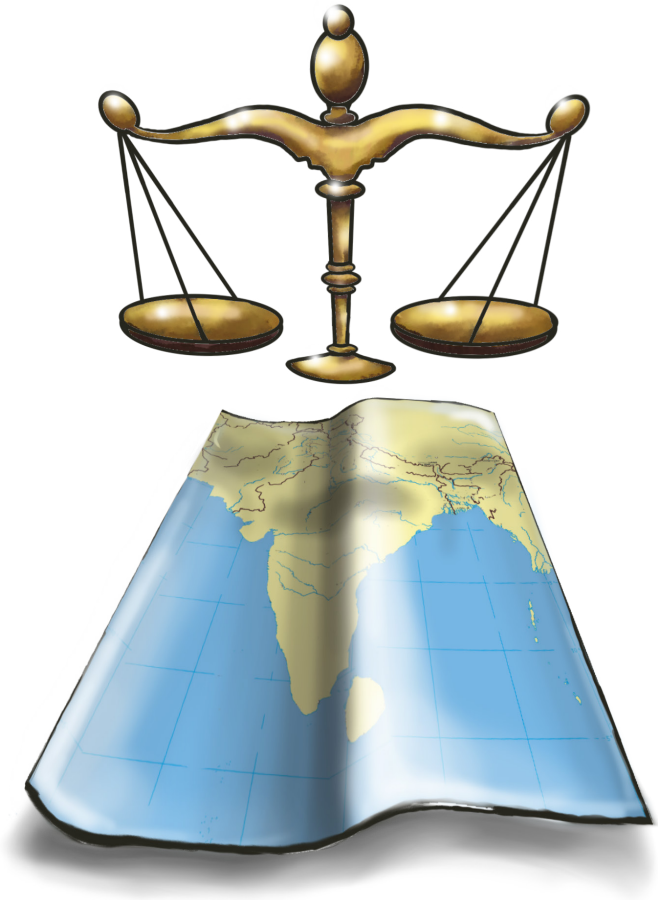
The aim is obvious. China seeks to alienate entire generations of Tibetan children from their family and cultural roots, and implant, what President Xi calls, 'the red gene,' into them early on.

In fact, much of China's 'Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism' policy framework is a clear attempt at systematic erasure of Tibetan culture. China seemingly believes that nothing short of a radical re-transformation will finally force the Tibetans to assimilate into China.

As the current Dalai Lama ages, it is a reality that the community in exile must reckon with open eyes, if it is to maintain any hope of preserving its identity and culture.

In 1959, when the PLA informed Mao Zedong that the 23-year-old Dalai Lama had escaped Tibet right under their noses, the Chairman replied, "In that case, we have lost the battle..."

Yet, as things stand today, when the 89-year-old Dalai Lama inevitably escapes the material world, it may very well be the Tibetans who finally lose the war. ■



Law & Foreign Policy

Mainstreaming International Law In Indian Foreign Policy

Prabhash Ranjan

A few years back, Pakistan arrested and sentenced Kulbhushan Jadhav, an Indian national, to death for allegedly conducting subversive activities in Pakistan based on a trial that lacked due process. When India learned about Jadhav's arrest, it requested that he be given consular access as per international law. Despite India's repeated diplomatic requests, Pakistan denied consular access to Jadhav. India then sued Pakistan at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for breaching the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (VCCR).

The ICJ agreed with India and ruled that Pakistan had breached its obligations under the VCCR by denying consular access to Jadhav.

The Jadhav case is an excellent example of how India used international law in the successful pursuit of conducting its foreign policy. However, such examples are few and far between. Overall, India hasn't used international law as effectively as it should have in the conduct of its foreign policy. But before we look at this issue, it is imperative to sketch the broader context for this argument.

One of the objectives of Indian foreign policy has been to internationally call out Pakistan for using terrorism as an instrument of state policy against India.

THE ROAD TO HERE

The adoption of the United Nations (UN) Charter almost 80 years ago, not only laid the foundations of a post-world war international order but also inaugurated a new era of legalisation of international relations. Legalisation is a form of institutionalisation whereby countries agree to be bound by international rules or commitments when they deal with each other.

Furthermore, as part of legalisation, countries agree to delegate the power to a third party such as an international court to interpret and apply the rules and resolve disputes.

This era of legalisation got a further boost in the 1990s with the rise of neoliberalism and a greater acceptance of theories of interdependence. Thus, in the last three decades, not just international organisations but also international courts and tribunals (like the dispute settlement mechanism of the World Trade Organization or the WTO, the investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms under a plethora of investment treaties and the International Criminal Court, etc.,) proliferated.

Despite this ever-deepening legalisation of international relations, the use of international law in the conduct of foreign policy is surprisingly not prominent.

While this is true to some extent even for developed countries like the United States as the work of American lawyer Louis Henkin demonstrates, it is truer for developing countries like India where the conduct of foreign policy is often sans the international law lexicon. This is despite the fact that deploying international law in the conduct of foreign policy gives legitimacy to state action.

RESPECT FOR INTERNATIONAL LAW

This does not mean that India disrespects international law. When India gained independence in 1947, it did not jettison international law despite not having played a major role in its development due to colonial rule. On the contrary, our constitutional makers underlined the significance of international law by explicitly providing in Article 51 that the state shall foster respect for international law. Since then India has always advocated for the conduct of international relations as per international law and has remained staunchly committed to the UN Charter.

At the same time, India has also contended that the international legal order should be reformed to accommodate the voices of developing countries. Thus, India has questioned the Euro-centric character of international law and continues to do so.

India has repeatedly emphasised that the 'geography' of international law has changed due to the emergence of post-colonial states. India has also played a critical role in creating new norms for international law. Two prominent examples are–initiating the International Solar Alliance, which is an audacious attempt to shape international environmental law, and proposing a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.

ABSENCE OF LAWFARE

Notwithstanding this close engagement with international law and the high levels of legalisation of international relations, India has not been quite successful in mainstreaming international law in articulating its national security interests as part of its foreign policy. If one were to deploy the vocabulary of lawfare–using law as an instrument to accomplish strategic objectives, one could safely argue that India has failed to use international law as a substitute for military activity, to bolster its legitimacy and weaken that of its enemies.

India prefers to put most of its eggs in its diplomacy basket. Take India's dealings with Pakistan as an example to understand this, notwithstanding the Jadhav case.

One of the objectives of Indian foreign policy has been to call out Pakistan internationally for using terrorism as an instrument of state policy against India. India's foreign minister Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in his recent statement at the 79th session of the UN General Assembly delivered a powerful statement rightly targeting Pakistan for sponsoring terrorism in India.

Likewise, India has often used its right of reply at the UN to correctly counter Pakistan's falsehoods against India on the issue of Kashmir and made a case of Pakistan sponsoring terrorism. Strangely, the Indian statements, though diplomatically powerful, in most cases do not once mention 'international law', let alone forgetting to cite Pakistan's specific breaches of the treaty and customary international law on terrorism.

Two more examples can be offered in this regard. First, India struck the terror camps in Pakistan in February 2019, days after a dastardly act of terrorism in Pulwama that was carried out by a Pakistan-based terror outfit.

In justifying the use of force, India did not invoke the right to self-defence since Pakistan was unable or unwilling to act against the terrorist groups operating from its soil. Rather, India relied on the contested doctrine of 'non-military pre-emptive action'.

Second, after the Pulwama attack, India decided to revoke the most-favoured-nation (MFN) status of Pakistan. Under international law contained in the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which is part of the WTO, countries can deviate from their MFN obligations on grounds of national security.

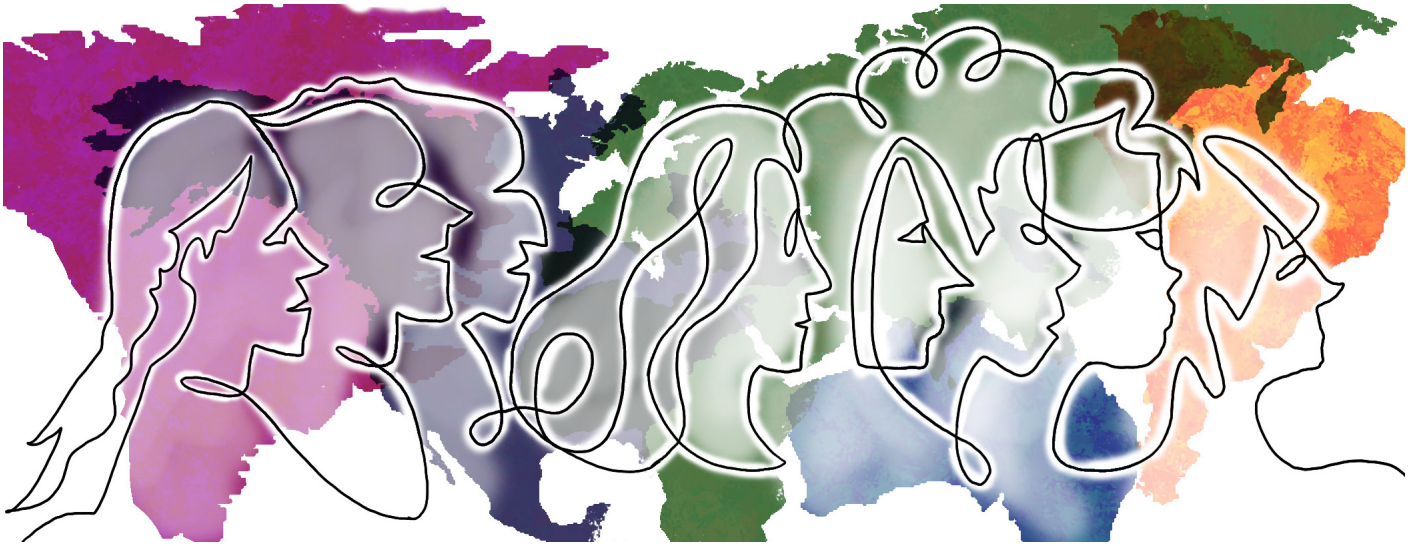
Instead of suspending the MFN obligation towards Pakistan along these lines, India used Section 8A(1) of the Customs Tariff Act, 1975–an economic legislation oblivious of national security to increase customs duties on all Pakistani products to 200 per cent. The notification on this decision did not even mention 'national security'.

These examples demonstrate that even if India did the right thing to safeguard its national security, it could have bolstered the legitimacy of its actions by embedding them in the international law vocabulary.

Furthermore, it could have been a critical step forward to de-legitimise Pakistan's state conduct exposing its internationally wrongful actions such as the failure to act against terrorism emanating from its soil.

International law is a useful weapon that needs to be judiciously used in pursuit of foreign policy, as the Kulbhushan Jadhav case amply demonstrates. India needs to learn from countries like China that have successfully used lawfare to hamstring its opponents without fighting a war.

China's border law that aims to rename many places in Arunachal Pradesh and formalise its military presence is just one example. The greater use of international law in foreign policy requires building state capacity. This is a task that New Delhi needs to take up urgently if the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 (Developed India) must be accomplished. ■



Gender

Why India Needs A Feminist Foreign Policy, Now

Tishya Khillare

In 2021, Hindustan Times quoted India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar on Feminist informed foreign policy - "I agree that we need to look at the world from the perspective of women, we need a gender-balanced foreign policy. We need to look at three things here: Getting more women to engage with foreign policy issues, reflecting women's interests in foreign policy, and bringing in a feminist perspective to foreign policy". In 2023 during its G20 presidency, India showcased its capability to be a gender advocate in the Global South, having successfully introduced an ideational transition from development for women to women-led development.

Yet despite a sharp understanding of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) at the leadership level and a proven foreign policy appetite for promoting gender equality, India is yet to adopt a feminist-informed foreign policy.

WHAT IS THE FEMINIST TURN IN FOREIGN POLICY MAKING?

Feminist Foreign Policy can best be summed up as a policy innovation which integrates feminist values, goals, and methods in the foreign policy of a country, and through such an innovation seeks to achieve alternative foreign policy impacts as opposed to foreign policy-as is.

A good FFP is centred on feminist analysis of all aspects of a country's foreign policy making ecosystem including foreign policy institutions, the foreign policy itself, initiatives being undertaken as part of the foreign policy, associated budgets etc.

Although the feminist analysis of foreign policy is not recent, for long it has grabbed the attention of academics from international relations. This changed when Sweden's former Foreign Minister, Margot Wollström announced Sweden's FFP in 2014.

She introduced it to her country and the world as a foreign policy that was "standing against the systematic and global subordination of women" and a "precondition" for achieving Sweden's wider foreign development and security policy objectives." 16 countries have since then joined the FFP club.

THE CASE FOR AN INDIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

The connective tissue that links various FFPs is that they all centre core feminist values of gender equality, representation, rights and participation of all. Feminist Foreign Policy is Inclusive Foreign Policy and speaks to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision for the Global South- *'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas Sabka Vishwas aur Sabka Prayas'* (Together with all, development for all with the trust and efforts of all), very accurately.

Putting it simply, a Feminist Foreign Policy approach to India's development partnerships is the most suited approach to fulfil its vision of 'Development for All' in the Global South. It is also the only way to bolster India's claim as the Voice of the Global South and the normative leader of the idea of "women-led" development for the Global South.

FFP will also bring several co-benefits-driving greater inclusivity within the Indian Foreign Service where the number of women in incoming batches have risen as meaningful gender parity has fallen. According to a recent report on the status of women in Indian Diplomacy, in June 2024, women headed only eight Indian diplomatic missions as opposed to 25 in 2008 and only one of the seven top leadership positions in the Government of India's Ministry of External Affairs.

Putting in the hard work to meaningfully adopt a feminist-informed approach to development partnerships will work to also strengthen India's

The connective tissue that links various FFPs is that they all centre core feminist values of gender equality, representation, rights and participation of all.

institutional muscle and improve its performance on gender issues. As feminist scholar Swati Parasher rightfully points out it will enable India to engage more comprehensively on global gender issues and I would add, more confidently too.

Research by Devasia has shown that India undertakes projects aimed at women's empowerment as part of its development partnerships in Cambodia, El Salvador, Fiji, Lesotho, Myanmar, Namibia, Palestine, Papua New Guinea, Senegal, Tajikistan and other countries.

However, it remains unguided by a systematic feminist-informed policy framework, a dedicated budget and human resources which help operationalize it, India's efforts at women's empowerment do not add up to a holistic picture. Further, Swati Prabhu argues–there is a lack of gender-disaggregated data to assess the impact of Development Partnership initiatives on women's empowerment. At its best India's approach to women's empowerment through its development partnerships is schematic and at its worst–unnecessarily ambivalent.

WHERE CAN INDIA BEGIN?

India's frontier sectors of development cooperation are–development projects in sectors like infrastructure, health, education and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). India has emerged as the de-facto 'first responder' in the neighbourhood by actively engaging in HADR efforts in its immediate and extended neighbourhood.

A year after India's G20 presidency that became associated with the concept of 'women-led development', it is time for India to take greater ownership of it and begin its meaningful integration in development projects in partner countries.

The place to start would be a gender analysis of existing development projects to identify gaps and inform a result-based strategic plan for promoting women's participation and leadership in existing and future projects. Some priority areas can be projects on issues such as grassroots development, entrepreneurship, financial inclusion and economic leadership especially in rural areas, digital technology, education, skill development and climate change.

India is also known as the neighbourhood's first responder and its HADR efforts are well appreciated. Even though it is an important element of its soft power, an obvious blindspot in India's HADR apparatus is the missing gender link.

Because gender has not been systematically mainstreamed, many gender-specific gaps remain unaddressed like the collection of gender-disaggregated data, meaningful inclusion of women and marginalised communities in disaster planning and response, and the monitoring and evaluation of HADR efforts based on gender-sensitive indicators.

The Sendai Gender Action Plan, which was launched in March 2024, aims to "substantially increase gender-responsive disaster risk reduction by 2030" and provides much-needed guidance. Aligning India's domestic and external HADR efforts with the Sendai Gap that recommends gender equality actions across nine key objectives and four priorities of the Sendai framework will be an ideal way forward for India.

A FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY SERVES INDIAN INTERESTS

A turn to feminist-informed foreign policy will re-orient India's schematic attempts at women's empowerment into a conscious goal-oriented foreign policy practice. If done right, India stands a chance to off-set rising populist anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka by offering people-centric development, shape its geopolitical environment in its favour, and secure its position as the preferred partner for the global south. ■

The Many Splendoured World

C. Raja Mohan

India's World, we must remember, is not just about India! It's about the world too! India's international relations and the unambiguous pursuit of its national interests must be anchored deep in an appreciation of other countries–their histories, political evolution, economic trajectories, and their internal and external contradictions. Understanding other societies and developing comprehensive knowledge of the world is a precondition for successful Indian grand strategy, irrespective of its means and goals.

There is one new and distinctive feature of emerging India's engagement with a changing world. It is about the systemic effects of India's rise. The claim here is not about India's exceptionalism, but India's size. Its large population (nearly 18 percent of the world) and the massive untapped potential for economic growth mean India's rise will have significant effects on the global economy, world's resources, climate, geopolitics, and international order.

We have seen this come into sharp view with China's transformation since the late 1970s. As India and the world shape each other as never before, any grand strategy should factor in the complexities of the two-way interaction.

If its rise is not in a static but a dynamic system, Delhi should be prepared for other sovereigns to react and adapt–positively or negatively–to the continuing improvement in India relative global standing. Assessing the effects of India's actions and the nature of response to it must be an important element of India's awareness of the world.

Equally important is to avoid the temptation to see the rest of the world through the limiting bilateral prism. India's world is not a sum of its bilateral relations. India's partners and adversaries have relations with each other. And they inevitably change over time–note the continuous and often spectacular churn in the relations between America, Europe, Russia, China, and Japan over the last century. That essential feature of the world is not about to disappear.

Change in the distribution of power among the major actors is unending and inevitable. Most of the time that change is incremental and peaceful; but at some moments it is quick and violent. This change is also intricately tied to the domestic political, social and economic evolution of the great powers. A good grasp of the internal dynamics of key states in the neighbourhood and beyond is critical for a productive Indian engagement with the world.

Empathy and an appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of Delhi's interlocutors–both friends and foes–are necessary for India to go up the international hierarchy. After all no nation, however big and powerful, can compel other sovereign actors to obey its diktat. Navigating the world of multiple sovereigns demands a conscious check on self-referential thinking and xenophobia.

Knowing about the many splendoured world–with all its wonderful stories– has joys of its own; not only for scholars off India's international relations, but also to the growing millions of Indians who now cross our frontiers for travel, tourism, study and business. Deeper study of the world at a moment of intensifying India's engagement with it, then, is both urgent and important. ■

For any queries, Contact:

Bharat Book Bureau

808, Real Tech Park, Sector - 30A, Vashi, Navi Mumbai, India – 400703
Website: www.bharatbook.com
Email: info@bharatbook.com
Phone: +91 22 68327185
Mobile: +91 9223767111