

Rising India: Consequences for the future

by
Harsh V. Pant *

** Dr Harsh V. Pant joined the Defense Studies Department, King's College London in January 2006 after finishing his doctorate at the University of Notre Dame (USA). He holds a BA (Hons) from the University of Delhi and MA and M.Phil degrees from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi (India). He is also an Associate with the Centre for Science and Security, King's College London.*

The rise of India on the international scene

In its seventh decade after independence, India today stands at a crossroads in its relations with the rest of the world.

Being one of the most powerful economies in the world today gives India clout on the global stage matched only by a few other states. Coupled with highly professional armed forces well-ensconced in a liberal democratic polity, India is emerging as an entity that can decisively shift the global balance of power.

As a consequence, the lens through which India has traditionally viewed the rest of the world is increasingly unable to do justice to India's growing stature in the international system. Flush from its recent economic success and on its way to emerge as a major global player, India today is struggling to define itself, to comprehend not only its power capabilities but also the possibilities and limits of that power.

While there is an emerging consensus among Indian policymakers and the larger strategic community that the old foreign Indian policy framework, perhaps adequate for the times when it was developed, is no longer capable of meeting the challenges of the times, there is little consensus on a strategic framework around which India should structure its external relations in the present global context.

But the world is not waiting for India to put its own house in order and to come to terms with its rising profile. Already, the international community, expecting it to play a global role in consonance with its rising stature, is making demands on India. India is now being invited to the G-8 summits, is being called on to shoulder global responsibilities from nuclear proliferation to global warming to Iraq, and is being viewed as much more than a mere "South Asian" power.

For long, India had the luxury of being on the periphery of global politics from where it was relatively easy to substitute “sloganeering” for any real foreign policy. India, with some skill, used issues like third world solidarity and general and complete nuclear disarmament to make its presence germane on the international stage.

But international politics is an arena where outcomes are largely determined by the behavior of major powers. It is the actions and decisions of great powers that, more than anything else, determine the trajectory of international politics.

And being a minor power without any real leverage in the international system, India could do little of import except criticize the major powers for their “hegemonistic” attitudes. Today, as India itself has moved to the center of global politics with an accretion in its economic and military capabilities, it is being asked to become a stakeholder in a system that it has long viewed with suspicion.

As a consequence, howsoever difficult it may seem, India will have to come to terms with this new reality. India is a rising power in an international system that is in flux, and it will have to make certain choices that probably will define the contours of Indian foreign policy for years to come. The stakes are too high for India as well as the international community. Not surprisingly, this is engendering a debate in India on various foreign and security policy issues that is as remarkable for its scope as it is for its intensity...

A rise in difficult time

India is debating the choices it faces on foreign policy like it has never done before and the rise of its profile and stature at a time where the fissures in foreign and security policy issues are out in the open. Thus Indian foreign and security policy is currently grappling with a range of issues that are controversial but central to the future of Indian global strategy. These include, but are not limited to, India’s relations with the United States; the idea of a strategic triangle involving Russia, China, and India; India’s nuclear doctrine and its impact on the emerging civil-military relations; India’s position on the ballistic missile defense system; India’s relations with Iran and Israel; and India’s quest for energy security.

On almost all these issues, there is an intense debate in the Indian polity and the strategic community, and how this debate resolves itself will, in many ways, determine the direction of Indian foreign policy for years to come.

Today Indian policy stands divided on fundamental foreign policy choices facing the nation. What Walter Lipmann wrote for US foreign policy in 1943 applies equally to the Indian landscape of today. He had warned that the divisive partisanship that prevents the finding of a settled and generally accepted foreign policy is a grave threat to the nation. *“For when a people is divided within itself about the conduct of its foreign relations, it is unable to agree on the determination of its true interest. It is unable to prepare adequately for war or to safeguard successfully its peace (1).* In the absence of a coherent national grand strategy, India is in the danger of losing its ability to safeguard its long-term peace and prosperity.

There is clearly an appreciation in the Indian policy-making circles of India’s rising capabilities. It is reflected in a gradual expansion of Indian foreign policy activity in recent years, in India’s attempt to reshape its defense forces, in India’s desire to seek greater global influence.

But all this is happening in an intellectual vacuum with the result that micro issues dominate the foreign policy discourse in the absence of an overarching framework. Since foreign policy issues do not tend to win votes, there is little incentive for political parties to devote serious attention to them and the result is an ad hoc response to various crises as they emerge.

The ongoing debates on the US-India nuclear deal, on India’s role in the Middle East, on India’s engagements with Russia and China in the form of the so-called “Strategic Triangle,” on India’s energy policy are all important but ultimately of little value as they fail to clarify the singular issue facing India today: What should be the trajectory of Indian foreign policy at a time when India is emerging from the structural confines of the international system as a rising power on way to a possible great power status?

Answering this question requires one big debate, a debate perhaps to end all minor ones that India has been having for the last few years. However much Indians like to be argumentative, a major power’s foreign policy cannot be effective in the absence of a guiding framework of underlying principles that is a function of both the nation’s geopolitical requirements and its values. India today, more than any

other time in its history, needs a view of its role in the world quite removed from the shibboleths of the past. The rest of the world is eagerly waiting for this one big debate...

The US-India love-hate affair

The state of affairs between the United States and India is best expressed in the recent civilian nuclear energy cooperation pact. This pact is not an end in itself for either India or the United States. It is about the need to evolve a strong strategic partnership between the world's biggest and most powerful democracies at a time when democracy promotion is at the centerpiece of the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

To be sure, nonproliferation is an important goal for the United States, but by making India part of the global nonproliferation architecture, the United States will only be strengthening the broader regime. Despite its long-standing opposition to the nonproliferation regime, India has so far been an exceptionally responsible nuclear power, never having sold or traded nuclear technology, and this deal gives further incentives to India to try to maintain and strengthen the nuclear regime.

With the global balance of power in flux, the United States and India are both trying to adjust to the emerging new realities, and the U.S.-India nuclear deal is an attempt to craft a strategic partnership that can serve the interests of both states in the coming years. The U.S.-India civilian nuclear cooperation agreement is just a first step toward a future realignment of global power.

While US-India ties may not suffer in the long run if the nuclear deal does not come through in light of growing convergence of Indian and American interests, India is unlikely to get the same favorable terms next time whenever the deal comes to be re-negotiated even as India's need for nuclear fuel supplies and advanced technologies will only keep on growing.

India's liberation from the crippling technology-denial regime will remain the priority of successive Indian governments and engagement with the US would be the only way out. And so India will be back to square one with the difference being a lack of confidence on the part of India's global interlocutors in Indian government's ability to deliver on its commitments and an unwillingness of future US Administrations to walk the extra mile with India. It is not a position India would prefer to be in. India, in many ways, is a natural partner of the US as the world's pre-eminent power adjusts to a reconfiguration in the global distribution of

power. However, neither the US nor India are used to partnerships among equals and India remains too proud, too argumentative and too big a nation to reconcile as a junior partner to any state, including the US. How the two democracies adjust to this reality will shape the future of their relationship...

Counterbalancing the United States power: a pipe dream?

The present structure of the international system gives the United States enormous advantages in its dealings with the rest of the world because of the unprecedented power it enjoys. This gives the United States a certain indispensable quality in so far as other states are concerned, because it has much to offer be it in terms of military protection, economic development, or even the force of its ideas—and that too on its own terms.

So, while Russia, China, and India have tried to engage the United States in various forms, they have found it difficult to overcome their distrust of each other. And as one of the three becomes more powerful, the other two might be more willing to balance it, maybe even with the United States, than join its bandwagon to create a global equipoise to U.S. power (2). The political and economic costs of countering U.S. power are not only too high but the very idea of counterbalancing the United States also is, in my view, unrealistic for Russia, China, and India, given the current distribution of power in the global system. Conversely, it is worth their efforts to try to prevent the emergence of each other as a global power, possibly even with the help of the United States.

As a consequence, given the centrality of the United States to the present global political and economic order, Russia will never want to join the Chinese political and economic sphere, because the United States has much more to offer it politically and economically. The same goes for China, which gained enormously from its economic ties with the United States, and a declining Russia and still-economically weak India do not show much promise (3).

India, afraid of China and not too optimistic about Russia's prospects, has all the reasons not to make its U.S. policy contingent on the sensitivities of other states. The result is that each of the three countries has been at pains to explain to the United States that their attempts to come closer to each other are in no way directed at the United States, lest the United States might take an exception.

William Wohlforth has argued that even as many countries talk of counterbalancing