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The Rise of India as a World Power

Edited by Muqtedar Khan





Rise of India as a World Power

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COVER: India’s new Parliament building is illuminated in India’s national colors on the eve of its inauguration in New Delhi on May 27, 2023. (Mayank Makhija / NurPhoto via Getty Images)

Our mission is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

Our purpose is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.



The Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi is the official home of India's president. (Priyank Pamkar / Getty Images)

Introduction: Is the Rise of India as a Global Power Inevitable?

Muqtedar Khan

Since the turn of the century, the chatter about India as an emerging global power has become louder and louder. The drivers of this perception are the steady growth in India's defense budget; the recognition of the talent of its engineers, doctors, scientists, and managers; the success of the Indian diaspora; and India's rapid GDP growth. The fact that India is a democracy also adds to its international appeal. Western nations saw very early on that India was not only a natural ally of the West because of its

democratic ethos but was also a preferred rival to China, where authoritarianism remains entrenched. This geostrategic difference adds to India's importance. The U.S., India's biggest trading partner, sees U.S.-India relations as the "most consequential relationship of this century."¹ And U.S. officials now routinely parrot the refrain that India, the world's biggest democracy, and the U.S., the world's oldest democracy, are natural allies and partners in advancing a global order that defends democracy and the rule of law.²



Since the George W. Bush administration, the U.S. has been facilitating the rise of India, as it enabled the rise of China in the 1990s. The sanctions imposed on India for testing nuclear weapons were eased and efforts have since been made to groom India as a potential partner in containing the rise of China as a challenger to U.S. hegemony and to the liberal international order. India is eager to gain a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council. It feels that this achievement will not only underscore India's status as a major power but also give it the protection it seeks from international criticism as it pursues its ideological goals in the domestic arena. India has witnessed how the U.S. has used its power at the U.N. not only to advance its own interests but also to safeguard the interests of its allies. From the day it gained independence, India has felt that it was destined to be a great power and will one day achieve its "rightful place" on the global stage. Becoming part of the global governing elite, meaning a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, and having more say in the management of multilateral institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, would be the pathway to this "rightful place." This idea was born with the concept of a modern, independent India. In his famous speech "Tryst With Destiny," delivered on the eve of India's independence, India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, pledged that he would work "to the end that this ancient land attain her rightful place in the world and make her full and willing contribution to the promotion of world peace and the welfare of mankind."³

India's Hunger for Global Status

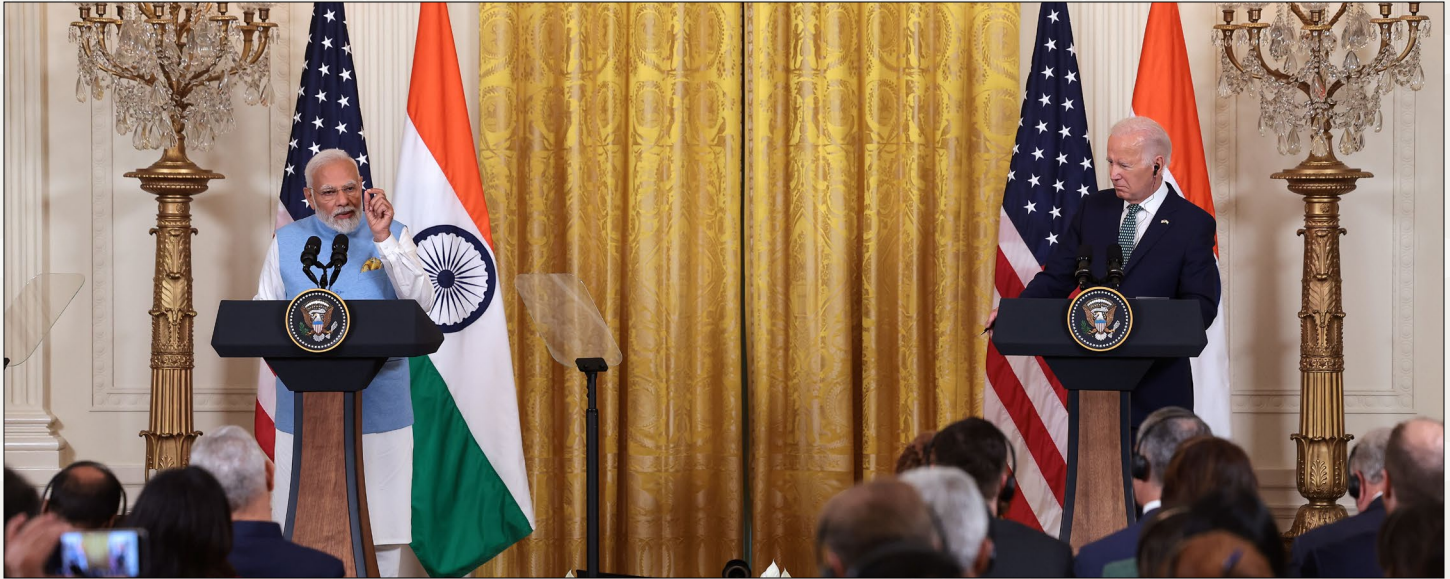
The Indian foreign policy elite is desperate for international validation of India as an important nation on the global stage. Often, to satiate that hunger, fake news about international recognition is circulated in Indian media that makes India look more powerful and influential than it is. For example, there were fake reports circulated in mainstream Indian media that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. The media frenzy around this fake report subsided only after a member of the Norwegian Nobel Committee issued a statement denying the nomination.⁴ Surveys by inconsequential private consultants that show Modi to be the most popular global leader make headlines and are mentioned frequently by talking heads and government officials,

but those same individuals challenge or vehemently reject international indices that show India performing poorly on the happiness index, the hunger index, or human rights and democracy measures. Every critical report about India's human rights record is labeled as biased and fake, even though those reports are well documented in the U.S. State Department's 2022 report. The present Indian leadership, politically engaged population, and media, it is safe to say, are seeking international recognition more intensely than their counterparts in any other nation in the world today.

This hunger is driven by frequent developments that indicate India's rise. The recognition by the IMF that India is the fastest growing major economy in the post-COVID-19 era and the fact that it has now surpassed the United Kingdom as the fifth largest economy in the world are clear indicators that India is gaining in the economic sphere. India has recently become the world's most populous country, and this too is seen as a marker of India's achievement. The year 2023 has become a diplomatic bonanza for India. India became the host and president of two important multilateral forums, the G20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This has kept India in the global diplomatic limelight for most of the year, during which time it has sought to set the global agenda and establish itself as an important global power and the voice of the Global South. Even invitations for state visits for Modi by the U.S. and France reinforce the perception that India is the new "golden boy" of international relations.

Additional markers of India's global influence include the success of India's diaspora in business (think tech CEOs) and in politics (think Rishi Sunak and Kamala Harris); the emergence of powerful business houses like the Ambanis, Adanis, and Tatas; and the growing political influence of Indian Americans. The India story can be seen in everything from the emergence of India's growing middle class as a major market to the recognition of the global importance of India's IT, and from the diamond and pharmaceutical industries to India's growing defense imports.

India's successes have not happened by accident. The country has made major investments in digital access, and today Indians on the internet outnumber Chinese



U.S. President Joe Biden (R) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hold a joint press conference at the White House on June 22, 2023. (Win McNamee / Getty Images)

and Americans combined. The Indian government is also investing in national infrastructure, building more roads, airports, metros, and bullet trains, which is contributing to the rapid development and economic growth of the nation. According to UNICEF, in the decade 2010-2020, India lifted 271 million people out of poverty. Additionally, India's exports have also increased, and the country is likely to see its exports surpass \$1 trillion U.S. in the year 2023. India has also benefited from the Russia-Ukraine war and has imported Russian oil at discounted prices; it now exports refined oil to Europe and North America. Both public sector and private sector oil companies have made huge profits from this unexpected opportunity.

Besides all these economic and diplomatic achievements, the key reason all eyes are now on India is the persistent wooing of India by the Biden administration. U.S. officials have not only increased

both the frequency and the intensity of their engagement with Indian counterparts, the U.S. has also signed many defense agreements, increased cooperation in the arena of critical emerging technologies and intelligence sharing, and is committed to upgrading India's defense capabilities. The sale and transfer of F414 jet engines, which will be made in India by Hindustan Aeronautics, is the latest development in the U.S.-India defense partnership. This is a game-changer for India's air strike capability, as well as its defense industry. Finally, the state dinner President Joe Biden hosted for Modi on June 22, 2023, and Modi's address to a joint session of Congress have gone a long way toward sending a message to the world – especially to India and China – that U.S.-India relations have now reached unprecedented heights and that India is important to the U.S. Everybody now knows that India is one of the cool kids on the global campus.

The Dark Side of the India Story

But there is another side to the India story – a much darker side. This is a story that is rarely told in mainstream Indian media, but the global media is more committed to telling both sides of the India story. The other side is about two critical issues: one, the rise of Hindu nationalism and its terrible impact on democracy and the rights of religious minorities in India, especially Indian Muslims; and two, the structural flaws in India's economic growth that are hidden by an unusually high focus on GDP growth alone as a measure of economic development.

In his book "India Is Broken," Princeton professor Ashoka Mody, a former IMF economist, identifies three major flaws in the Indian economy. He argues that the economy is growing but without generating jobs, and hence the unemployment rate in India is very high for a country



whose economy is growing at over 6%. The unemployment rate in mid-July 2023 was 8.4%, according to the Center for Monitoring Indian Economy.⁵

Mody also argues that India is suffering from chronic underemployment. Many rural workers' employment is seasonal, yet those workers are considered employed for purposes of tracking unemployment. Many people with advanced degrees are not working in their fields, but rather working as drivers for home delivery of food and goods or as drivers for ride-hailing services. Such realities are hiding the extent of India's unemployment. The most shocking aspect of India's economy is the decline in women's labor force participation, which dropped from 30% in 1990 to 19% in 2021 and is around 23% at the moment.⁶ Mody also argues that India's economic growth is insensitive to the damage it is causing the environment, and hence is not as sustainable as the government claims. He also finds the quality of India's rapidly expanding private education institutions less than desirable. He feels that if India does not improve the quality of its education, it will fall behind other Asian nations that invest more in their human resources.⁷

As for India's democratic backsliding, the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom have systematically documented the many ways in which minorities in India are persecuted. Democracy indices have, especially since 2019 (the beginning of Modi's

second term), downgraded India to the status of a flawed democracy. The Swedish think tank V-Dem labeled India an "electoral autocracy," and Freedom House has also highlighted the decline of freedom under the rule of Modi.⁸ The State Department's 2022 annual report is damning: It meticulously documents the persecution of religious minorities, especially Muslims, in India under Modi and his Hindu nationalist party (Bharatiya Janta Party). The atrocities documented include mob lynching of Muslims, extrajudicial bulldozing of Muslims' homes and places of worship, violence against Muslims by mobs as well as police, passage of laws that violate religious freedoms, and frequent calls for genocide of Indian Muslims and hate speech by Hindu priests and Hindu nationalist political leaders.⁹

The two sides of the India story were dramatically on display when Modi visited the U.S. in June 2023. While the White House and the U.S. Congress laid out the red carpet for Modi, and Biden spoke eloquently of India's democratic DNA, over 75 U.S. senators and representatives wrote a letter to Biden demanding that he raise the issue of India's terrible human rights records directly with Modi.¹⁰ Many of them also chose to boycott Modi's address to Congress. While Biden was bending backward not to ruffle India's feathers, former President Barack Obama said in an interview with journalist Christiane Amanpour that the "protection of the Muslim minority in a majority-Hindu India" was "something worth mentioning" during the state visit. He added, "If you do not protect the rights

of ethnic minorities in India, then there is a strong possibility India at some point starts pulling apart." There are some who believe that Obama may have made this comment at Biden's behest to send the message to India that the U.S. was not overlooking the democratic backsliding of India.¹¹ These comments sparked backlash from Indian leaders, who attacked Obama for being hypocritical since he had bombed several Muslim countries during his time as president. The most shocking reaction came from a senior leader of Modi's party, Himanta Biswa Sarma, the chief minister of the state of Assam, who told a journalist that there were many Hussain Obamas in India and that Assam police would prioritize "taking care of them," then head to Washington, D.C. Ironically, while India's prime minister was talking about how there was no room for discrimination in India, his own party member was threatening Muslim minorities with police for no reason. The man has faced no consequences for his blatant bigotry.¹²

Clearly there are two sides to the India story: one about India's emergence as a major economic and global power, and the other about its steady transformation into an electoral autocracy that treats its religious minorities terribly. In the two months prior to this writing, overlapping with Modi's visit to the U.S., over 250 churches have been burned down in the state of Manipur, which is also ruled by Modi's Hindu nationalist party (Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP). The state is experiencing an ethnic and religious civil war in which over



140 people have been killed and thousands displaced and rendered homeless.¹³ The European Parliament passed an urgency resolution on the violence in Manipur hours before Modi landed in Paris to be a state guest at France's Bastille Day celebrations.¹⁴ Unless India seriously addresses its domestic religious polarization and targeting of minorities, it will be hard even for the Biden administration, which is comfortable working with illiberal leaders all over the world, to keep India in the camp of democracies. India is on its way to becoming a more developed, more powerful, and more influential country, but it is also suffering from a serious domestic crisis that could undermine progress. It can and probably will emerge as a major power, but first it must address the communal hatred that unfortunately is becoming more lethal and more widespread around the country.

Brief Summaries of the Book Chapters

For this anthology, titled "Rise of India as a World Power," New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy has invited an extraordinary group of scholars, experts, and practitioners to contribute their views. The essays, like the diverse contributors, bring a variety of perspectives that paint a multifaceted picture of India's rise and the challenges it faces. In the first essay, professor **Sumit Ganguly**, a prominent scholar of Indian foreign policy and South Asian politics, argues that India can emerge as a global power, but it must make significant changes in its posture toward the U.S. and its defense procurement policies, end its geopolitical rivalry with Pakistan, and address the persistent poverty in the nation. While he acknowledges that many authoritarian nations have become great powers, he feels that India's lurch toward authoritarianism could become a major impediment to its march toward great power status. Ganguly argues that India's democracy, albeit flawed, has succeeded in managing the country's vast diversity, but if India retreats from its democratic principles, then it will jeopardize its domestic and social order.

Ambassador **Talmiz Ahmad**, who has served as India's ambassador to many Middle Eastern countries, is intimately aware of both the process and content of Indian foreign policy. He argues that Modi has worked hard to improve relations with Middle Eastern countries, and has been successful, but worries that

India's reputation as well as its long-term interests are not being served well by the Hindutva ideology that informs the Modi government. He also points to weaknesses in the Indian economy and predicts that it will not reach the target of \$5 trillion U.S. by 2025, as predicted by the Modi government.¹⁵ Ahmad also laments the loss of opportunity. The U.S. has slowly retreated from the Middle East, and India, which has good business relations with the nations in the region, has not enhanced its strategic role. It has allowed China to step into the vacuum created by the U.S.'s pivot away from the Middle East. He predicts that constrained by Hindutva values, which target Muslims at home, India can only maintain transactional and business relations with the Middle East, and shared strategic goals and actions will be limited.

Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center, argues that while Pakistan is capable of putting hurdles in India's path, it cannot at the moment prevent India's rise. A combination of the widening gap between India and Pakistan's capabilities along with domestic political and economic instability have diminished Pakistan's ability to curtail the rise of India and its growing international profile. Kugelman also points out that while Pakistan does possess assets that allow it to pose asymmetric threats to India, it has for the moment reduced such activity. Additionally, Pakistan's fortunes in Afghanistan have not fared well, and hence Pakistan will continue to maintain peace and calm on its eastern border with India while dealing with the challenges it faces from Afghanistan on its western border. Kugelman sees challenges to India's emergence as a world power coming more from India's other neighbor, China, a more powerful and more aggressive power.

Aparna Pande is a research fellow at the Hudson Institute, and her work focuses on India's foreign policy and the politics and geopolitics of South Asia. Pande draws an intriguing portrait of India as an aspiring world power, but a "different kind of world power." She argues that India is seeking recognition as a global power with a moral identity – *Vishwaguru* (world teacher). The country does not have hegemonic aspirations in the region or globally. It does not have any territorial aspirations, nor does it seek to upset the existing order. According to Pande, this "Indian exceptionalism" is based on a form of nationalism

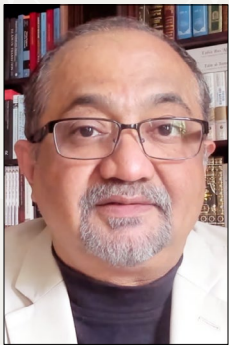


that takes pride in its civilizational heritage and is neither territorial nor ideological. In her essay, Pande also emphasizes the importance of the emerging and rapidly growing India-U.S. alliance.

Ghazala Wahab, a defense expert who also edits and publishes *FORCE*, a monthly journal on security issues, has contributed a counterintuitive and persuasive challenge to the narrative that India is a rising military power. She points out that India's status as having the third largest defense budget in the world and also being the third or fourth largest importer of military equipment is being confused with military power. She argues that while India is indeed spending more than most nations on military power, it is not deterring other nations such as Pakistan and China from pursuing their aggressive cross-border attacks and violations. For Wahab, deterrence is the measure of power. Wahab also dispels the myth of the policy/goal of *Atmanirbhar* (self-reliance) in the defense sector. She observes that the resources earmarked for research and development are very low, and almost all major weapons manufacturing in India happens through

collaboration with foreign firms. Wahab suggests that heralding India as a major military power is premature, and that it will be a while before India actually becomes self-reliant and successfully deters its enemies.

India seeks greater responsibility and recognition on the global stage, and as part of this pursuit it has persevered in pushing for reforms first of the U.N. Security Council and now of the entire system of multilateral governance. Retired Ambassador **Syed Akbaruddin**, who has served as India's permanent representative to the U.N., recounts in detail how India has sought reform of the U.N. Security Council to make it more representative and more in alignment with current realities, and to attain a permanent membership. He explains how India's strategy for reform has evolved and how various international stakeholders have ensured that the process is consistently stymied, and no reforms have taken place. India's failure to achieve a permanent seat at the U.N. Security Council reveals the nature of global politics: Institutional continuity prevails despite major shifts in economic and military balances of power.



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National Security Institute from 2016 to 2019 and is the academic director of the American Foreign Policy Institute, 2019-2025, at the Institute for Global Studies, University of Delaware. He has been a senior nonresident fellow of the Brookings Institution (2003-2008), a senior fellow with the Center for Global Policy (2017-2020), and a senior fellow with the Institute for Social Policy (2001-2016).

Dr. Khan holds a Ph.D. in international relations from Georgetown University, an M.A. in international

studies from Florida International University, an MBA from Bombay University, and a B.E. from Osmania University. He is the author of the award-winning book "Islam and Good Governance: Political Philosophy of Ihsan," published in April 2019 by Palgrave Macmillan. He is also the author of several other books: "American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom" (2002), "Jihad for Jerusalem: Identity and Strategy in International Relations" (2004), "Islamic Democratic Discourse" (2006), and "Debating Moderate Islam" (University of Utah Press, 2007). He has edited several e-books as well; his latest is "Emerging World Order After the Russia-Ukraine War" (New Lines Institute, 2023).

Khan's articles and commentaries can be found at www.ijtihad.org. His academic publications can be found at <https://udel.academia.edu/MuqtedarKhan>. He hosts a YouTube show called Khanversations at <https://www.youtube.com/c/ProfMuqtedarKhan>.



Endnotes

- 1 See comments by Rich Verma, the deputy undersecretary of state, as reported by Financial Express, April 27, 2023. <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-india-us-relationship-the-most-consequential-relationship-of-this-century-top-us-diplomat-3064684/>. Similar observations are regularly repeated by senior diplomats.
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- 13 See report in *The Guardian* on the state of affairs in Manipur: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/10/foreigners-on-our-own-land-ethnic-clashes-threaten-to-push-indias-manipur-state-into-civil-war>. *The Telegraph* reports that 253 churches have been burnt in Manipur. See <https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/253-churches-burnt-down-during-continuing-unrest-in-manipur-indigenous-tribal-leaders-forum/cid/1944597>.
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Indian Border Security Force soldiers take part in the unit's 58th Raising Day Parade in Amritsar, India, on Dec. 4, 2022. The security force guards India's borders with Pakistan and Bangladesh. (Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

India as a Great Power?

Sumit Ganguly

Almost since its emergence as an independent state following the end of the British Empire in South Asia, key members of India's political leadership have opined that the country was destined for great-power status. Their arguments, in the initial years after India's independence, were mostly based on civilizational grounds. One of the principal exponents of this view, of course, was India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In his magisterial work, "The Discovery of India," Nehru wrote, "She [India] has the right to reclaim in universal history the rank

that ignorance has refused her for a long time and to hold her place amongst the great nations."

This chapter will unfold as follows: It will first discuss Nehru's attempts to play a significant role on the global stage. It will then address how his successors fitfully continued those efforts. Finally, it will assess where India currently stands in this quest for great-power status and what policy choices are probably necessary for it to proceed on a possible glide path to great-power status.



Tilting at Windmills?

As India's first prime minister, despite the country's myriad material weaknesses, Nehru fashioned a foreign policy that would enable the country to play a role in global affairs that transcended its corporeal shortcomings. As is well known, along with Sukarno of Indonesia, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, and Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, he founded the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). India's participation in this movement gave it a voice in the international order far greater than what its physical capabilities had warranted.¹

Among other matters, Nehru underscored the importance of the role of multilateral organizations, most notably the United Nations, in promoting the peaceful resolution of disputes. To that end, India played a critical role in the Korean conflict as a member of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC).² It was also a key member of the International Control Commission (ICC) following the French withdrawal from Vietnam after the fall of their garrison at Dien Bien Phu.³ He also boosted the cause of global nuclear disarmament. Indeed, in April 1954, he issued a call to the United Nations to adopt a "standstill agreement" on nuclear testing.⁴

The 1962 Border War and After

These initiatives notwithstanding, India's military weaknesses were laid bare when border negotiations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) reached a deadlock in 1960, following which the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched an attack along disputed borders in October 1962. The well-armed and battle-hardened PLA, which had carefully planned the onslaught, imposed a disastrous defeat on an ill-prepared and militarily underequipped Indian army.⁵

This war, in considerable part, not only reduced Nehru's stature in global affairs but also made clear to India's foreign policy elite that the ideational orientation of its foreign and security policies had distinct limits. As a consequence, Nehru's successors fitfully sought to acquire the sinews of material power. These efforts, however, were hindered in considerable part due to the country's deeply flawed economic policies that hobbled both growth and poverty alleviation.⁶ Though

Nehru's successors continued to espouse many of his policies both at home and abroad, the country's role in global politics proved to be significantly diminished for decades. For complex reasons, after it carried out a nuclear test in 1974, India faced such a raft of crippling global sanctions that its clandestine nuclear weapons program all but became dormant. Bluntly stated, for much of the remaining years of the Cold War, India was all but an irrelevant actor on the international stage.⁷

A Resurgent India

It was not until an unprecedented fiscal crisis in 1991, in the wake of the first Gulf War, that the country finally managed to turn a corner on multiple fronts, thereby bringing it closer to its long-term quest for great-power status. In the aftermath of this extraordinary crisis, India's policymakers undertook major economic reforms even in the face of considerable domestic opposition. Within years after these market-friendly reforms, the country witnessed significantly higher rates of economic growth and also saw dramatic reductions in both rural and urban poverty.

These market-friendly reforms also contributed to the country becoming a significant investment destination for global corporations. In 1995, the United States Department of Commerce declared India to be one of the world's "big emerging markets." Simultaneously, a number of its own conglomerates, ranging from the information technology firm Infosys to the vast industrial corporation Tata and Sons, entered the global arena.

Apart from rapid economic growth, the country, under a new right-of-center Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government, also started to shed many of its Cold War-era shibboleths and inhibitions. The most important of these involved its stated aversion to the utility of force in international politics. Even though Prime Minister Indira Gandhi as well as her son and successor, Rajiv Gandhi, had demonstrated a large degree of pragmatism when it came to the use of force, they had nevertheless not abandoned the Nehruvian rhetoric about eschewing the resort to force in global affairs. After coming to power in 1998, the BJP government, which had long accepted the significance of material power in global politics, conducted a series of five nuclear tests.



Former U.S. President Bill Clinton meets with students of the Ram Rati Gupta Women's Polytechnic school of Rampur, Uttar Pradesh state, during a breakfast meeting in New Delhi in 2003. (Raveendran / AFP via Getty Images)

These tests, quite unsurprisingly, led to widespread condemnations from much of the international community, and the United States in particular. Worse still, the U.S. led the world in imposing a series of sanctions on India's nuclear weapons and space programs.

Despite this initial harsh reaction, the Clinton administration started a dialogue with India in the hope that it might be able to persuade the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government to reverse its nuclear weapons program. This effort, however, proved to be mostly unsuccessful.⁸ Interestingly enough, the George W. Bush administration concluded it was worth abandoning the U.S.'s unyielding commitment to nonproliferation to try to enlist India in a strategy designed to bolster it as a possible counterweight to the PRC in Asia. To that end, it negotiated a nuclear accord with India that enabled New Delhi to maintain its nuclear weapons program.⁹ This agreement, which for all practical purposes legitimized India's nuclear weapons program, brought it one step closer toward realizing its goal of becoming a great power.

A Great Power in the Making?

In 2014, the ruling Indian National Congress (INC) party suffered its worst electoral defeat in decades. The BJP won a clear-cut victory and assumed office. Despite significant ideological differences, the new government did not markedly alter the economic policies of its predecessor. The commitment to economic liberalization that the INC had initiated as early as 1991 mostly remained in place. The BJP did, however, make some noticeable changes in the realm of domestic policies relating to social and cultural issues, as well as some important changes to foreign policy. Among other matters, it dispensed with India's hoary commitment to nonalignment. This was evident when Narendra Modi became the first popularly elected prime minister to ever skip the Non-Aligned Summit held in Margarita, Venezuela, in 2016. Since then, the Ministry of External Affairs has rarely, if ever, invoked the use of the well-worn term in its official communiqués.



People play amid poor visibility at India Gate in New Delhi in November 2020.
(Arvind Yadav / Hindustan Times via Getty Images)

Also, despite some lingering concerns about the reliability and steadfastness of the United States, especially as it involved ties with India's nettlesome neighbor Pakistan, the BJP government has shed many of the ideological inhibitions that had stood in the way of a closer strategic partnership with the United States. To that end, after nearly a decade of temporizing on the part of prior governments, the Modi's BJP government signed three important "foundational agreements" with the United States, thereby facilitating closer strategic ties in the realms of military communications, logistics, and geospatial cooperation. All three of these agreements will facilitate security cooperation with the U.S. and also enable India to cope better with the renewed emerging security threat from the PRC. The shedding of the ideological baggage from the Cold War era and the concomitant growing strategic cooperation with the United States are part and parcel of India's quest to play a more consequential role in global politics.

Yet it is important to underscore that New Delhi will need to overcome its reservations about a more fulsome strategic partnership with the United States to enable it to contend with the unrelenting threat from the PRC. On its own, given the many deficiencies of its defense industrial base and its slothful defense acquisition process, it cannot muster the requisite military capabilities to ward off the threat from the PRC.

These two policy shifts may well bring India closer to its long-standing goal of achieving great-power status. However, a failure to forthrightly tackle a number of other domestic policy issues as well as certain political choices may well hobble the country's efforts to achieve that goal. Each of these deserves some discussion. The first, and most obvious, is that despite nearly two decades of substantial economic growth, the country still remains saddled with vast swatches of both rural and urban poverty.¹⁰ According to reliable sources, as many as 228 million Indians remain below the official poverty line, thereby leaving the country with the largest number of poor in the world.¹¹ Unless India's policymakers can make a significant dent on poverty, the country's ability to play a wider role in international politics will be stymied.

Second, in its attempt to promote rapid economic growth, India may be sacrificing its environment. The environmental challenges that the country faces are too numerous to discuss in this chapter. Suffice to say, however, that the pitfalls it confronts are far from trivial. These include shortages of water, air pollution, and loss of biodiversity, among others.¹²

Third, any number of authoritarian states have emerged as great powers; in fact, the number of states that are both democracies as well as great powers are limited, and indeed constitute a recent historical phenomenon. That being said, India's lurch toward authoritarianism may prove to be an impediment to its evolution as a great power. The reasons for



this are straightforward: Its cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity are legendary. Governing a country with India's extent of cultural pluralism poses unique challenges and is singularly ill-suited to a repressive political dispensation. Democracy, albeit with various flaws, has enabled India to manage its diversity despite a brief period of authoritarian rule in the late 1970s under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's "state of emergency." India's current lurch toward political illiberalism and retreat from democratic values and principles could well pose significant problems for domestic social and political order and thereby subvert its rise in world affairs.¹³

Fourth and finally, to enable it to concentrate on and cope with the security challenge it faces from the PRC, it is in New Delhi's interest to fashion a long-term strategy to reach a rapprochement with Pakistan. While Pakistan and the Kashmir dispute are unlikely

to stop India's rise, they can certainly slow down the process.¹⁴ India's inability to terminate the rivalry with Pakistan, or at least to forge a successful strategy of deterrence, will continue to sap the energies of its foreign and security policy establishments and constitute an important impediment to the realization of great-power status. Unfortunately, given Pakistan's present internal disarray and the presence of a Hindu chauvinist government in New Delhi, the prospects of a rapprochement with Pakistan seem rather dim. However, unless India can fashion a robust policy of deterrence by denial or overcome its deep-seated reservations about reaching out to Pakistan despite the latter's continuing dalliance with terror, its nettlesome neighbor will remain an albatross around New Delhi's neck.¹⁵ In the absence of these policy choices, it appears unlikely, despite its long-held aspiration, that New Delhi will emerge in the front rank of global powers.



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Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad bin Salman (L) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hold a press conference at the presidential palace in New Delhi in February 2019. (Indian Foreign Ministry / Anadolu Agency / Getty Images)

Outlook for India–Middle East Relations: National Aspirations and Interests Will Crash Against Hindutva Ideology

Talmiz Ahmad

India's image at home and abroad is being shaped by two factors that are deeply intertwined: the personality of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ideology of Hindutva — Hindu nationalism — that he robustly advocates. These elements taken together have evoked mixed responses to the country and its leader. At home and in large sections of the Indian diaspora in Western countries, there is widespread enthusiasm for his vision; many Indians admire the celebration of India and the retrieval of its glorious heritage, as well as the fact that it is now poised for leadership in world affairs.

At the same time, many in India and abroad are anguished over the apparent loss of India's affiliation with the norms of multiculturalism, secularism, and pluralism; its identity as the standard-bearer of a developing country accomplishing economic and technological achievement while upholding the values of democracy and human rights; and its long-standing accommodation of diverse communities and belief systems in a vibrant constitutional order.

For Modi and his ideological cohorts, the attainment of “*Hindu Rashtra*,” an India built on “Hindu” values, is



central to his leadership. The prime minister's foreign engagements and, indeed, India's foreign policy itself have been mobilized to subserve this project so that Modi's messianic persona boldly and fearlessly secures the *Rashtra*; the project and its prophet are thus an integrated entity.

However, the project has created misgivings in several world capitals — especially in the Middle East, a region that is crucial for India's energy, trade, and investment interests and is home to an 8-million-strong Indian community that directly supports over 30 million people at home by remitting to the national exchequer over \$35 billion annually.

As prime minister, Modi has devoted considerable effort toward building economic cooperation and strategic partnerships with the countries of this region. But the region has large and influential Muslim populations who are appalled by the visceral hatred for their co-religionists in India and the violence that is directed at them with impunity in the effort to attain the *Hindu Rashtra*.

This chapter will examine the wellsprings of the *Hindu Rashtra* project and the implications it could have on India's interests in the Middle East as it pursues its Hindutva agenda.

India's Economic Parameters

There has been consensus in the Hindutva "family" that India "must get its rightful place in the world and in international institutions," and it needs a robust economy to realize this aspiration.¹ In 2015, Modi spoke of India becoming a "leading power." The Indian foreign affairs analyst C. Raja Mohan has explained that this meant placing India "among the major powers — the global directorate if you will."²

By the time Modi became prime minister in 2014, India was already in the vanguard of global economic success: In 1990-2000, its GDP had increased by 5.4%; it increased by 8.8% in the next decade, including a record growth of over 9% in 2005-07, before falling to 7.1% in 2010-17. Most forecasts predict that in 2030 India will be the world's third largest economy, after China and the U.S.^{3,4}

But under Modi, the success narrative has not gone as planned:

- India has a workforce of 450 million people, but 418 million (93%) are employed in the unorganized sector.
- In 2015, the World Bank estimated that about 50% of the Indian population (about 500 million people) was living in poverty; a later World Bank estimate said that the share of rural residents living in poverty had gone from 31% in 2011-12 to 35% (320 million) in 2017-18.
- A 2020 U.N. report said that 23% of Indians (about 275 million people) were exposed to food insecurity, the highest proportion globally, and that the number had increased by 62 million between 2014 and 2019 — i.e., in Modi's first term.
- India was ranked 94th out of 101 countries in the 2020 Global Hunger Index and 116th out of 174 in the 2020 World Bank Human Capital Index.
- India was one of the countries that was worst hit economically by the pandemic: GDP shrank by 7.3% in 2020-21, but decline in growth had started much earlier — 8% in 2016-17, 6.6% in 2017-18, 6% in 2018-19, and 3.9% in 2019-20.
- Economic outlook is not much better: India's annual average rate of growth is expected to be about 4-5% over the next five years; however, even a 6% growth will not allow India to reach the prime minister's target of making the country a \$5 trillion economy by 2025. India will thus remain a "low-income" country.^{5,6,7}

The explanation for this poor economic record during the Modi period is now well documented. In the run-up to the 2014 national elections, Modi had projected the "Gujarat Model" as the basis for economic achievement during his 12-year stint as chief minister. As the U.S.-based economist Ashoka Mody has said, what most observers then failed to note was that in Gujarat, "Modi was not promoting entrepreneurship. He was subsidising favored industrialists who created virtually no jobs and polluted the land and water."⁸

This flawed "model" continued to be pursued after his election victory in 2014 when, as Ashoka Mody says, "politically connected Indian businessmen were continuing to scam government-owned banks" — nonperforming loans of banks (i.e., loans not being repaid on time) rose from 4% in late 2014 to about





Supporters of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena party rally at their convention in Mumbai, India, on Jan. 23, 2020. Party leader Raj Thackeray unveiled a new saffron-colored party flag that symbolizes his party's drift toward the Hindutva ideology. (Satyabrata Tripathy / Hindustan Times via Getty Images)

9% in 2017; for government-owned banks, 12% of the loans were nonperforming.⁹

To compound the country's economic malaise, in November 2016, Modi dramatically announced demonetization of 1,000-rupee and 500-rupee notes, thus abruptly removing 86% of currency in circulation. With the bulk of national employment in the unorganized sector, millions of daily-wage earners were left without income or employment, and the national economy received a shattering blow as numerous small and medium enterprises closed down; there were several reports of starvation and deaths from different parts of India.¹⁰

Hardly had the country recovered from this hammer blow when, in July 2017, the government introduced the Goods and Services Tax (GST). This was largely recognized to be a positive initiative, as it would eliminate cascading taxes (i.e., taxes on taxes) and

integrate the country into one common market. However, the GST regime was introduced in such haste and with several important high-tax earners excluded from it, that it in fact harmed the national economy. As Mody points out:

Modi stood by cluelessly as his officials chaotically rolled out the hugely complex GST. In both the demonetization and GST cases, Modi's actions (or inactivity) inflicted the maximum pain on India's most vulnerable citizens. Farmers and small businesses saw their incomes drop, and workers saw their jobs disappear. ... against the promise of millions of new jobs under Modi, the Indian economy employed fewer people — yes, fewer people — in 2018 than in 2012.¹¹

By the time of the 2019 elections, Modi no longer spoke of economic development or the "Gujarat





model”; having failed to provide economic success, it was now necessary to shift “from aspirations to resentments” by asserting the “strongman” persona before the country’s enemies at home and abroad.¹²

Hindutva Politics and Foreign Policy

Under Modi’s leadership, for the first time since India became a free nation 75 years ago, the country is being shaped as a majoritarian order in which “minorities are actively and regularly persecuted, dissent is punished, the judiciary is unable to balance executive overreach, freedoms are restricted ... and the State is vicious.”¹³

The basis for this is the ideology of Hindutva, a concept first defined and expounded by the Hindu intellectual Veer Savarkar (1883-1966) in 1923. Savarkar propounded the twinning of faith with politics, which yielded an ethnic-national identity for Hindus based on their shared race; their ties to the sacred land of Bharat (India); and their affiliation to the language, Sanskrit, the “mother of all languages.” To these he added “Hindu culture,” which uniquely distinguishes Hindus from adherents of all other faiths.^{14,15}

It is important to note that, while Hindutva adopts “religious symbolism, emotionalism, and vocabulary” from Hinduism, the principal effort is to draw only its ethnic historical-cultural aspects from the faith and give lip service to rites and spiritualism.^{16,17}

Modi as prime minister has adopted this mindset and approach as the central feature of his personality and administration, and has linked this with populist politics. He has achieved this through the systematic use of a compliant mass media and robust social media factories run by Hindutva zealots, largely in Western countries. This has been accompanied by actual acts of violence by Hindutva cadres against Muslims and by denigrating Muslim political and cultural heritage while extolling Hindu history and culture; Sarkar (p. ix) notes that “we no longer have riots in this country, we have pogroms.” She adds: “Hindutva’s Hinduism is not just to unify Hindus but to do so under a violent agenda against non-Hindus.”¹⁸

Hindutva does not have a foreign policy discourse. This has enabled Modi to selectively anchor his

policies in populist pronouncements and actions that boost his personal credentials as the champion of Hindu interests. For instance, he draws from Hindutva the assertion of masculine strength — toughness and decisiveness defining the leader (and, hence, the nation he leads) in the face of external challenges.

Modi also seeks to impart a “Hindu” veneer to his foreign policy pronouncements by using Sanskrit words to describe various aspects of interstate relations. For instance, in 2016, Modi said that India’s “strategic intent” is shaped by our civilizational ethos of *yatharadwad* (realism), *sah-astitwaa* (coexistence), *sah-yog* (cooperation), and *sah-bhagita* (partnership).¹⁹

Modi and his associates also derive certain attributes of the national “strategic culture” from the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharat and the Arthashastra of Kautilya, affirming the Hindu roots of world statecraft and diplomacy. Thus, former diplomat and current external affairs minister Dr. S. Jaishankar has said: “The Mahabharata is indisputably the most vivid distillation of Indian thoughts on statecraft.”²⁰

Foreign policy for Modi is thus a string of robust pronouncements that assert his strength and decisiveness and the country’s lofty global status. The reality is that what passes for Modi’s foreign policy has no basis in a longer-term vision of the national interest and a well-thought-out strategy to realize that vision or interest.

This is not surprising since the principal effort of the administration is to constantly consolidate the prime minister’s base and appeal at home. This is achieved through projecting on television screens the pageantry and ceremony that accompanies his external engagements, the honors conferred on him, and the respect with which he is received and his remarks heard.

This is complemented by Modi’s high-profile wooing of the Indian overseas community. He has been at his best in addressing large gatherings of the Indian diaspora, where he has enchanted them with his persona and wit, and has exuberantly drunk from the cup of their adulation as they repeatedly and exultantly chant his name.





India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi reviews an honor guard during the nation's 73rd Independence Day at Red Fort in New Delhi on Aug. 15, 2019. The event commemorated the end of Britain's colonial rule. (Prakash Singh / AFP via Getty Images)

On occasion this posturing has let him down. On the basis of India's hoary traditions, in January 2021 at Davos, Modi claimed for India the status of *Vishwaguru* ("world-teacher") for its success in fighting the COVID pandemic and saving the world from the scourge. Three months later, India was hit by the deadly Delta strain of the virus that felled India's health sector and caused the deaths of several thousand people. The national GDP declined and millions of Indians were pushed into poverty and hunger. At the same time, India's rich flourished through what French political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot has called "collusive capitalism": The richest 10% control about 78% of the national wealth; the richest 1% control 58%.²¹

Modi's nine years as prime minister have confirmed that the attainment of a *Hindu Rashtra*, founded on the robust and unrelenting implementation of Hindutva ideology, will remain the principal driving force of his government. This project will presumably gain further resonance and vigor as Modi moves into his third term as prime minister if he wins the 2024 elections.

The project has been remarkably successful. In the eyes of his support base, the sense of collective national resurgence and global achievement under Modi's leadership have not been diluted by credible facts relating to nongovernance or misgovernance; pervasive evidence of corruption and venality to benefit



a small coterie of cronies; gross misuse of state power and flouting of the rule of law; obvious failures to deliver on the economic front; and the systematic emasculation of national institutions that are intended to safeguard Indian democracy.

The prime minister and his cohorts are convinced that, regardless of the policies followed at home, other countries need India — for its markets; its huge opportunities for foreign investment; and the availability of its vast and talented human resources for the global corporate sector, as high-end technology specialists in the developed world, and across the employment ladder from blue-collar to technician to the professional in the Gulf.

This optimism could be misplaced. Every serious commentator on India's future trajectory on the world stage, including some who are Modi's fervent supporters, has warned that India's great power aspirations will be seriously jeopardized by the divisive policies being pursued at home. The security affairs writer Manoj Joshi has said that India does not face an existential threat from abroad, but that there is a significant danger from within, with "religion-related social hostilities [being] very high."²²

Ashley Tellis, an American commentator on India's great power aspirations, has emphasized the need to strengthen India's liberal democracy and, among other prerequisites, "preserve a normative order that celebrates diversity."²³ C. Raja Mohan points out that "India can't afford to lose its own internal coherence."²⁴ Indian journalist, activist, and author Aakar Patel believes that India's actions at home "repel nations familiar with and accustomed to a particular representation of what India, the civilisational entity, was. There appears to be little or no external benefit to India being a Hindutva-minded State."²⁵

Relations With the Middle East

India's relations with the Middle East go back several millennia: There is archaeological evidence of substantial commercial, religious, philosophical, and people-to-people interactions between India and the peoples in West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula during the Indus Valley Civilization (3300-1300 BCE).

These close ties have continued, uninterrupted, to the present day.

These relations were affected, however, by the Cold War — India was closer politically and ideologically to the Arab republics that emerged in various countries after the revolution in Egypt in 1952 than they were to Arab monarchies. The republics projected a strong anti-colonial posture, spoke of nationalism and socialism, and had a secular order. Arab monarchies, on the other hand, were part of the Western alliance and, led by Saudi Arabia, anchored their ideological moorings in Islam. However, though India had limited political interactions with the Gulf monarchies that were allied with Pakistan politically and militarily, starting in the 1970s, as oil revenues filled the coffers of the sheikhdoms, Indians steadily came to dominate the regional employment landscape.

As the Cold War ended, India's high growth rates, its increasing demand for the Middle East's energy resources, and its own economic and technological successes (particularly in information technology), along with the resilience of its democratic system and enduring commitment to multiculturalism, made India a model of all-around achievement and an attractive political partner for West Asian nations.

This began with the visit to Riyadh of Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh in January 2001, when the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, got rid of the constraints of the "Pakistan factor" in bilateral ties by pointing out that the kingdom would view relations with India as important in themselves, not to be influenced by Saudi ties with any other country. In January 2006, the Saudi ruler King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz visited India as the chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations and established "strategic energy ties" with India.

It wasn't until the extremist assault on Mumbai in November 2008 that Gulf leaders recognized the role of jihadism in India-Pakistan relations. It was clear that this was a jihadist attack planned and mounted by religious extremists who had been nurtured and mobilized by Pakistani institutions and personnel as instruments of state policy directed against India. The attack motivated the Gulf nations to partner with India in counterterrorism efforts. This became the basis by





The national flags of Israel and India stand in the campus of the Centre of Excellence for Vegetables in Vadrav, a village about 70 kilometers (40 miles) northeast of Ahmedabad, Gujarat state, in January 2018. (Sam Panthaky / AFP via Getty Images)

which the largely energy-, economy-, and community-based ties acquired a “strategic” value.

Saudi Arabia took the lead in pursuing a “strategic partnership” with India on the basis of expansion of ties in political, security, economic, and cultural areas, as set out in the Riyadh Declaration in February 2010. The partnership’s immediate achievement was intelligence-sharing in regard to extremist elements. Following this, other GCC countries also deepened bilateral security cooperation with India.

Ties Under Modi

Beginning in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi outdid all his predecessors in the frequency of his personal interactions with Gulf leaders, as well as in the results he obtained in order to give these relationships both variety and substance. In his first term as prime minister, Modi visited the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, and Israel, and

hosted at home then-Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This pattern of regular interactions with West Asian leaders continued in the early part of his second term, which began in 2019.

In every regional capital, the leaders conveyed that they saw India as their “strategic partner,” a status that reflected a high degree of shared perceptions and approaches on security issues. Thus, the 2015 joint statement with the UAE mentioned “shared threats to peace, stability and security,” and sought a “shared endeavour” to address these concerns. It referred to the need for the two countries to establish a “close strategic partnership” and called upon them to “work together to promote (regional) peace, reconciliation and stability.” The UAE also earmarked \$75 billion for investment in India’s infrastructure.



Similarly, the joint statement with Saudi Arabia spoke of the two countries' responsibility to promote peace, security, and stability in the region. It noted "the close interlinkage of the stability and security of the Gulf region and the Indian sub-continent and the need for maintaining a secure and peaceful environment for the development of the countries of the region."

In Tehran, Modi pointed out that India and Iran "share a crucial stake in peace, stability and prosperity" in the region and have shared concerns relating to "instability, radicalism and terror." The two countries agreed to pursue regional logistical connectivity projects and to enhance cooperation in defense and security.

The Indo-Saudi joint statement of February 2019 gave substance to the burgeoning "strategic partnership" between the two countries, with the bilateral dialogue being institutionalized through a Strategic Partnership Council set up at apex level to monitor progress. The Saudi side noted there were investment opportunities in India worth \$100 billion.

It is important to note that while the joint statements speak of strategic partnership, both India and Saudi Arabia recognize the central importance of economic ties. Saudi Arabia is particularly important to India in this regard. The kingdom is India's fourth largest trade partner: Two-way trade in 2021-22 was \$42.6 billion, while Saudi Arabia provided 18% of India's oil imports. The joint statements signed between the two countries have identified the following as new areas for bilateral cooperation: renewable energy, health care, food security, technology, climate change, and the defense industry sector.

Companies from the two countries are presently looking at connecting the Indian and Saudi coastlines with undersea cables to create a green energy grid to address problems stemming from fluctuations in supply of solar and wind energy. In the area of health care, the two countries are looking at joint medical research, adoption of best practices, and coordination in medical products regulations.

The UAE is the other significant regional partner for India. In recent years, these ties have been bolstered by regular high-level interactions, including the presence of the then-crown prince of Abu Dhabi (now

ruler of Abu Dhabi and president of the UAE), Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, as the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in 2017, and the UAE conferring its highest civilian award, the Order of Zayed, on the Indian prime minister in 2019.

In 2022, India and the UAE signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which exempts 80% of Indian goods exported to the UAE from customs tariffs; it is expected to boost bilateral trade from \$45 billion to \$100 billion in the next five years. The UAE's foreign direct investment in India has increased over the last few years and now stands at over \$12 billion. In the area of food security, the UAE has invested in India's organic and food processing industries, in addition to providing expertise to upgrade food transportation and storage facilities in India.

India's Ties With Israel and the U.S. Factor

Though India formally recognized the state of Israel in 1950, it backed the Palestinian cause and did not establish diplomatic ties until January 1992, though there were clandestine ties in the defense area.

As prime minister, Modi already had a history of personal engagement with Israel: He had visited Israel as chief minister of Gujarat in 2006 and had encouraged Israeli investments in his state in the dairy and agriculture sectors. During his first visit to Israel as prime minister in July 2017, he signaled a dehyphenation in India's interactions with Israel and the Palestine Authority: He did not visit Ramallah during his Israel visit, but instead invited President Mahmoud Abbas to India a month earlier and then paid a separate, stand-alone visit to Ramallah in February 2018, a month after Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to India.

Several commentators have noted the close affinity between Zionism and Hindutva: Both ideologies are founded on the marriage of faith and politics; both uphold the sacredness of territory on the basis of ancient holy texts and claim an exclusive right to their sacred land; above all, both view Muslims as the evil "other" and condemn them to second-class status (legally in Israel, in practice in India).^{26,27}





“ This new partnership [the I2U2] has been described as an ‘ad hoc, informal, issue-specific and geoeconomic initiative,’ highlighting that the partnership has no shared strategic vision and, hence, has no agenda in the area of regional security. ”

This strong ideological affinity is reflected in the positions adopted by Hindutva cohorts in response to Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Thus, in May 2021, when there were clashes in Gaza in which 253 Palestinians were killed, including 66 children, there were numerous tweets from Hindutva elements backing Israel; a BJP member of Parliament said: “We are with you. Stay strong Israel.”²⁸

However, Hindutva’s ideological ties with Zionism have not had any significant impact on bilateral relations. An Israeli commentator, Orshit Birvadker, has urged both countries to “remain pragmatic in their engagements with each other and not allow sentiment to cloud their decisions.” An Indian observer has described the two countries’ defense ties thusly: “It’s all hard cash and the rest is Israeli guile.”²⁹

Leaders in the GCC were not particularly concerned when India established formal diplomatic ties with Israel; most of them had had behind-the-scenes interactions with Tel Aviv for several years, with Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar even hosting Israeli trade offices in the 1990s.³⁰ India, for its part, pursued its traditional approach to the region on a bilateral and transactional basis, i.e., having substantial, mutually beneficial but separate ties with all the regional states, without allowing one relationship to impinge on the other.

The “normalization” of relations between the UAE and Israel in August 2020 encouraged India, the UAE, and Israel to enter into a trilateral partnership in May 2021, which evolved into a “Quad2” in October 2021 when the U.S. joined the triumvirate; it was renamed “I2U2” in July 2022.³¹ This new partnership has been described as an “ad hoc, informal, issue-specific and geoeconomic initiative,” highlighting that the

partnership has no shared strategic vision and, hence, has no agenda in the area of regional security.³²

This was affirmed by the I2U2 joint statement, issued in February 2023, after a meeting of the foreign ministers of the four countries, which said that the “grouping is intended to mobilise private sector capital and expertise” to pursue projects in infrastructure, public health, green technologies, and food and energy security.³³ The important point to note is that not only is there no shared strategic content in this partnership, but the lead role in pursuing projects will also be that of the private corporate sector, not the governments concerned.

India’s ties with the regional Arab states have not been influenced by India’s expanding defense ties with the U.S. over the last two decades. And other than the I2U2 initiative mentioned above, there has not been any serious effort to expand engagements with broader trilateral or quadrilateral partnerships. The exception is, of course, Iran — since 2004, Indian has continuously subordinated its ties with Iran to accommodate U.S.-led sanctions, even to the extent of compromising its energy, economic, and logistical connectivity interests.

Hindutva Interventions

India’s robust pursuit of Hindutva and its attendant hostility toward Muslims at home has, so far, had a limited impact on India’s flourishing ties with the GCC nations. Generally, the Gulf monarchies tend to avoid commenting on domestic developments in friendly countries; they have no interest in a reciprocal scrutiny of their own domestic situations, which have frequently involved questionable human rights practices in a



political order that is authoritarian and defined by a lack of transparency and accountability.

Thus, the monarchies avoided comment on the destruction of Babri Masjid in December 1992 and the attendant countrywide communal riots in which large numbers of Muslims were killed. Similarly, there were no adverse comments after the post-Godhra riots in Gujarat in 2002, when several hundred Muslims were victimized. The general position by GCC leaders was to affirm faith in the resilience of India's democratic and secular order and its ability to correct the "aberrations" that occur periodically.

During Modi's prime ministership, amidst the considerable mutual bonhomie, there have been two occasions when uneasiness in the Gulf monarchies about the implications of the Hindutva agenda became public. The first occasion was in March-April 2020 when tweets reflecting Hindutva abuse of Muslims for deliberately spreading the COVID-19 virus came to the attention of GCC nationals. The response came not from government sources but from private citizens, though there would certainly have been behind-the-scenes official support.

Thus, the principal response came from a royal family member from Sharjah, Sheikha Hend Al-Qassemi, who admonished the source of the abusive tweet for his "rudeness" and reminded him that his "bread and butter" came from the Muslim people he scorned and ridiculed. Later, the princess recalled Mohandas Gandhi as the "fearless campaigner for the rights and dignity of all people." Following this, several other commentators joined the chorus in noting that Islamophobia in India was "state-sponsored," and distinguishing the medical treatment being given to Indians afflicted by the virus in GCC countries from the abuse being heaped on Muslims in India.

Modi intervened in late April 2020 with a relatively mild tweet in which he said: "COVID-19 does not see race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language or borders before striking. Our response and conduct thereafter should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood." Though observers saw this remark as displaying "little conviction and less enthusiasm," it was sufficient to bring the exchange of tweets from the Gulf to a close.³⁴

The response of the GCC states to Hindutva abuse two years later shifted from private citizens to official interventions. In late May 2022, a BJP spokeswoman, Nupur Sharma, made remarks on national television that were viewed as abusive of Prophet Muhammad and his family. Clippings of the interview reached GCC officials 10 days later. Most GCC and some other Arab governments conveyed their displeasure publicly, either through official statements or directly to the Indian ambassadors who were summoned to the foreign offices. Nonofficial sources in the region also called for the boycott of Indian goods, with some even seeking suspension of oil supplies to India.

Given the strong and widespread criticisms, the BJP, treating this as a party rather than a government matter, suspended the membership of Nupur Sharma, charging her with expressing "views contrary to the party's position." In a public statement, the BJP's national general secretary recalled India's history where "every religion has blossomed and flourished" and affirmed that the BJP "respects all religions ... and is strongly against any ideology which insults or demeans any sect or religion."³⁵

"The Voice of the Global South"

The rivalry of the West with China has imparted a new strategic value to India: Western countries, led by the U.S., give lip service to democratic values and even seek to frame the ongoing competition with China in terms of democracy versus authoritarianism. Meanwhile, however, they have largely refrained from criticizing India for its shift toward an authoritarian order and the gross mistreatment of its 200-million-strong Muslim community. As Sumit Ganguly and Nicolas Blarel wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, "India remains too important an economic and geopolitical partner in the wider contest with China."³⁶

However, whatever the Western calculations, India will continue to emphasize its commitment to strategic autonomy, or "multi-alignment" in the new jargon. As Christian Wagner has explained, there is a continuity in Indian perceptions regarding its status as a "pole" in the world order — to be a separate and independent actor, not part of any alliance.³⁷ Rejecting any possibility of joining a Western alliance, in January this year, India asserted its leadership of the "Global





South” by convening, in its capacity as president of the G20, a hybrid summit of 120 developing countries. The conference was titled “The Voice of the Global South,” and took place under the theme “Unity of Voice, Unity of Purpose.”

Indian officials said the conference provided a common platform to deliberate “on those concerns, interests and priorities that affect the developing countries and ... to unite in voice and purpose in addressing these elements.”³⁸ A later report quoted the Indian external affairs minister as saying that as G20 president, “India would represent countries that are not on the G20 table.”³⁹

India championing the interests of developing countries recalls the Bandung Conference of 1955, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Group of 77 founded in 1964 to strengthen the interests of developing countries at the United Nations. However, the Modi government has preferred to project it as part of the prime minister’s vision, “*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas*” (“Global Unity, Global Commitment, Global Effort”), drawn from Indian traditions that uphold “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” (“The World Is One Family”), which is also the motto of India’s G20 presidency.

The leadership of the Global South appears to be a new “big idea” of the Modi government; not surprisingly, numerous commentators have swung into action extolling this development — one academic even said that India’s emergence as the voice of the Global South was “reshaping global order,” just as it had “disrupted” international relations during the Cold War and the post-1991 eras.⁴⁰

Leading the Global South draws heavily from Nehruvian traditions, much maligned by the Hindutva family, particularly the prime minister himself. More importantly, Modi hardly has the credentials to lead the Global South: The priority being given to the Hindutva agenda at home and the attendant abuse and mistreatment of the country’s large Muslim minority are hardly going to boost the confidence of the states of the Global South, particularly when many of them are Muslim countries or have large Muslim minorities.

Above all, most of Modi’s foreign policy initiatives and rhetoric “ring hollow, privileging optics over substance”; as noted earlier, they are aimed at bolstering Modi’s personal image before domestic constituencies.⁴¹

Outlook for India-Middle East Ties

Not surprisingly, India’s uncompromising pursuit of the Hindutva enterprise will have certain important consequences for its presence and role in the Middle East. The Nupur Sharma episode has affirmed that Modi has little inclination to moderate his Hindutva cohorts — they are his crucial support base and are essential to the realization of *Hindu Rashtra*. At the same time, GCC leaders, under pressure from large sections of their own citizens, are also finding it difficult to ignore events in India; social media respects no borders and is not easily controlled by governments.

These realities will set the limits on the content and direction of India’s ties with the Middle East. India’s principal area of cooperation with the region will be business — a widening role of the Indian corporate sector in the lucrative projects in the region. This will supplement the traditional ties founded on energy, trade, investments, and the employment of Indians in diverse economic enterprises. Clearly, despite the robust rhetoric contained in the numerous joint statements commemorating India-Gulf engagements, neither India nor the GCC countries see any prospect of a “strategic” content in the relationship — ties between the two sides will remain bilateral and transactional, and largely commercial in content, as they have been for the last several decades.

Over the last decade, despite the U.S. disengagement from the Middle East and the several advantages that India had to shape and pursue a strategic role in regional affairs, India exhibited neither the will nor the capacity to take its responsibilities to another level. It therefore dismissed the opportunity to view the region as a strategic space to promote peace and stability and, over time, with regional partners, shape a comprehensive regional security arrangement — that the Middle East desperately needs.

That role now belongs to China. A newcomer to the Middle East and, until now, diffident about playing



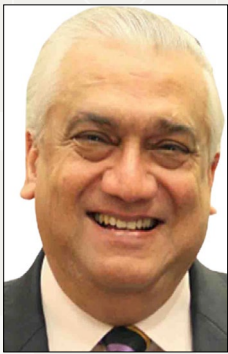


a political role in the region, China shrugged off its hesitations and brokered the Saudi-Iran peace agreement in March of this year, with itself as a party to the agreement and its effective guarantor. China has thus heralded the emergence of a new regional geopolitical scenario.

China assumed this responsibility as it recognized the crucial importance of a stable region where its energy and economic interests would be safeguarded and its Belt and Road projects – logistical, technological, and health-related – successfully implemented. It brought to the region a broad and constructive strategic vision

and was not daunted by the complexity of the region's divisions and disputes, or by its own limited experience in addressing these challenges.

For India, even the “business-as-usual” scenario that supports its economic interests might not be sustainable. As the hot winds of Hindutva blow through the country, with their attendant abuse, venom, and violence, and the nation is fractured along fault lines of faith, caste, language, region, and ideology, the state could experience regional and global isolation – becoming a pariah rather than the *Vishwaguru* it had aspired to be.



Talmiz Ahmad joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1974. Early in his career, he was posted in a number of West Asian countries such as Kuwait, Iraq, and Yemen, and later, between 1987-90, he was consul general in Jeddah. He also held positions in the Indian missions in New York, London, and Pretoria. He was the head of the Gulf and Hajj Division in the Ministry of External Affairs in 1998-2000.

He served as Indian ambassador to Saudi Arabia twice (2000-03 and 2010-11), to Oman (2003-04), and to the UAE (2007-10). He was also additional secretary for international cooperation in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas in 2004-06, and director general of the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi, in 2006-07. In July 2011, the Saudi government conferred on him the King Abdul Aziz Medal First Class for his contribution to the promotion of Indo-Saudi relations.

After retirement from foreign service in 2011, he worked in the corporate sector in Dubai for four years. He is now a full-time academic and holds the Ram Sathe chair in international studies, Symbiosis International University, Pune.

He has published four books: “Reform in the Arab World: External Influences and Regional Debates” (2005), “Children of Abraham at War: The Clash of Messianic Militarisms” (2010), and “The Islamist Challenge in West Asia: Doctrinal and Political Competitions After the Arab Spring” (2013). His latest book, “West Asia at War: Repression, Resistance and Great Power Games,” was published in early April this year.

He writes regularly in the Indian and West Asian media and lectures on the politics and economics of West Asia, Eurasia, and the Indian Ocean; political Islam; and energy security.

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Photo shows a portion of the border fence separating India and Pakistan near Ahknoor, India. The Indian government built the fence in the hopes that it would stop infiltrators. (Ami Vitale / Getty Images)

The Pakistan Factor in India's Rise: Not a Constraint, Still a Challenge

Michael Kugelman

Since independence in 1947, Pakistan has fought three major wars and one limited conflict with India, its eastern neighbor. It rejects India's rule over Jammu and Kashmir. It has harbored terrorists who staged attacks in India, and it has produced tactical nuclear weapons meant to target India. For decades, Pakistan has used prominent global platforms like the U.N. to center attention on India's policies, especially in Kashmir, in order to shame New Delhi.

For all these reasons, Pakistan has long posed a challenge to New Delhi. However, Pakistan is unlikely to constrain India's efforts to become a global power because of its own limited clout; its global image problem; its serious internal challenges, which give it strong incentives to minimize tensions with India; and India's capacity to neutralize Pakistan in South

Asia, where Islamabad has some influence. All this said, India is still vulnerable to asymmetric threats and destabilization risks emanating from Pakistan. Additionally, with India-Pakistan reconciliation not in the cards any time soon, there is always the risk of a fresh bilateral crisis that distracts India from its efforts to deepen its role on the global stage.

A Manageable Challenge

There are several reasons why Pakistan is unlikely to constrain India's global rise.

Power Asymmetry

India is a more powerful country, based on multiple metrics: It is larger, more populous, and has a bigger army. Its conventional military force capacities are,



on many levels, superior to those of Pakistan. This power asymmetry extends abroad as well. Pakistan lacks the global clout to counter India in the world. Because it is not a military, diplomatic, or economic power, it struggles to gain entry to the most prestigious and influential groupings, like the G20. Pakistan is certainly active in multilateral organizations regionally and around the world, from various U.N. bodies to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, and Organization of the Islamic Cooperation. But Islamabad doesn't enjoy enough clout within these groups to leverage them to undermine or isolate India. Pakistan does use the annual U.N. General Assembly meetings to condemn Indian policies. But strong criticism is no curb on India's activities or aspirations.

Image Problems

Another challenge Pakistan faces abroad is its image. Because of its legacy of military rule, accusations that it shared nuclear secrets with other countries, and state sponsorship of some terror groups, among other factors, it has struggled – especially in the West – to be seen as a credible, trusted actor. This means that Islamabad's messaging at the U.N. and other global platforms to highlight India's policies in Kashmir and its repressive actions more broadly will invariably fail to resonate with a critical mass of foreign governments. Indeed, such messaging often falls on deaf ears. Pakistan isn't helped by the fact that most countries – including those in the Muslim world – view India as an important trade partner and prefer to overlook the concerning Indian domestic policies flagged by Islamabad.

Relatively Calm Relations

Another reason Pakistan doesn't constrain India's rise is that the bilateral relationship, while always volatile, has settled into a relatively calm phase that has the potential to last for an extended period. Historically, one of the major triggers for tensions is the Line of Control (LoC), the disputed border that divides India- and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. It has long been a source of violence – whether in terms of Pakistani militants using the LoC to enter India-administered Kashmir to stage attacks, or cross-border firing between the two militaries. However, Islamabad and

New Delhi signed a new border truce in February 2021 that has produced significant decreases in violence.

Both countries today arguably have a strong, long-term interest in minimizing tensions. Pakistan's house is in complete disorder, with the country simultaneously facing an acute economic crisis, political paralysis, and a resurgence of Islamist terrorism. It can't afford – literally – any trouble with India. A telling data point came last year, when an Indian supersonic missile was accidentally launched and flew 75 miles across Pakistan before crashing to the ground. At another moment, this could have escalated into a major crisis. But Pakistan's response was remarkably restrained, with a sharply worded statement condemning the missile launch but not much else. Pakistan's "polycrisis" – especially its economic malaise – is as serious as it is complex, with no easy solutions, suggesting that Islamabad will want to ensure its relationship with New Delhi remains relatively trouble-free for quite some time into the future, so that it can focus on its internal issues.

India, meanwhile, confronts a growing threat from China on its northern border, and it doesn't want to be burdened by tensions on both its northern frontier with China and western frontier with Pakistan. In fact, New Delhi likely agreed to the border truce with Islamabad in great part to allow it to focus more on its northern border. To be sure, Islamabad has not forgotten about the bloody events of 1971, when Indian forces backed separatist rebels in what was then East Pakistan in a conflict that led to the new state of Bangladesh. Consequently, many Pakistanis insist that India still harbors designs on Pakistani territory, including Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Such concerns are likely misplaced. Given the extent of India's China challenge, the idea of India making a play for Pakistan-administered Kashmir – a move that could trigger a new war – is fanciful.

So long as India-Pakistan relations are relatively stable, as they are now, India's relations with Washington won't be impacted. The U.S. government strongly supports a workable India-Pakistan relationship, given that Washington's core interest in South Asia is stability. If India-Pakistan relations worsen, and especially if there is a serious crisis, U.S.-India relations could experience a distraction in that Washington





Indian Border Security Force personnel and Pakistani Rangers (in black) lower their respective flags during the daily beating of the retreat ceremony at the India-Pakistan Wagah Border Post, about 35 kilometers (22 miles) from Amritsar in November 2021. (NARINDER NANU / AFP via Getty Images)

would – as has been the practice in the past – seek to mediate to ease the crisis. The only scenario under which an India-Pakistan crisis could hurt the U.S.-India relationship is if India provokes a crisis or conflict – for example, by launching a preemptive military strike in Pakistan meant to deter a potential terrorist attack, or by unilaterally revoking the Indus Waters Treaty, an accord that apportions control of shared river water resources between upper riparian India and lower riparian Pakistan. Still, because Washington invests more strategic significance in its relationship with New Delhi than it does with Islamabad (it views India as its biggest strategic bet in South Asia to help counter China, a close ally of Pakistan), and because the U.S.-India relationship is simply more healthy, stable, and trust-based than the U.S.-Pakistan one, it's hard to imagine any type of India-Pakistan crisis, no matter the perpetrator, resulting in enduring harm for U.S.-India ties.

Viable Workarounds

A final reason why Pakistan is a manageable challenge for India is that New Delhi has viable workarounds that it can deploy in the one place abroad where Islamabad does have some reach and influence – and that is

South Asia itself. Pakistan doesn't have a legacy of warm relations with many governments in the region, but it is a member of the only South Asia-wide regional organization, The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and it has been able to project influence in Afghanistan through its longstanding ties to the Taliban.

However, SAARC has been ineffective, largely because it operates on unanimity and India and Pakistan rarely agree. In recent years, India has further weakened SAARC – and by extension Pakistan's agency as a regional actor – by leading efforts to scale up cooperation, mainly through electricity-sharing arrangements, with BIMSTEC. This is another South Asia regional organization, but Pakistan is one of two SAARC countries (Afghanistan is the other) that isn't a member. In effect, India has used sub-regionalization tactics to undercut Pakistan regionally.

Furthermore, Pakistan has seen its fortunes sink in Afghanistan. The Taliban takeover, instead of strengthening ties between Islamabad and Kabul, has instead produced serious tensions between the Taliban and their former Pakistani patron, mainly over terrorism and border issues. These tensions have



created an opening for New Delhi, which decided to partially reopen its embassy in Kabul in 2022. New Delhi hasn't recognized the Taliban regime, and its diplomatic engagements have been very limited. But at the least, Pakistan's strategic advantage in Afghanistan (relative to India) has been neutralized by its tensions with the Taliban and India's surprisingly nonhostile relationship with Taliban-led Afghanistan. The Taliban have called for good relations with India, and even vowed to deny space to terror groups that threaten it (such promises, however, should be regarded with skepticism, given the Taliban's long track record of not turning on its militant allies, which include the India-focused, Pakistan-sponsored Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed – both of which have enjoyed a presence in Afghanistan).

Pakistan's troubles in Afghanistan offer another possible geopolitical advantage for India: Tensions between Islamabad and the Taliban may complicate efforts pursued by Islamabad in recent years to generate new connectivity projects that link Pakistan and Afghanistan to Central Asia – a region that both India and Pakistan view as strategically significant, mainly because of its energy riches. One of the first initiatives in this regard is an accord envisioning a new transnational railroad that links Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan. New Delhi, meanwhile, is disadvantaged by a lack of direct land access to Central Asia, because Pakistan doesn't give India transit rights. Given this constraint, any setback for Pakistan would be a big boost for India, which has sought to strengthen ties with the Central Asian states in recent years. Its presidency of the SCO in 2023 gives it additional opportunities to enhance engagement with the region.

The China Contrast

It's instructive to contrast Pakistan with China, India's other rival, which poses much more of a challenge to India's global aspirations than does Pakistan. China is larger than India and has a bigger military. It routinely provokes India on their disputed border, and New Delhi has struggled to deter Chinese incursions. It has a deepening commercial footprint in South Asia, and a growing naval presence in the western reaches of the Indian Ocean region. For these reasons, as well as a border clash in 2020 that killed 20 Indian troops, the

India-China relationship is tenuous now than it has been at any other time since the two fought a war in 1962.

Additionally, China – a military and economic power – has the clout to counter India abroad. Beijing can wield its veto power to keep India out of prestigious global forums that New Delhi hopes to join – such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group and (if U.N. reforms were to allow for member expansion) permanent membership in the U.N. Security Council. Additionally, China has geopolitical leverage that can potentially be used in ways that imperil Indian interests. For example, the war in Ukraine is increasing cash-strapped Russia's economic reliance on Beijing. That growing reliance means more Chinese leverage. Beijing could well press Moscow – a longtime Indian friend – to reduce arms supplies to India, or to increase engagement with Pakistan.

In effect, China is powerful militarily, economically, and geopolitically. It has the capacity to check Indian power regionally and more globally, and its own relationship with New Delhi has hit rock bottom (this hasn't prevented robust bilateral trade, though India has a large trade deficit with China). Pakistan, by contrast, doesn't have this global clout. Additionally, its own policy focus for the foreseeable future is internal, meaning it has a strong interest in not picking any fights with India.

No Time for Complacency

This isn't to say that India's rise won't be impacted by Pakistan further down the road. Pakistan is not as powerful as India, but its alliance with China ensures a steady supply of military support from Beijing. So long as the U.S. and India continue to strengthen their relationship – bilaterally as well as through multilateral arrangements like the Indo-Pacific Quad – China and Pakistan will have strong incentives to elevate their own partnership. This means that India's policy of deepening partnership with Washington and its Pacific allies will make Pakistan stronger, because it will receive greater support from Beijing. Furthermore, Beijing can be counted on to amplify Pakistan's messaging against India with its own strong statements in global forums, including rhetoric that assails India's Kashmir policy.





Asymmetric Threats

Also, Pakistan has compensated for India's superior conventional military power by developing two asymmetric force capacities that pose threats to India. One is the harboring of anti-India militant groups. Pakistan has cracked down on these militants in recent years because of pressure from the Financial Action Task Force, a terrorism financing global watchdog that had put Pakistan on a watch list. But these networks have not been altogether dismantled. The second asymmetric force capacity is nuclear weapons (both countries officially became nuclear weapons states in 1998). Pakistan has never renounced a no-first-use policy, meaning that any exchange of hostilities, no matter how modest, runs the risk of a Pakistan-prompted nuclear escalation. The two sides have demonstrated a strong comfort level with using conventional force under the nuclear umbrella; in 2019, India responded to a terrorist attack by Pakistan-sponsored terrorists with a retaliatory air strike in Pakistan, which Islamabad followed with its own retaliatory air strike. The more conventional force used, the greater the chance of escalation to nuclear levels.

Destabilization Risks

To be sure, with Pakistan focused on its internal tumult, no conflict scenario is likely to emerge anytime soon. But Pakistan's internal crises could cause other types of concerns for India. Over time, the factors that make Pakistan's domestic turmoil especially concerning – default risks, a lack of cohesion within the military, low morale within the police, no coherent plan to tackle a terrorism resurgence – could trigger unrest and destabilization in the country. In reality, Pakistan's military would likely step in to avert a worst-case, civil-war-like scenario. But if not, New Delhi would face the risk of its own worst-case scenario: destabilization in Pakistan spilling into India. During a visit to New Delhi more than a decade ago, an Indian security analyst told the author: "If Pakistan goes down, we don't want it to take us down with it." Even though New Delhi is now focused laser-like on China – India's biggest security concern – that sentiment hasn't lost its relevance in India today.

India will hope that there will be enough stability not only in Pakistan, but also in New Delhi's relationship



Security officials offer funeral prayers next to the coffins of policemen who were killed in multiple explosions caused by fire in a munitions cache at a specialist counterterrorism police station in Kabal town of Swat Valley, in Pakistan's northwestern region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, on April 25, 2023. (Abdul Majeed / AFP via Getty Images)

with Islamabad, to ensure that Pakistan doesn't become a dangerous distraction to India's efforts to step up its global role.

Pathways to Reconciliation

Reconciliation, much less peace, remains elusive. Pakistan's internal mess means Islamabad has no policy bandwidth to allocate to such an ambitious goal – and India will have no interest in pursuing peace with a country in acute crisis mode. At any rate, any government in Pakistan would know that undertaking a formal dialogue with Narendra Modi, a hard-line Hindu nationalist leader, would be close to political suicide. This is because of the repugnance with which most Pakistanis view Modi, due to his policies in Kashmir – especially his decision to revoke India-administered Kashmir's special autonomous status – and his views and policies toward Indian Muslims. Modi and his





Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will likely be reelected for a third term in 2024 and stay in power for another five years. Because of the weakness of the Indian opposition, the BJP could well stay in power beyond then, even if Modi doesn't stay on as premier.

As for Modi and the BJP, they've talked tough on Pakistan since January 2016, when terrorists attacked an Indian air force base soon after Modi made a surprise visit to Pakistan (New Delhi accused Pakistan-sponsored terrorists of being behind the attack). Extending an olive branch to Islamabad wouldn't appear to be a politically prudent move for a ruling party that has consistently sought to isolate and ignore Pakistan – and that won reelection in 2019 and has triumphed in key state elections since then.

Any pathway to reconciliation would require confidence-building measures (CBMs) and other trust-generating acts. Tellingly, over the last few years, aside from the 2021 LoC truce, there have been precious few – and at a moment when they would have been especially helpful. India and Pakistan didn't establish any mechanism to cooperate during the COVID-19 pandemic. After Pakistan's catastrophic floods in 2022, there were no efforts to restore some border trade with India in order to allow Pakistan to import

badly needed cheap food products. India and Pakistan haven't established any new initiatives to combat air pollution, or other shared and worsening climate threats. Instead, earlier in 2023, fresh tensions broke out around the mediation mechanism for the Indus Waters Treaty – one of the few enduring triumphs of India-Pakistan cooperation.

One ray of hope did emerge in the spring of 2023, when Pakistan's foreign minister, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, accepted an invitation from New Delhi to attend a foreign ministers meeting of the SCO in Goa in May (India chairs the SCO in 2023). This development helped move the needle forward a bit, but it will amount to little without any follow-on CBMs – and the political environment in both countries militates against the possibility of bigger steps toward reconciliation.

At any rate, for India, CBMs are less of a priority than is the broader goal of minimizing tensions with Pakistan. New Delhi will face no shortage of obstacles in its efforts to become a bigger global player – from the rise of China to India's enduring struggles at home with defense manufacturing, poverty, and corruption. India would prefer that Pakistan not be added to this long list.



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People walk through a palace at Red Fort in Delhi. On India's Independence Day (Aug. 15), the prime minister raises the flag and addresses the nation there. (Reed Kaestner / Getty Images)

Being India: A Different Kind of World Power

Aparna Pande

Many are referring to 2023 as the “year of India.” India is the most populous country in the world, and has the fastest-growing economy. India’s economic growth, military potential, and democratic credentials are the reason that countries around the world have welcomed India playing a larger role in the global arena. Indians see their country as a rising global power and have long believed that India has a right to historical greatness. The belief that India, a great civilization, will one day

be a great power has meant that not only has India sought a seat at the global high table, but that it has been unwilling to allow the big powers of the day to dictate to it.

The world may look at India through the lens of its struggles with modernity, its economic obstacles, and its demographic challenges. For most Indians, however, India’s centuries-old civilization, its geographic location, its population comprising



one-fifth of humanity, its growing economic power and military strength, and its history make it an inevitability that India will be a great power not only in Asia but the world.

Indian Exceptionalism

This “Indian exceptionalism” rests on the faith that there is something unique about India that enabled it to gain independence without violence, revolution, or war. Indian discourse often speaks of an “Indian character” that will overcome odds and circumvent difficulties. For Indians, these are not just feel-good avowals, but rather reflect a deep-seated way of thinking, like the messianic vision of the United States.

Belief in the greatness of Indian civilization lies at the core of Indian nationalism and foreign policy. Indian leaders have often voiced the view that India was a “guide” for the world and had a “mission to fulfill.”¹ In the decades immediately after independence, this desire to be a global leader, albeit a moral one, manifested in the preaching overtones of Indian foreign policy. In recent years, the slogan that India is a “*Vishwaguru*” (“global teacher”) carries the notion forward.²

India’s interactions with the world are framed by civilizational and historical imperatives. It is not unusual for countries to argue that their path is unique and specific. But for India, this is more than a platitude. India has always sought to be viewed as an example to the world: The country is unique in maintaining a democratic system in a poor postcolonial state; its path of economic growth, emphasizing self-sufficiency, is different from others’.

India is a status quo power that has no revisionist ambitions in its neighborhood or beyond. India seeks to be an Asian and a global player, but lacks ideological or territorial ambitions beyond its immediate neighborhood. India seeks recognition as the regional hegemon, but a preeminence that is benevolent and status quo oriented. For India, power projection, both in its immediate neighborhood and beyond, is for recognition of status, not for aggrandizement of territory or rewriting of any global norms.

Indian Military Power Is for Defense Only

India retains a large military without being trigger-happy in deploying it beyond its borders. It sees itself as having global influence without viewing power as only the ability to coerce, unlike other regional or global powers. India does not believe it needs to be a security provider for the world or for Asia; it does not view military aid or assistance as aid. It has a very different view from that of many in the West.

India is already a global power in the minds of its public and officials, who believe the country should be seated at the global high table. For most Indians, India’s claim to the global high table comes from its unique civilization, its democracy and pluralism, its soft power, its economic strength, its geostrategic location, and only reluctantly its military capabilities.

At the core of India’s foreign policy lies a desire for autonomy in decision making, a holdover from the impact of British colonial rule, when that autonomy did not exist. The colonial experience left an indelible mark on India’s collective personality. During the British Raj, Indians were kept out of decision making, and instead subordinated to the interests of their colonial rulers.

The British Indian Empire forced Indians to fight distant wars with which they had little to do. While Indians were involved in local government and administration, they had nothing to do with foreign policy, which remained firmly in the hands of colonial officers and administrators. As a result, the key demand of India’s freedom struggle was the right for Indians to make decisions that affect their lives and their futures, i.e., self-determination.

The pursuit of an independent path was always tied to the moral certitude that India ought to be a beacon not only for Asia, but also for the entire world. India’s policies were framed so as to build a world based on ideals of peace and international friendship. To create this idealized world, India championed nonalignment; encouraged multilateral cooperation through the United Nations and regional organizations; and supported decolonization and disarmament, including universal nuclear disarmament.



Since the end of the Cold War, India's expanding economic and military capabilities have diminished the need for India to emphasize nonalignment. India is now able to go beyond trying to be a global leader through rhetorical moralizing alone, with the material capacity to engage in a more assertive and actionable foreign policy. Still, India remains averse to joining foreign-led alliances and its desire for strategic autonomy – one of the central tenets of nonalignment – remains unchanged. India wants to deal with the world's major issues without being tied down to a single great power or set of powers. It does not wish to be in a position where its stance is predetermined by alliance commitments.³

Indian foreign policy makers prefer a multipolar world.⁴ They believe that India, with its limited economic and military capabilities, can play a role at the global high table only when the world is not dominated by just one or two superpowers. In the past, that view led to India championing third-world nonalignment during the Cold War, and has endured as strategic autonomy in Indian foreign policy thinking through the post-Cold War era.

The future global order is likely to be dominated by a competition between the United States and China. This situation is markedly different from that of the Cold War, when neither of the two competing superpowers were in geographic proximity to India. China is India's neighbor, and a rival that covets parts of Indian territory. Moreover, China's desire for influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region challenges India in its backyard, setting off competition for the same sphere of influence.

India's Chinese Predicament

For Indians, China's rise creates the potential for a clash between two ancient Asian civilizations, intersecting at political, social, security, and economic levels. Since April 2020, troops belonging to the two most populous countries in the world have faced each other in the Himalayan region. This is the fourth time since 2012, and second time since 2017, that India was taken unawares by China seeking to change the ground reality along its border.⁵

India has consistently viewed China's expanding influence with suspicion. Since the India-China war of



A group of British expatriates, some in military uniform, sits outside their house in India, circa 1880. (Hulton Archive / via Getty Images)

1962, India has noted China's efforts to build close ties with countries on India's periphery – thereby possibly trying to encircle it – as well as its efforts to lay the groundwork for military and naval bases throughout the Indian Ocean region. With a population of more than 1 billion, India is the only country with enough manpower to match that of China. Thus, India's views of China and its policies will have an impact on any global attempt to counter China's rise.

Today, China is the top trading partner of all South Asian countries, including India. China is the top supplier of arms and military equipment to most South Asian nations. Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is also the leading provider of loans and leading builder of infrastructure. China controls important military and economic infrastructure in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Djibouti.⁶

For Delhi, the nightmare scenario is not simply a border conflict with China, but the specter of a two-front war with China and its all-weather friend Pakistan. While New Delhi has always been wary of the China-Pakistan relationship, the deepening military dimension has



led Indian defense strategists to think of newer ways to combat such an occurrence. India's response has been to rebuild relationships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region and deepen its strategic alignment with the United States and its allies in Asia.

India and the United States have overcome the distance and suspicions that arose out of India's refusal to align itself with the U.S. soon after its independence in 1947. The world's oldest and largest democracies have, over the last three decades, built a deep, multilayered, and likely enduring partnership. The United States views India as a critical partner in the Indo-Pacific, and Washington would like Delhi to play a larger role in South, Central, and Southeast Asia. India sees the United States as a partner in the containment of China, and India's ties with Russia, a legacy of the Cold War, are not more important to India than the evolving partnership with the United States. India remains at the heart of the U.S. response to its peer competition with China.

India and the Indo-Pacific Strategy

India is central to America's Indo-Pacific strategy as well as the Pacific Quad, the grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S., and is a key part of the West Asia Quad or I2U2 – India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. However, India is reluctant to cede power to any collective security mechanism, so as of now neither the Indo-Pacific Quad nor the West Asia Quad has a security dimension.

India is a Major Defense Partner (MDP) of the United States, and the two countries are more aligned today in the military realm than they have ever been in the past. India has signed all four defense-enabling agreements that U.S. defense partners normally sign for exchange of intelligence and technology in the military realm. This has enabled information sharing, bilateral and multilateral military exercises, maritime security cooperation, liaison officer exchanges, and logistical cooperation.

Yet India's preference for indigenization – namely, *Make in India* and *AtmaNirbhar Bharat* – will impose a limitation on how close a defense collaboration the two countries can share. Further, while cooperation in trade and technology between India and the United

States has increased substantially, India's age-old protectionism has hindered the commercial and economic pillar of the partnership to achieve its promise of \$500 billion in bilateral trade.

India's leaders have always insisted that they not only sought to advance India's own interests, but also to voice the collective interests of developing nations. India has often portrayed itself as an example for other poor and formerly colonized countries, primarily in Asia but increasingly all over the world. Seeing itself as a future major power, India has positioned itself as the voice of equanimity in international bodies, demanding that more powerful nations voluntarily cede some of their influence for the sake of greater fairness in international affairs. This has positioned India well as a partner for developing nations.

India's economic growth and rise in military capability in the last two decades have only enhanced the country's desire to play a leading role in the world. India is unwilling to change its policy of issue-based alignment or strategic autonomy, nor its refusal to be a "camp follower." While India is part of multiple minilateral arrangements with the United States and its allies, it is also a member of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the China and Russia Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This reflects India's pursuit of maximum options in foreign relations. It also reflects an Indian desire to create and be involved with international institutions that are not run by Western European powers or the United States of America.

As the president of G20 this year, India hopes to use the September G20 summit to showcase how it has leveraged its soft power, moral stature, and economic and military potential to befriend countries around the world. India also wants to use the G20 presidency to balance its close ties with the West and its historical claim to strategic autonomy and leadership of the world's have-nots. Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared at the Global South Summit, echoing India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, "India, on the one hand, maintains close relations with developed countries, and at the same time understands and articulates well, the point of view of developing countries."⁷



A Chinese soldier gestures as he stands near an Indian soldier on the Chinese side of the Nathu La border crossing between India and China, on July 10, 2008. (Diptendu Dutta/AFP via Getty Images)

India's long-term goal is to seek reform of the U.N. Security Council such that it might be given a permanent seat in that body. But India also knows that U.N. procedures make such reform unlikely anytime soon. It is, therefore, trying to use fora such as G20 and the Global South Summits to continue advancing the case for reform of multilateral institutions, catering to demands of less-developed countries.

India has always sought a multipolar world order because that is the only way that India, with its capacities and capabilities, will be able to play a role. However, as a status quo power India has never been interested in overturning or changing the world order by force. Instead, it has sought to ensure that its own interests and desire for autonomy were secure,

irrespective of the world order – be it the Cold War or post-Cold War era.

India Between Realism and Idealism

For all its vocal moralistic idealism, India's foreign policy has a hard-nosed realist underpinning.

For instance, India's primary grievance tied to the Ukraine conflict is geopolitical. India's response has been a continuation of its past policies. It has consistently avoided taking sides in conflicts, going back to the Soviet Union invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Afghanistan in 1979. Even when Iraq's dictator, Saddam Hussein, invaded Kuwait in 1990, India refused to go beyond "deploring" the move.⁸

The United States and Europe are India's top trading partners and strategic partners. India's relationship with the United States is its closest of any country, and India's vision of the Indo-Pacific security architecture is closely aligned with that of the United States as well. However, every country's foreign policy is based on its geographical compulsions and its security interests. It is to hedge against threats along its borders with China and Pakistan that India persists in its Cold War-era partnership with Russia. While the U.S. is now waking up to the prospect of peer competition with China, India has always seen China as a threat. It is in India's interest to ensure that Russia does not side with China in India-China disputes.

India's geographical compulsions dictate a preference for a stronger Russia that exerts a check on a rising China. A weaker Russia that is dependent on China creates multiple challenges for India. India's balancing act must be understood in the context of Russia's position as its historical – and ongoing – defense supplier. This is a legacy of the Cold War era, when the West was reluctant to share technology with India and the Soviet Union helped build India's industrial base, especially in the military realm. Russia remains one of India's top arms suppliers, and 70% of India's military arsenal is still of Russian origin.

The United States has a natural geographic advantage that India does not, with no threats on its immediate land or maritime borders. India, like many countries in the Global South, would like to manage relations



with China while also having the security and other benefits of close ties with the U.S. For its part, the U.S. and many of its allies appear willing to concede that India's diplomatic leverage and soft power are useful for their goals in a world that no longer sees America as the sole superpower.

China lays claim to large segments of Indian territory and is a greater source of unease for India than were the superpowers during the Cold War. Then, the policy

of nonalignment helped India maintain good relations with both the U.S. and the Soviet Union, without having to pick sides during conflicts.

A seemingly bipolar world, with China and the United States as the two contenders for preeminence, is anathema for India as it would force India to make choices between the two countries – something it has studiously avoided doing throughout much of its history.



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An Indian air force Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jet takes off during joint exercise “Cope India 2023” between the U.S. Air Force and the Indian air force at the Kalaikunda Air Force Station in West Bengal state on April 24, 2023. (Dibyangshu Sarkar / AFP via Getty Images)

Projection of Power

Ghazala Wahab

It is tempting to conflate India’s military spending and its large armed forces with military power. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) lists India among the five largest spenders on defense behind the United States and China, both formidable military powers engaged in global rivalry for strategic space and influence. Therefore, it is natural to assume that as the third (or sometimes the fourth; last year, Saudi Arabia sneaked into the third position) contender on the list, India would at least be a rising military power.

The devil is, however, in the details of this military spending – both in its volume and where it is spent. Statistics come in handy for both. While the U.S. spent \$801 billion on its military and China \$293 billion U.S. in 2021, India spent \$76.6 billion that year. This figure dropped to \$61 billion in 2022.¹ Even more interesting is where this money went. In its 2023 report, SIPRI once again listed India as the biggest arms importer in the world.²

Clearly, spending on weapons cannot be a measure of military power, which has to be judged by the



deterrence value a nation has. Put simply, in India's case, its military power can be seen from whether its adversaries, China and Pakistan, are deterred by its potential to inflict military punishment on them. If indeed they were deterred, would Pakistan continue with the proxy war against India in Kashmir? Would China violate the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and occupy Indian territory?

Military power is a coalescence of three critical elements: military-industrial complex, political determination, and secure homeland. As history of the past century has shown, size, either of the armed forces or the nations, does not matter. Smaller nations and forces have been able to cause big powers enormous grief.

India's military power has been tested mostly against Pakistan, a much smaller country geographically, economically, and militarily, where, barring the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the conflicts have ended in a stalemate, with peace achieved by mutual give and take through international intervention. The only time India fought against a bigger nation, China in 1962, the war ended in defeat, including loss of territory. Since India's military power is mostly presumed rather than proven, it is only fair to measure it against the three parameters mentioned above.

Military-Industrial Complex

The primary purpose of any defense industry is to serve the nation's armed forces. For this, the industry needs to work in

close coordination with both the political dispensation and the military to stay in step with anticipated threats, as well as the means to mitigate or counter those threats. Only with this three-way cooperation can the industry produce what the military needs. This is referred to as the military-industrial complex (MIC), where the three stakeholders – the military, which projects the requirements and uses the equipment, thereby placing its trust in it; the government, which approves the requirements and finances them; and the industry, which develops and manufactures the required systems and technologies – work in close coordination.

Defense exports, which are regarded as the touchstone of quality and competitiveness, are a byproduct of the above coordination. Since national military requirements are finite and ever evolving, and the weapons-development process long and capital intensive, it's impossible for industries to sustain themselves solely on the basis of domestic supply. That's why, once the domestic requirements are met, similar technologies/systems/platforms, etc., are offered to global customers. One critical prerequisite for defense exports is induction or operationalization of the equipment by the home military. That is the biggest source of marketing for any military product. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq propelled the export of weapons systems successfully deployed in these theaters. After all, if a country's own military has little or no faith in the weapons systems produced by its industries, how can others trust it?

Herein lies the truth about India's military-industrial complex: If India is the largest importer of military hardware worldwide, clearly the Indian defense industry has been unable to meet the requirements of the Indian military. The domestic defense industry is critical for any nation's military power for two reasons. One, it ensures independence of foreign policy; and two, it gives the nation the confidence to employ military force in service of national interests without worrying about sustaining such employment, because the domestic industry would step up production of ammunition to meet the military requirements. From World War II to the current Russia-Ukraine conflict, military campaigns have long been sustained due to a surge in production of defense equipment by the domestic industries.

Dependence on foreign military supplies restricts a country's foreign policy choices, and consequently its capacity to wage a military campaign. For instance, the U.S. has put restrictions on Pakistan's use of F-16 fighters against India. And India's dependence on Russian weapons comes in the way of its relations with the U.S.

Two conflicts in particular, separated by over two decades and united by the similar lack of military preparedness because of overdependence on defense imports, underscore the importance of the domestic defense industry. In the summer of 2020, when Chinese troops sauntered into Ladakh and occupied up to 1,000 square kilometers of Indian territory,³ apart



Indian army soldiers demonstrate the positioning of a Bofors 155mm howitzer near Tawang in India's Arunachal Pradesh state in October 2021. The exercise was near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China. (Money Sharma / AFP via Getty Images)

from the shock and awe, what paralyzed the Indian government was the realization that it was militarily unfit to take on the PLA. This forced the government of India to do two things.

One, it rushed into signing a joint statement with China in September 2020 in Moscow (mediated by Russia) that disproportionately favored Beijing.⁴ It eschewed the mention of the LAC and only made passing reference to the amorphous "border areas." Moreover, it talked only of disengagement and not de-escalation, implying that PLA troops would not retreat from the Indian territory they had occupied, and that disengagement would happen on Indian territory, which meant Indian troops would need to step back further.

Two, it authorized the emergency import of materiel worth Rs 5,000 crore (about \$610 million U.S., per the current rate) in 2020 for the Indian military.⁵ Apart from equipment, this included creature comforts, such as insulated all-weather tents, high-altitude clothing, and shoes for the troops deployed overnight in eastern Ladakh to resist further Chinese intrusions. The noteworthy point here is that the Indian troops depend upon imports for even nonlethal equipment, such as clothing and habitat.

China's actions of 2020 brought back memories of Pakistan's intrusion in the Kargil sector of Ladakh in 1999, which led to what is popularly remembered as the Kargil conflict. In the winter of 1998-1999, irregular troopers aligned with the Pakistan army

moved into Indian military posts on the mountain range abutting western Ladakh, which the Indian army used to vacate in winter due to harsh weather conditions.

With over a decade-long engagement in counterinsurgency operations in the restive state of Jammu and Kashmir (since 1989), the Indian army was both distracted and disoriented from conventional war. Hence, when it discovered Pakistani irregulars on high-altitude locations in the Kargil region overlooking Indian territory, it went into panic mode. This was further aggravated by Defense Minister George Fernandes' assertion that intruders would be thrown out within 48 hours.⁶

The Kargil conflict was India's moment of truth. Left with no choice, Chief of Indian Army Staff General V.P. Malik told the media that, "We will fight with whatever we have."⁷ Even if the chief hadn't spoken, the weapon-exporting nations knew the truth of India's defense preparedness as bureaucrats got busy either calling up friendly nations for emergency ammunition or flying out with suitcases to purchase spares in hard currency.⁸

Eventually, the Indian army and air force managed to evict Pakistani intruders at a great cost. According to statistics from the government of India, 527 died and 1,363 were wounded⁹ in a conflict that the Pakistan air force did not join. The government was shaken enough to set up the Kargil Review Committee (KRC), which among other conclusions faulted India's premier Defence Research



“ The Kargil conflict was India’s moment of truth. Left with no choice, Chief of Indian Army Staff General V.P. Malik told the media that, ‘We will fight with whatever we have.’ ”

and Development Organisation (DRDO) and government-owned defense companies for letting the nation down. To reform this state of affairs, KRC recommended opening up defense manufacturing to private companies, which were deemed to be more efficient and accountable.¹⁰

Fired up by the idea, in 2001 the government declared “self-reliance” in defense as the way forward. Certain reforms were initiated to bring the private sector into defense manufacturing (even if as small-time suppliers). A defense offset policy was promulgated, which stipulated that all original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) invest a certain percentage of their total sales into the Indian defense industry to give it a leg up. When it was discovered that the Indian defense industry did not have enough breadth to absorb the windfall of offsets and the OEMs were failing to meet their obligations, the scope was extended to civil aviation. When even that was found inadequate, offset scope was broadened further to include homeland security and, subsequently, infrastructure building.

Over the years, the defense procurement procedure (DPP) and the offset policy were repeatedly reformed. The idea was that the

purchase of defense equipment should also lead to capacity building of the Indian industry by absorption of technology and adoption of global best practices. But in effect, all of this led to further complicating the procedure, adding multiple categories and subcategories for procurement, thereby adding substantial latency to the process of importing defense equipment.

The complicated procurement procedure created room for agents, which the Indian system criminalized, both to simplify the process and to negotiate the labyrinthine Indian regulations. The latency led to possibilities of corruption at the various levels of bureaucracy.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, he did two things to give a push to the defense industry. He renamed DPP as Defence Acquisition Policy (DAP), and the slogan of “self-reliance” was replaced by “Make in India.” After his 2019 election victory, “Make in India” was renamed “*Aatmanirbhar Bharat*,” which actually is the Hindi translation of “self-reliance.”¹¹ This was not only going back in time linguistically, but an admission that the Indian military-industrial complex was running on a treadmill.

Two examples particularly demonstrate this. In 2001, the Indian air force (IAF) expressed that it needed 126 multirole combat aircraft (MRCA) to replace those it intended to retire progressively over the coming few years. Following government approval, a request for information was issued to six major fighter manufacturers. Based on the information received from those manufacturers, the IAF issued a request for proposal in August 2008, and the competition began among the contenders – United States’ Boeing and Lockheed Martin, France’s Dassault Aviation, the European Union’s Eurofighter consortium, Sweden’s Saab, and Russia’s United Aircraft Corporation. Of the 126 fighters, 18 were to be bought off the shelf and 108 were to be built in India under transfer of technology (ToT).

After a rigorous process of trials and evaluation, in 2011 the IAF shortlisted Eurofighter consortium’s Eurofighter Typhoon and Dassault Aviation’s Rafale as fighters that best met its requirements. By 2012, the Ministry of Defence’s price negotiation committee shortlisted Rafale as the most cost-effective fighter through its service life. Then started the process of protracted discussion with Dassault Aviation over ToT to the Indian partner Hindustan Aeronautics



A Dassault Rafale fighter jet being is accorded a water salute during its induction ceremony on September 10, 2020 in Ambala, India. The aircraft is a part of the Golden Arrows squadron. It was one of the first five Rafals fighters that arrived at Ambala Air Force Station from France in July 2020. Indian. (Ajay Aggarwal / Hindustan Times via Getty Images)

Limited (HAL) and support to Indian manufacturing of the fighter, among other matters. The discussions continued for several years, but two niggling issues remained unresolved.¹²

Dassault refused to guarantee the cost of the fighters to be built by HAL. Since HAL would be building a fighter of this complexity for the first time, Dassault presumed that there would be unexpected time and cost overruns, despite its hand-holding. Second, Dassault refused to stand guarantee for the HAL-built aircraft; it insisted that HAL stand guarantee, but the IAF did want HAL's guarantee.¹³

Eventually, the program was scrapped in 2015 when, during his visit to France, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that India would buy 36 Rafales in

flyaway conditions from France – no strings attached. Incidentally, the Cabinet Committee on Security's (CCS) approval for the purchase came 16 months after the prime minister's announcement. In normal circumstances, CCS approval comes before the purchase decision.

Meanwhile, with a fast-depleting fighter fleet, the IAF's struggle to acquire more fighters continued. In 2018, it again floated the proposal for importing fighter aircraft, despite HAL producing a Light Combat Aircraft with nearly 60% indigenous content by value, and DRDO promising a fifth-generation Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft in the years to come. This time, the IAF referred to its hunt for "multirole fighter aircraft," instead of using the earlier jinxed term "multirole combat aircraft."

The Indian navy's quest for submarines has been equally long-drawn. In 1997, the navy envisaged a 30-year plan to attain self-sufficiency in submarine building, and got government approval in 1999. Under the plan, the navy was to procure six submarines from a European nation, and six from Russia (as their design philosophies were different), under ToT. Following the experience of building 12 submarines under ToT, the idea was that the Indian defense shipyards would gain enough expertise to build another 12 "indigenous" submarines. Hence, within 30 years, India would have 24 operational submarines and the capability to make as many as it wanted. That, however, was not how the plan worked out.

For the first leg of the plan, the navy chose the French submarine



Scorpene, built by DCNS (now renamed Naval Group). The Indian partner shipyard was Mazagon Dock Limited (MDL). But as in the case of Dassault Aviation, DCNS found MDL not adequately fit to build the Scorpene submarines. Hence, the negotiations dragged. The agreement was finally signed in 2005, after the government of India agreed that DCNS would not only create the supply chain for submarine building, but would also have total control over the construction process – in effect, ensuring that submarines were merely being assembled at MDL under DCNS's supervision. Since DCNS had to replicate the full French supply chain in India, the program got inordinately delayed. Consequently, the sixth submarine of the program is still under construction, 26 years after it was first envisaged.

The second line of submarines is still at the tendering stage. Of course, there is no longer any question of India building its own indigenous 12 conventional submarines, because the technology is fast approaching obsolescence. The Indian Ocean region is already crawling with Chinese nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed submarines. India's indigenous and not-so-secret program to build nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed submarines (SSNs and SSBNs) with Russian help remains primitive compared to the technology deployed by militarily powerful nations, including both Russia and China. Hence, they are at best technology demonstrators on the learning curve, rather than operationally deployable lethal weapons.

The Indian MIC is full of such stories of half-hits and several misses, across services and platforms, from cruise missiles to artillery guns. The only measure of success has been the helicopters built by HAL and surface warships built by assorted defense shipyards. Both these systems have substantive imported content by value, including critical components like engines and weapons, despite being made in India. Indian industry tom-toms these as signs of indigenization, citing the example of the interdependent global defense industry, where it is common practice to buy components for one platform from specialist manufacturers, including those from outside the country.

This argument misses one important point, however. When Boeing, as the manufacturer of fighter plane Super Hornet, buys engines from General Electric and missiles from Raytheon, it's a collaboration between three expert U.S. companies on a platform, each with stakes in it. This is not the case when HAL pays hard currency to import engines from a British or an American company. All nations with credible military force have the capability to produce their own weapons systems; they resort to importing components only for commercial reasons, and mostly for the export of their platforms.

Absence of effective and capable defense industry impacts not only defense preparedness, but also budgetary priorities. For instance, in the 2023 Indian defense budget, the largest chunk of capital expenditure (CapEx) was earmarked for the Indian air force because of

the installment that had to be paid to Russia for the S-400 air defense missile system.

The second largest chunk went to the smallest of the three services, the Indian navy. This was understandable, as the navy had recently inducted the indigenously built (with almost 50% imported content by value) aircraft carrier INS Vikrant. Vikrant does not yet have its own berthing space and is making do with L&T's facility at Kattupalli in Tamil Nadu. Additionally, the navy has also contracted for a number of surface vessels, both in India and Russia, for which installments have to be paid. The army, despite being the largest service and its emergency procurements due to the Ladakh crisis, got the smallest piece of the CapEx pie.

Clearly, dependence on imports guides the budgetary allocations and puts limits on what the government can or cannot do. It is obvious that there is no substitute for building an effective and credible defense industry. The answer to why India has repeatedly failed to do that lies in the second aspect of military power: political determination.

Interests Over Determination

The building of a defense industry is as much a matter of ability as of political determination. As early as the 1960s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) understood that science had to be harnessed both for the nation's defense and for the welfare of the people. It modeled its Academy of Sciences on the Soviet system, and sent its scientists



“ A consequence of these multipronged, sustained efforts of decades is that today China is regarded as a military threat by the U.S., so much so that the U.S. believes it needs a coalition of nations, in the form of QUAD, AUKUS, and so on, to contain it. ”

in hordes to the Soviet Union to study and train.

Once relations with the West had improved, the PRC sponsored its students to study in the best institutions around the world in technologies that could be harnessed for military purposes. Even today, nearly 300,000 Chinese students study STEM subjects in U.S. universities,¹⁴ the largest foreign student community in the world, of which nearly 90% return home.¹⁵ Interestingly, many natives who return to China do so after working in U.S. laboratories and companies for a few years, leading to the suspicion that they carry with them their research work, including sensitive technologies, which U.S. investigators are likening to creative theft.¹⁶

A consequence of these multipronged, sustained efforts of decades is that today China is regarded as a military threat by the U.S., so much so that the U.S. believes it needs a coalition of nations, in the form of QUAD, AUKUS, and so on, to contain it. China also figures in the list of the top five military equipment-exporting countries behind the U.S., Russia, and France.

The Indian story contrasts sharply with this. A few years ago, a

Russian technocrat with one of the biggest defense companies (dealing with air defense systems) told this author that the Russian government had offered India a few seats for DRDO's midlevel scientists in the defense company's laboratories. The government of India proposed that the agreement be made between the Russian and Indian governments through a memorandum of understanding on shared manufacturing and defense technology transfer, rather than between the institutions. Russia declined the proposal.

Indian policymakers always had an ad hoc and short-term approach to military capability building. Hence, they preferred shortcuts to procurements instead of long-term investments in design and development. This impacted India's industrial capacity building. Obsessed with keeping the military out of the policy-making loop to ensure that the civilian supremacy was not challenged, the government never realized the importance of the indigenous defense industry. As long as the equipment was made in India, it was content that jobs were being created and government-owned companies were churning out materiel that was needed for the military. Whether the Indian companies were developing

capabilities to build new equipment based on emerging requirements of the military was immaterial. If the Indian military's requirements changed, new weapons systems would be purchased, and a new ToT line would be started to keep the wheels of the government businesses running.

For example, the government-run Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL) started making the Milan anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) on ToT from European company MBDA in the late 1970s. Today, BDL proudly lists Milan as its missile in its portfolio, despite the fact that not only does it not hold the intellectual property rights to the technology, it also doesn't have the capacity to use that learning to produce a new ATGM.

This is not an isolated case. Take BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, which is a joint venture between DRDO and NPO Mashinostroyenia of Russia. The name itself is a combination of the Brahmaputra and Moskva rivers. More than 50% of the critical components of the missile by value come from Russia for assembly in India. Yet the Indian government promotes it as an Indian missile.

There are innumerable such cases across domains, from



fighters to tanks to artillery guns. A measure of how much the government values indigenous research and development can be taken from the 2023 defense budget, in which only 10% of the CapEx has been earmarked for R&D. The government also gave a sense of where this 10% would be spent – in buying systems from global technology partners and manufacturing them in India through joint ventures. Today, almost all Indian defense R&D and manufacturing companies have a foreign technology partner. The resultant equipment is given an Indian name and proudly proclaimed to be made in India in pursuance of *Aatmanirbhar Bharat*. Essentially, the slogan is the policy.

Unfortunately, military power is not built on slogans.

If there were political determination to build an indigenous defense industry, the government of India would have sponsored Indian scientists to study abroad and subsequently nurtured them in Indian laboratories. It would have fixed accountability for both state-owned defense research and manufacturing organizations instead of running them like any other bureaucracy, where competence and incompetence are treated the same, with job certitude and pension benefits. It would have disinvested substantially from state-run defense companies, allowing the private sector to buy stakes in them, leading to a true private-public partnership. This would have ensured both competitiveness and accountability. It would have instituted a long-term, bipartisan fund for defense

research, design, and development. Most importantly, instead of projection, it would have focused on achievable technologies.

Homeland Insecurity

India has unresolved border issues with two of its big neighbors – China and Pakistan. It has military lines with both, the Line of Control and Line of Actual Control, which need to be defended by force. This requires continuous deployment of the military, lest the adversary try to change the military line by force. Pakistan tried to do this in 1999 in Kargil, and China has been doing it regularly for the past 20 years. As mentioned earlier, in 2020, it actually changed the LAC in Ladakh.

While the raging insurgency in Kashmir is globally well known, the lesser-known problems continue to linger on in Central and Northeast India. The most recent reminders of these were the ambush of 10 security personnel in Chhattisgarh by Maoist extremists in the last week of April 2023, and the death of more than 54 civilians from sectarian violence in the restive state of Manipur in the first week of May 2023.¹⁷ Add to this the unresolved Naga problem, where the peace process continues to elude an agreement.

However, the most dangerous internal security worry is the growing radicalization of the Hindu majority in India.¹⁸ Once regarded as fringe and not deserving of being taken seriously, the extremist organizations, such as the Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Ram Sene, Hindu Mahasabha, and so

on, now operate with impunity, and with tacit official sanction. At their mildest, these organizations talk about annihilating Muslim citizens of India, urging Hindus to pick up arms. At their worst, they form vigilante groups to stalk, terrorize, and sometimes kill ordinary citizens, largely Muslims and noncaste Hindus, such as Dalits, but also Christians. When the Congress Party said in its election manifesto in the state of Karnataka in April 2023 that it will seek a ban on Bajrang Dal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi likened the organization to the Hindu deity Hanuman. He urged the people to cast their votes against Congress by invoking Lord Hanuman.¹⁹

Today, India is the most populous nation in the world, with 65% of its population below the age of 35.²⁰ Of this, 7.8% is unemployed.²¹ However, unemployment figures are misleading, as they do not take into account the underemployed (such as people dependent upon underpaying family businesses or farming), seasonally employed (such as farm laborers), and temporarily employed (such as those working below their educational qualifications). Each of these situations leads to dissatisfaction and frustration, creating conditions for anger and radicalization, especially when told that their lives and meager resources are under threat of being usurped by Muslims.

Several experts have been warning that progressively there will be increased violence²² and disenfranchisement of India's Muslim minority,²³ which is nearly 13.5% of the total population.



All of this is a source of huge internal instability, which combined with external threats leads to an extremely vulnerable nation. The present government, despite being democratically elected with full majority, remains insecure. It is forced to coerce opposition into silence by using investigative agencies like CBI, NIA, Enforcement Directorate, Income Tax, and so on as a Damocles' sword over their heads.²⁴ Ordinary citizens who have been critical of the government and its policies are arrested and often charged under nonbailable acts such as the National Security Act or Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, thereby ensuring that they remain incarcerated without a trial.²⁵

The government also frequently resorts to suspension of the internet and other communication services in areas it deems to be trouble spots.²⁶ Additionally, India ranks high among countries with a poor record of press freedom.²⁷ All of this has led international democracy watchers to criticize India as being only theoretically democratic.²⁸ Such international opprobrium makes the government both defensive and offensive by turns.

All of this notwithstanding, India's biggest worry should be that it has not been able to resolve any of its internal security challenges since independence. The oldest

Indian insurgency – the Naga insurgency – continues to fester. The Kashmiri insurgency demands the attention of nearly one-third of the Indian military, in addition to money. According to statistics from the government of India, between 2000-2016, Rs 1.14 lakh crore (about \$13.9 billion U.S., per the current rate) was spent on holding onto the state.²⁹ And the Maoist insurgency continues to take its toll in spurts. Now with communal polarization, the government of India is cleaving open another front.

Far from being an emerging military power, India has never in its history been more vulnerable than it is in the present moment.



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U.N. member flags fly at the U.N. headquarters in New York City. (Getty Images)

India on the Long Road of Security Council Reform

Syed Akbaruddin

In 2023, India's population is estimated to be the largest on the planet, surpassing China's for the first time in more than 200 years.¹ It is a turning point the world is unlikely to see again for centuries.² Such demographic transitions have geopolitical consequences.³ Yet the United Nations Security Council, which acts on behalf of "we the peoples"⁴ and serves as a center for harmonizing the actions of nations⁵ while addressing international peace and security, is bereft of representatives from India, a sui generis state with the largest democratic agglomeration of humankind in history.

This omission is a metaphor for the inability of international organizations to keep pace with changing realities. The situation has come about not for lack of awareness of major nations about the desirability of Security Council reform. Pathways to reform have long been on the table. In the early 1990s, India and its Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) partners initiated this phase of the post-Cold War reform process by enshrining the "question of equitable representation and increase in the membership of the Security Council" on the agenda of the U.N. General Assembly.⁶ Since then, the role of international organizations



in global affairs has changed considerably. The role of the United Nations Security Council has also evolved in form and content. Yet Security Council reform has remained a collection of plans, processes, consensuses, and negotiations to nowhere.⁷

India's active engagement on matters related to Security Council reform pre-dates the current efforts. India has consistently promoted structural change of the U.N. Security Council for decades.

India, in the initial years of the U.N., never accepted the gentlemen's agreement arrived at informally among the permanent members of the Security Council in 1946 as guidance for distribution of the nonpermanent membership because it was never discussed or adopted by the general membership.⁸

When the effort initiated by the Latin American states in the 1950s to expand the nonpermanent members from six to eight⁹ sputtered on account of Soviet objections linked to Cold War differences with the West, it was India, as the champion of the NAM, that led a chorus of voices calling for the enlargement of the council.¹⁰ Collectively, the Afro-Asian NAM states and the Latin states proposed an increase of nonpermanent members from six to 10 and the total membership from 11 to 15, citing the significant increase in the total membership of the U.N. from 51 in 1945 to 113 in 1963. The reform also formalized the geographical distribution of nonpermanent seats to four regional groups, ending the informal gentlemen's agreement.¹¹ It led to adoption of the U.N. General Assembly resolution 1991/A (XVIII) on Dec. 17, 1963, and resulted in the coming into effect of the only amendment of the U.N. charter on Sept. 1, 1965.¹²

In 1979, India was among the 10 NAM members that proposed the inclusion of a new item on the agenda of the General Assembly on the "equitable representation on and an increase in the membership of the Security Council." The aim was to increase the nonpermanent membership of the council in light of increases in the membership of Afro-Asian states of the U.N. to 152, from 113 in 1965.¹³ The opposition of the permanent members and their camp followers blocked the effort.

While India has actively engaged on Security Council reform since the inception of the United

Nations, the present thrust differs from the past in the quest for permanent membership. India is in the vanguard of those desiring an expansion of the existing membership categories – permanent and nonpermanent. This is the preferred option of most members of the U.N. All permanent members, barring China, have, at some stage during the past three decades, expressed support for such a rubric of reform. India typically possesses the strongest case for a permanent seat among the G4 (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan), who all aspire to permanent membership. The Indian bid also has the most extensive support base in the General Assembly.¹⁴

Nevertheless, differences remain among those who support the need for an increase in both categories. The divergence is in the numbers of a reformed council, processes to be followed in expansion, and the rights and responsibilities of new permanent members concerning the veto issue. The commonality of approach on the need for greater equity, enhanced legitimacy, more representativeness, and desire for reflecting new realities has not translated into cohesiveness of action.

The five permanent members that enjoy disproportionate influence over the reform proceedings, as their ratification is essential for any U.N. charter amendment to come into force, display differing degrees of a lack of interest in change. The 54 African states, under Chinese pressure, are reluctant to press forward. No reform is possible without their buy-in, as they are 42% of the 129 votes needed for any outcome in the General Assembly.¹⁵ Other significant groups promoting reform in both categories, such as the L.69, cannot move the dial much due to Africa's incoherence. The secretaries-general who followed Kofi Annan have shown little interest in promoting Security Council reform.

On the other hand, a set of middle powers that perceive that they will lose the most if new permanent members are inducted have banded together along with their close allies. They constitute the Uniting for Consensus group – Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Indonesia, Italy, Republic of Korea, Malta, Mexico, Pakistan, San Marino, Spain, and Turkey.¹⁶ Although they have the support of not more than 30 members, they have put forth proposals for a new



category of elected members with longer tenures than the two years provided in the U.N. charter, and suggest that the ban on immediate reelection will not apply to this new category of long-term members. China has gravitated toward them and coordinates tactically with Russia to emphasize that there is no general agreement for reform of the permanent membership. Diplomats keep kicking the can of Security Council reform down the road and bank on the resilience of the established council to tide over calls for change. The result is that the reform process stands derailed in all but form.

India's Path to Permanent Membership of UNSC

Does this mean the end of the road for India's pursuit of permanent membership? Has India's thinking evolved on the issue following the stalemate? Has India's quest for reforming the Security Council run its course? Has India, then, missed the bus? These are all legitimate concerns that need to be addressed.

Those raising such issues misinterpret India's approach to changing the international peace and security architecture. India desires change, but is not wedded to "change now" as the only path forward.

India has long perceived itself to be a great power and aspired to better representation on the horseshoe table. At the San Francisco conference where the U.N. charter was agreed to in 1945, India voted in favor of the Yalta formula,

prescribing permanent membership with a veto for the five powers. However, this was not before the Indian delegation unsuccessfully sought to insert into the charter a provision providing for associated members with permanent seats at the Security Council but without the right to veto, in the hope that India would be one of them.¹⁷

Subsequently, the architect of independent India's foreign policy in the formative years, Prime Minister Jawarhalal Nehru, consistently pointed to "many factors," including historical, geographical, demographic, and moral, based on which India was entitled to a permanent seat on the Security Council.¹⁸ Notwithstanding the rhetoric, it was India's normative role in multilateral fora that made it a significant actor, rather than aspects of hard power, which had made the permanent members what they were. Hence, India promoted the expansion of nonpermanent membership without giving up the aspiration to permanent membership.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh termed India's quest for reform as "an essay in persuasion."¹⁹ While India pursued permanent membership, like his predecessors, Singh followed a more realist thinking, considering India's many challenges. While the ultimate goal was to ensure a permanent place for India at the horseshoe table, there was also an understanding that no quick-fix solution was on the anvil. India acknowledged that sovereign states' views must be respected and addressed through purposive diplomacy. More time

and effort were needed. This also fit well with the space India required to enhance its abilities as a provider of global public goods, which would be a key ingredient in any endgame related to Security Council permanent membership. While India was active at the U.N. and coordinated with other key players with similar goals, it was willing to allow time for the process to bear fruit. It was, therefore, more understanding and sensitive to African concerns than it otherwise might have been. Unlike those who felt that any delay would undermine their cause, India calculated that the passage of time would strengthen its credentials, not diminish them.

There is a consistent pattern to India's quest for permanent membership. Across different governments, the calculus has involved:

- Contributions by India to the U.N. system.
 - The value-addition that India, as a large developing country with a balanced approach, would bring as a permanent member to the decision-making process of a body where issues of peace and security impacting the Global South were addressed.
 - The incongruity of the permanent membership not reflecting current demographic realities, i.e., India now being the world's most populous country.
- Implicit in all this is the consistent Indian desire and willingness to shoulder more global responsibilities. Since 2014, under



Ruchira Kamboj, U.N. Security Council president for December 2022 and India's permanent representative to the U.N., chairs a Security Council meeting. Despite India becoming the most populous nation in the world, it does not have a permanent seat on the Security Council. (Eskinder Debebe / U.N. Photo)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has added several strands to this existing matrix.

For one, there is a conscious delineation of normative thinking on global affairs. Modi speaks of "*Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*," meaning "the world is one family," reflecting the U.N.'s multilateral approach.²⁰ External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar speaks of "the India way."²¹ Others in government mention India as a "*Vishwaguru*," or "world teacher."²² The intent is to project India as a "civilizational state" with a distinctive take on global affairs. Intrinsic to such thinking is that India deserves a role at the global high table on matters of peace and security. The approach, however, remains nascent and awaits full-fledged articulation. Nevertheless, the use of traditional terminology has generated broader domestic interest in foreign policy issues, well beyond elite sections that have dominated Indian discourse in the past.

Increasingly, India is pursuing alternate options for shaping global discourse, providing global public goods, and addressing peace and security

concerns since the reform of the Security Council is not progressing. India has become more forthright in criticizing the inability of global multilateral arrangements to meet the challenges of the 21st century, as they remain cemented in a framework of a bygone era.²³ Indian diplomacy is more actively engaging in plurilateral and minilateral initiatives with peace and security implications, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with Australia, Japan, and the U.S. The aim is not only to address security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, but also to meet new-age threats from new and emerging technologies, the disruptive role of nonstate actors, and intensifying geopolitical competition.

Also, India's approach to Security Council reform issues has been repositioned as part of a larger package, termed New Orientation for Reformed Multilateralism (NORM). It envisages reforms in all three pillars of the current multilateral architecture: peace and security, development, and human rights.²⁴ This is the first time India has promoted



multilateral reform holistically. It takes into account that for many states, especially those from the Global South, the reform agenda at the U.N. is far larger than Security Council reform. NORM endeavors to address a multiplicity of global ills.

The interconnections between peace and security, development and human rights, and India's importance as a key actor on the global economic and social agenda also provide it leverage in peace and security matters. India's approach to reform of the peace and security component is well known and has not changed much in the NORM framework. What has changed is India's willingness to move reform discussions beyond the General Assembly. During India's presidency of the Security Council in December 2022, it held an open debate on NORM. India's global development reform agenda is also being vigorously put forth during its current presidency of the G20. The goal is to expand the reform canvas beyond the United Nations and encompass multilateral development institutions. The social aspects of the reform objectives have not been explained in detail as yet. Given India's global ambitions, reforms related to human rights machinery will be of interest when articulated.

To summarize, India's quest for Security Council reform continues as part of a broader orientation toward multilateral reform. This approach enables India to leverage its role in other aspects of the global multilateral reform process to enhance its claim as a potential permanent member. While there

is stasis at the U.N. in the Security Council reform process, India has strengthened its prospects by using opportunities beyond the format of the General Assembly. Buoyed by its growing economy and utilizing rotational openings on various platforms – the two-year nonpermanent membership of the Security Council in 2021-22 and G20 presidency in 2023 – India has assiduously worked to burnish its stature. It is moving toward Modi's stated goal of India becoming a "leading" power.²⁵

India's Global Aspirations

The challenge that India faces is channeling its growing global role on a multiplicity of transboundary issues, such as environment and climate change, sustainable development and economic growth, emerging technologies and global health, and outer space and cyberspace, onto a pathway that will lead it to a permanent perch on issues of international peace and security.

The moribund reform process at the U.N. remains on the back burner. The conventional wisdom is that, historically, situations of acute disorder provide opportunities for change of established institutions or the rise of new mechanisms. This has been true for the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, and conferences at Bretton Woods and San Francisco in the 1940s, all of which followed crises. Crises catalyze states to rise above inertia, myopia, and narrow self-interest. Anything less than a cataclysmic crisis won't do. Hence council reform, which

requires meeting a very high bar of support, is infeasible in an era of great-power competition. In fact, the issue had slumped so far down the U.N.'s agenda that two years ago, Secretary-General António Guterres did not even refer to Security Council reform among the long list of proposals in his report titled "Our Common Agenda."²⁶

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the global reverberations due to the inability of the Security Council to address its consequences, have changed the equations at the U.N. The economic headwinds developing countries face due to COVID-19 have accentuated concerns about the viability of the multilateral system. The episodic effort to reform the United Nations Security Council has returned to mainstream discussion. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged the council to act or "dissolve yourself altogether."²⁷ President Joe Biden lent further weight to the reform brigade when he remarked at the General Assembly in September 2022 that the "United States supports increasing the number of both permanent and non-permanent representatives of the council."²⁸ The High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, which Guterres set up in a new report titled "A Breakthrough for People and Planet," acknowledges that the principles of equity and legitimacy can only fully be met by expanding the Security Council membership and reforming its decision-making procedures.²⁹ The secretary-general's "New Agenda for Peace," expected in June or July 2023, will likely highlight measures needed for bettering the U.N. peace



and security framework. All of these factors indicate a new interest in the reform agenda in the run-up to the Summit of the Future planned for September 2024.³⁰

Modi often refers to the next 25 years as “*Amrit Kaal*,” or “The Era of Elixir.”³¹ His objective is to bring to fruition national aspirations by the time of the centenary of Indian independence in 2047. Few issues on independent India’s foreign policy agenda

have the resonance and pedigree that the aspiration for permanent membership on the Security Council does. We can, therefore, expect concerted efforts by an aspirational India toward meeting this goal by making the most of the opportunities likely to open up as change beckons. Only time will tell whether this phase will lead to the end of India’s long road to permanent membership. If not, the persistent quest is certain to continue.



Syed Akbaruddin joined the Kautilya School of Public Policy on June 1, 2021, as its dean, following a distinguished diplomatic career spanning more than three decades.

Entering the Indian Foreign Service in 1985, he retired in April 2020 upon completion of his tenure as the permanent representative

of India to the United Nations. He was the official spokesperson of India’s Ministry of External Affairs from 2012 to 2015.

He is among the few Indian diplomats who have the distinction of also serving as an international civil servant in a United Nations entity. From 2006 to 2011, he worked at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna. He was the head of the External Relations and Policy Coordination Unit, and later also served as the special assistant to the director-general

of the IAEA. He also served as the consul general of India, Jeddah, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 2000 to 2004.

Having served as counselor at the Indian High Commission in Islamabad (1998-2000), he is well versed in key issues between India and Pakistan. Also, he has worked at the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations as first secretary (1995-98). He was a member of the U.N.’s apex body, the Advisory Committee on Administrative & Budgetary Questions, during 1997-98.

Since his retirement, he has written and spoken extensively on global public policy issues. He has a master’s degree in international relations from the Australian National University.

He writes regularly in the Indian and West Asian media and lectures on the politics and economics of West Asia, Eurasia, and the Indian Ocean; political Islam; and energy security.

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