

The Remaking of Indian Foreign Policy: Opportunities and Challenges

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Executive summary

India may be a rising power but it continues to punch far below its weight. The task of Indian foreign policy is to change that. Indian diplomacy, however, faces several constraints, which range from increasingly fractious domestic politics to an ever more troubled neighborhood. India today confronts not only two regional adversaries, China and Pakistan, but also is at serious risk of being surrounded by a cordon of China's friends. India's founding myth — that it won independence by non-violence — remains a millstone for Indian diplomacy. Worse still, India is still intrinsically diffident and reactive. However, there are important shifts that are underway that raise expectations that Indian foreign policy will seize the new geopolitical opportunities to advance the country's interests regionally and globally. India, in fact, is demonstrating that a country can forge close bonds with rival powers to push its own interests. Underscoring its newfound geopolitical pragmatism, India has shaped a nondoctrinaire foreign-policy vision. India, a founding leader of the nonaligned movement, now makes little mention of nonalignment. Shorn of ideology, Indian foreign policy has sought to revitalize the country's economic and military security, while avoiding having to overtly choose one power over another as a dominant partner. In effect, India today is pursuing multi-alignment. However, in practice, closer collaboration with the United States, European powers and Asia's major democracies has come to define Indian foreign policy. The deepening relationships with other democratic powers could help generate progress toward a broader concert of democracies that helps realize the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. India, though, must shed its risk-averseness and pursue proactive diplomacy.

Madeleine Albright, the U.S. secretary of state between 1997 and 2001, famously said in her 2009 book that, “The purpose of foreign policy is to persuade others to do what we want or, better yet, to want what we want.”¹ This

is a high standard against which to measure any country's foreign policy. Yet it is a useful yardstick by which to assess the foreign policy of a great power or an aspiring great power.

India is a vibrant, if often cacophonous, multiparty democracy — the world's largest. As a former Indian diplomat and national-security official put it, “the task of India's foreign policy is to protect and secure India's integrity, citizens, values and assets, and to enable the development and transformation of India into a modern nation in which every Indian can achieve his or her full potential. The task of foreign policy professionals is to enable the transformation of India and to create an environment for that transformation.”²

But whether India is a world power in the making or just a large subcontinental state with global-power pretensions is a moot question. What is beyond dispute is that India, home to more than one-sixth of the human race, continues to punch far below its weight. Internationally, it is a rule-taker, not a rule-maker. India is seeking to change that. To what extent it will be successful, remains to be seen.

Clearly, Indian foreign policy is motivated by the country's ambition to be a world power. India historically was a major power. According to the late British economic historian Angus Maddison, the Indian and Chinese economies dominated the world for most of 2,000 years before they became targets of colonial plunder and rule. In 1820, at the advent of the industrial revolution, India and China alone made up nearly half of the world income, while Asia collectively accounted for 60 percent of the global GDP.³ Maddison calculated that India's share of the global income went down from 27 percent in 1700 to 3.8 percent in 1950.⁴ The British were attracted by India's wealth. Indeed, India was seen by the British as the “jewel in the crown” of the British empire. British

colonial rule reduced the world's wealthiest economy to one of its poorest, while turning Britain into the leading empire.⁵

The lesson India should have drawn right at independence is that national security is critical to protect wealth generation. Yet, in the early years after it won independence, India thought that if it sought peace, it would get peace. In reality, however, a nation gets peace only if it can defend peace. This reality did not sink in until China humiliated India in the 1962 war. *Time* magazine of November 30, 1962, summed up the situation with an apt caption on its cover, "India's Lost Illusions."⁶

The 1962 war, however, did not change one characteristic of Indian diplomacy — it has been driven not by integrated, institutionalized policymaking but by largely an ad hoc, personality-driven approach. This remains the bane of Indian foreign policy, precluding the establishment of a strategic framework for pursuit of goals. The reliance by successive prime ministers on ad hoc, personal initiatives and decisions has helped marginalize the national security establishment and compounded India's challenges.

In fact, India has made huge strategic blunders since independence that have weighed down its foreign policy. It was India that "internationalized" the Kashmir issue by taking it to the United Nations and accepted a U.N.-brokered ceasefire that allowed Pakistan to remain in occupation of more than one-third of the original princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Furthermore, India looked the other way when the newly established People's Republic of China gobbled up the large historical buffer, the Tibetan Plateau. In 1954, India tamely surrendered its British-inherited extra-territorial rights in Tibet without any quid pro quo, not even Beijing's acceptance of the then-prevailing Indo-Tibetan border. The 1954 surrender of extra-territorial rights in Tibet included India

shutting its military outposts at Yatung and Gyantse in Tibet and handing over Tibet's postal, telegraph and public telephone services that it had been running to the Chinese communist government.

Had India been proactive and forward-looking after becoming independent in 1947, it could have settled the Himalayan border before communist China was born. Historic opportunities rarely repeat themselves. For more than two years after India became independent, China was in chaos due to a bloody civil war. India had an open field to assert control over the traditional Himalayan borders and to cement its extra-territorial rights in Tibet. After the communists came to power in Beijing, they took another one year to begin their invasion of Tibet. India had ample time to force things and present China with a *fait accompli*.

In 1950, the People's Liberation Army was a ragtag force of ill-equipped and undernourished guerrillas when they invaded Tibet and began breaking the Tibetan Army's defenses through overwhelming superiority in numbers. The Indian Army, by contrast, was a professional and better-equipped force at that time. It was also a battle-hardened force that had fought for the British empire in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia.

Had it received political orders, the Indian Army would have asserted Indian control over the traditional Himalayan frontiers between 1947 and 1950. In that period, the Indian Army was internationally regarded as the best professional force in Asia. A pragmatic and visionary Indian leadership would have worked toward maintaining Tibet as a strategic buffer with China by preemptively checkmating the new Chinese communist regime's revanchist designs on Tibet. Instead, India ended up with a new neighbor on its north — China — that has imposed mounting costs on Indian security.

India's founding myth

History helps shape national perceptions and perspectives and undergirds national security. However, the boundary between historical fact and fiction is more porous than students of history might think. History is not only written by victors but also is used by most nations as a political tool in intrastate or interstate context.

Indeed, many countries create self-serving or sanitized historical narratives. Autocracies have a monopoly on interpreting or rewriting history. China, the fairytale Middle Kingdom, weaves legend with history to foster a chauvinistic Han Chinese culture centered on regaining lost glory. Democracies are not free from historical revisionism, although their history debates are more nuanced, usually pitting the political right against the left. In Japan, for example, attempts to reform the U.S.-imposed national security, educational and legal systems are portrayed by the left as a potential revival of prewar militarism. South Korea's historical revisionism, for its part, is still poisoning its relations with Japan.

India has had a largely static history debate on the factors that led to independence, despite varied views on the impacts of colonial rule. This, in some ways, is a reflection of its internal divisions and inefficient, British-style parliamentary democracy. In sharp contrast to South Korea's or China's still-continuing tirades against Japan over its colonial rampages in the pre-World War II period, India's relationship with Britain remains free of historical rancor, in spite of the brutality and impoverishment it suffered under British colonial rule.

Indeed, India embellished or distorted how it won independence in 1947. Indians are still taught in school that their country gained independence by non-violence. However, for the first time ever, India's annual Republic Day parade in 2019 featured veterans of the Japan-supported Indian National Army (INA), which waged an armed struggle against British colonial rule. Four INA veterans in their 90s separately rode a jeep in a parade that, paradoxically, showcased through 22 tableaux the life experiences of the apostle of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi.

The juxtaposed roles of the INA and Gandhi at the January 26 parade inadvertently highlighted a central contradiction in India's historical narrative about independence. The INA veterans' participation, in fact, helped underscore the Indian republic's founding myth — that it won independence by non-violence alone. This belief is deeply etched in the minds of Indians.

To be sure, the Mahatma Gandhi-led nonviolent independence movement played a critical role, both in galvanizing grassroots Indian resistance to British rule and in helping to ultimately gain independence. But the decisive factor was the protracted World War II, which reduced to ruins large swaths of Europe and Asia, especially the imperial powers. The war between the Allied and Axis powers killed 80 million, or 4% of the global population.

Despite the U.S.-engineered Allied victory, a devastated Britain was left in no position to hold on to its colonies, including “crown jewel” India. Even colonies where there was no grassroots resistance to British (or other European) rule won independence in the post-World War II period. The British had dominated India for more than a century through a Machiavellian divide-and-rule strategy. Their exit came only they had looted Indian treasures to their

heart's content, siphoning out at least £9.2 trillion (or \$44.6 trillion) up to 1938, according to economist Utsa Patnaik's estimate.⁷

Had India, in the immediate aftermath of independence, proactively secured its frontiers, it could have averted both the Kashmir and Himalayan border problems. India had ample time and space to assert control over the traditional Himalayan borders, including its extra-territorial rights in Tibet. But India's pernicious founding myth — that it won independence by non-violence — gave rise to a pacifist country that believed it could get peace merely by seeking peace, instead of building the capability to defend peace. That myth is at the root of India's twin regional-security problems relating to China and Pakistan.

Add to the picture the striking naiveté of India's first post-independence prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. According to a book by Maj. Gen. D.K. Palit, Nehru said this to Lt. Gen. Robert Lockhart, the first commander-in-chief of the Indian armed forces, when Lockhart showed Nehru a strategic plan he had prepared: "We don't need a defense plan. Our policy is non-violence. We foresee no military threats. Scrap the army. The police are good enough to meet our security needs."⁸ Indeed, Nehru on September 16, 1947, a month after independence, ordered that the Army's 280,000 strength be slashed to 150,000.⁹

Here's the paradox: Countless numbers of Indians died due to British colonial excesses. Just in the manmade Bengal famine of 1942-45, six to seven million Indians starved to death (a toll greater than the Holocaust) due to the British war policy under Prime Minister Winston Churchill of diverting resources away from India. Churchill had as much blood on his hands as Adolf Hitler, a fact obscured by the victors' prevailing narratives. Moreover, imperial Britain sent Indian soldiers in large numbers to fight its dirty wars elsewhere,

including the two world wars. And many of these foot soldiers for British imperialism died while serving as cannon fodder. The Indian civilian and military fatality toll in World War II, if the Bengal famine fatalities are included, surpassed that of Britain, France and the U.S. combined.

Indeed, the present Indian republic was born in blood: As many as a million civilians died in senseless violence and millions more were uprooted in the British-contrived and rushed partition of the subcontinent — the fruition of Britain’s divide-and-rule policy. Yet the myth of India uniquely charting and securing its independence by non-violence was propagated by the inheritors of the British Raj, the British-trained “brown sahibs.” Consequently, no objective discourse was encouraged post-1947 on the multiple factors — internal and external — that aided India’s independence.

In truth, the hope of Indian independence was first kindled by Japan’s victory in the 1904-1905 war with Russia — the first time an Asian nation comprehensively defeated a European rival. However, it was the world war that Hitler unleashed through expansionism — with Imperial Japan undertaking military expeditions in the name of freeing Asia from white colonial rule — that acted as the catalyst. An emboldened Mahatma Gandhi served a “Quit India” notice on the British in 1942.

While the Subhas Chandra Bose-led INA could not mount a formidable threat to a British colonial military overflowing with Indian recruits, the Bombay mutiny and other Indian troop revolts of 1946 triggered by INA prisoners’ trials undermined Britain’s confidence in sustaining the Raj, hastening its exit. Yet, independent India treated INA soldiers shabbily, with many abandoned into penury. Significantly, India’s founding myth also served the interests of Britain, which trained the Indian political leadership to whom it

handed the reins of power. Not surprisingly, India's post-independence leadership was beholden to Britain.

Against this background, the rehabilitation of Bose and the INA has long been overdue in India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi initiated that process, however low key, to give Bose and the INA their due, including renaming one Andaman island after Bose and two other Andaman islands to honor INA's sacrifices. Modi even wore the INA cap to address a 2019 public meeting in the Andaman archipelago on the 75th anniversary of Bose's hoisting of the Indian tricolor flag there — the only territory that the INA managed to liberate from British rule.

Today, a rules-based international order premised on non-violence remains a worthy aspirational goal. But Indian romancing of non-violence as a supposedly effective political instrument has crimped the country's foreign and national-security policies since independence. The country long hewed to pacifism (with Nehru publicly bewailing in 1962 that China had "returned evil for good" by militarily invading India) and frowned on materialism (even after China surpassed India's GDP in 1984-85).

Such has been the burden of the quixotic national philosophy centered on non-violence that India has borne enduring costs, including an absence of a strategic culture, despite the country's location in the world's most-troubled neighborhood. As the late American analyst George Tanham pointed out, the lack of a culture to pursue a clear strategic vision and policy hobbles India's ambition to be a great power.¹⁰

As an essential step to building a strategic culture and a vibrant foreign policy, India must free itself from the millstone of its founding myth. It must

revisit its colonial-period history, especially by reappraising its freedom struggle, including the British role in aiding the birth of the Indian National Congress. Recognizing unsung heroes is an essential step that India has initiated, however belatedly, toward rebalancing its historical narrative. As George Orwell famously said, “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.”

Geopolitical opportunities for Indian foreign policy

The changing global power equations are reflected in new realities. These include the eastward movement of power and influence; the waning relevance of the international structures the United States helped establish after its World War II triumph; and Asia’s rise as the world’s main creditor and economic locomotive. While the world is not yet multipolar, it is no longer unipolar, as it had been from the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse to at least the beginning of this century — a period in which the victors of the Cold War failed to fashion a new rules-based world order under America’s direction. What we have today is a world still in transition.¹¹ This may appear to some as a nonpolar world in which multiple engagements between and among different actors have become a strategic imperative. But with the emergence of new players in the geopolitical marketplace, ranging from Brazil and India to South Africa and South Korea, it is only a matter of time before multipolarity begins to characterize the international order.

Before the industrial revolution allowed the West to vault ahead, Asia was economically preeminent. As one analyst has put it, “The past two centuries of Western domination of world history are the exception, not the rule, during two thousand years of global history.”¹² The power dynamics in Asia

will be influenced not just by the key Asian states but also by the United States, which sees itself as “a resident power” there. Sharpening geopolitical competition in Asia, meanwhile, is contributing to a rapidly changing strategic landscape.

A fast-rising Asia may have become the pivot of global geopolitical change. Although an instigator of global power shifts, Asia is beginning to bear the greatest impact of such shifts. The specter of a power imbalance, for example, looms large in Asia. At a time when it is in transition, Asia is troubled by growing security challenges, which are manifest from territorial and maritime disputes. Asia also symbolizes the global divide over political values. With the Indo-Pacific region becoming more divided in the face of conflicting strategic priorities, major democracies are likely to be increasingly drawn together to help advance political cooperation and stability through a community of values.

India’s strategic compass extends beyond South Asia to the larger Indian Ocean Region (IOR). After all, a subcontinental country of 1.3 billion people cannot be kept within the confines of South Asia, which is an artificial construct created by the U.S. state department in the 1960s. The challenges in the IOR extend from traditional security threats to nontraditional and emerging challenges. This is also the region where the old order coexists with the new order. In fact, in no part of the world is the security situation so dynamic and in such flux as in the IOR, which extends from Australia to eastern and southern Africa. The IOR has emerged as the world’s major energy and trade seaway, as well as the center of the challenges of the twenty-first-century world — from terrorism and extremism to piracy and safety of sea-lanes of communication.¹³ Actually, the IOR covers the entire arc of Islam — from the Horn of Africa and the Saudi Arabian desert to Malaysia and the Indonesian archipelago. Given the

linkage between the spread of Wahhabism and the rise of terrorism, it is not an accident that the vast majority of terrorist attacks in the world are concentrated in this region.

The IOR also symbolizes the global nontraditional security challenges — from environmental pollution (as illustrated by the brown cloud of sooty haze hanging over South Asia) and degradation of coastal ecosystems to a mercantilist approach to energy and the juxtapositioning of energy interests and foreign-policy interests. In other words, this is the region where old and new security challenges converge. The region indeed serves as a case study of how international-security challenges are changing fundamentally.

Against this background, India's growing geopolitical weight, economic potential, rising military capabilities, increasing maritime role, abundant market opportunities, and favorable long-term demographics have helped increase its international profile, increasing the strategic space for its diplomacy. It is the leading naval power in the IOR. Furthermore, India is widely perceived to be a key “swing state” in the emerging international order. And in terms of its civilization, worldview, values and location, India is where the East meets the West.

Given the greater political and economic volatility in the world, geopolitical risks today are higher. As a “swing” geopolitical factor, India has the potential to play a constructive role to help contain or lower those risks by promoting collaborative international approaches. After all, new thinking and approaches are needed to bridge the global fault lines and build greater international cooperation and consensus on the larger political and economic challenges.

To play such a role, India must develop the requisite strategic capabilities and also resolve the still-continuing tensions between realism and idealism in its foreign policy and national-security policies. The struggle between idealism and pragmatism has been a constant phenomenon in independent India, starting from the contrasting approaches of the first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the first deputy prime minister, Sardar Patel.

For example, Nehru, the idealist, turned down U.S. suggestion that India become a United Nations Security Council permanent member by taking China's seat, which was then occupied by the Republic of China (RoC), or Taiwan. Nehru spurned those overtures by contending that People's Republic of China (PRC) should occupy China's seat at the Security Council. Nehru's advocacy of the PRC came despite the Chinese annexation of the traditional buffer with India, Tibet. The American proposal to have India as a Security Council permanent member was motivated by the emergence of the PRC as a menacing regional power. As one analyst has put it, "That Nehru so adamantly made clear that India did not want to replace China in the UN Security Council, and furthermore, that the issue of China's representation in the UN must take priority over any possible consideration of India gaining a permanent seat in that body underlines the centrality of China to Nehru's foreign policy. If there was an identifiable core to Nehru's foreign policy it was that China, whether it was communist or not, was going to be central to the post-war international world."¹⁴

The officially blessed selected works of Nehru quote him as stating the following on record: "Informally, suggestions have been made by the United States that China should be taken into the UN but not in the Security Council and that India should take her place in the Council. We cannot, of course, accept this as it means falling out with China and it would be very unfair for a great

country like China not to be in the Council.”¹⁵ The selected works also quote Nehru as telling Soviet Premier Marshal Nikolai A. Bulganin in 1955 on the same U.S. offer: “I feel that we should first concentrate on getting China admitted.”¹⁶

Earlier in August 1950, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Nehru’s sister and India’s Ambassador to the United States, wrote to her brother from Washington, D.C.: “One matter that is being cooked up in the State Department should be known to you. This is the unseating of China as a Permanent Member in the Security Council and of India being put in her place ... Last week I had interviews with [John Foster] Dulles and [Philip] Jessup... Both brought up this question and Dulles seemed particularly anxious that a move in this direction should be started.” Nehru replied unequivocally, “So far as we are concerned, we are not going to countenance it. That would be bad from every point of view. It would be a clear affront to China and it would mean some kind of a break between us and China. I suppose the State Department would not like that, but we have no intention of following that course. We shall go on pressing for China’s admission in the UN and the Security Council.”¹⁷

It was such thinking and approach that also explains Nehru’s 1954 surrender of India’s British-inherited extra-territorial rights in Tibet and his recognition of the “Tibet region of China.” This he did so by signing a pact with Beijing that was mockingly named after the Tibetan Buddhist doctrine of Panchsheela, or the five principles of peaceful coexistence.¹⁸ This eight-year treaty was designed to govern India’s relationship with the “Tibet Region of China” — an implicit, if not overt, recognition of China’s annexation of Tibet three years earlier. Yet when China invaded India in 1962, Nehru publicly bemoaned that China had “returned evil for good.”¹⁹ In fact, China today is the

biggest impediment to India's admission to the Security Council or even to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

The modern-day tensions between idealism and pragmatism mirror a similar struggle from ancient times, even though India's tradition of realist strategic thought is probably the oldest in the world. The realist doctrine was propounded by the strategist Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, who wrote the *Arthashastra* before Christ.²⁰ This ancient manual on great-power diplomacy and statecraft remains a must-read classic. Yet Kautilya was followed by the Mauryan emperor, Ashoka, an idealist par excellence who renounced war.

In the postcolonial period in modern history, while important countries pursued strategies of "balance of power," "balance of threat" or "balance of interest," Indian foreign policy was not organized around a distinct strategic doctrine, except for a period under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The transition from the traditions of Nehruvian diplomacy to a post-Nehruvian approach to world affairs started only after the end of the Cold War, when the country began imbibing greater realism in its foreign policy. Post-Cold War India started pursuing mutually beneficial strategic partnerships with other key powers. By the late 1990s, India emerged with a revamped foreign policy — one that sought to abandon some of the country's quixotic traditions and embrace greater realism and pragmatism. The same trend has continued until now. This period, significantly, has coincided with India's economic rise. India's new "global strategic partnership" with the United States — a defining feature of this century's Asian strategic landscape — was made possible by the post-Cold War shifts in Indian policy thinking.

India has important advantages that it could utilize to play the role of a bridge between the East and West. Among its strengths is the fact that it has a

long historical record of being a great power and of playing a mainstream, cooperative role in international relations. As its history attests, India has been most prosperous and stable when it was most connected with the rest of the world.

With its traditional wealth of philosophy and a culture emphasizing compromise, conciliation and creativity, India views the world as a stage not for civilizational wars but for building bridges and meeting common challenges. Over the centuries, Indian civilization thrived on synthesis. This ability to synthesize is one of the great strengths that India can employ internationally.

Another of its strengths is that India symbolizes unity in diversity. India is the most diverse country in the world. With a sixth of humanity living within its borders, India is more linguistically, ethnically and religiously diverse than the whole of the European Union. Its foreign policy thus carries regional and extra-regional implications.

India is where old traditions go hand-in-hand with post-modernity, epitomized by the image of electronic voting machines being carried to a village balloting station atop an elephant. India is a rare nation whose identity is not founded on a shared language or common religion or ethnic distinctiveness. The gradual spread of Hindi as the de facto *lingua franca* has occurred without any official support, thanks to Bollywood and the telecommunications revolution. Indeed, India has shown that, unlike the traditionally homogenous societies of East Asia, a nation-state can manage diversity — and thrive on it.

Yet another strength centers on its vibrant democratic system. Democracy remains India's greatest asset. India is the only deep-rooted democracy in the vast contiguous arc between Israel and Indonesia. While India continues to

pride itself as a model of a non-Western democracy, it lacks the U.S. zeal to export democracy. Instead, it looks at democracy in practical terms, as “the most effective means to reconcile the polyglot components of the state,” according to Henry Kissinger. He notes: “India, striving neither to spread its culture nor its institutions, is thus not a comfortable partner [of the United States] for global ideological missions.”²¹ India’s strategic outlook has historically been inward looking and non-proselytizing.

Democracy has come to define Indian nationhood. It is valued as a political system essential to manage, blend and harmonize Indian diversity, to give voice to all, including the disadvantaged, and to empower people at the grassroots. If India became an autocracy, its unity and rising strength could come under pressure.

While the concepts of democratic freedoms and the rule of law are normally associated with the West, India can claim ancient traditions bestowing respect to such values. Basic freedoms for all formed the linchpin of the ancient rule of Emperor Ashoka who, as Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has pointed out, “did not exclude women and slaves as Aristotle did.”²²

In terms of its values and worldview, India has more in common with Europe than with next-door China. Because of its geographical location, India is the natural bridge between the West and the East, and between Europe and Asia. Many languages of India are part of the Indo-European group of languages. That underlines the historical affinity between India and Europe. Today, India’s “rediscovery of Europe is again underway,” as the Indian foreign minister declared in a 2019 speech.²³

There are, however, some important shortcomings in India's political system. Even though democracy may be a major asset for India, the Indian system tends to function by the rule of parochial politics. India is a raucous democracy mired in petty polarized politics. Add to the picture the frequency of elections in India: No sooner have elections been completed in one Indian state than elections loom in another state, keeping the country perpetually in election mode and fueling fractiousness. Putting a forward-looking national agenda is not easy. The bitter partisanship also precludes national consensus on the challenges India confronts. Indeed, domestic politics accentuates India's internal fault lines, hobbling its ambition to be a great power. Furthermore, partly due to its historical experiences, the Indian state is intrinsically cautious and shy rather than proactive.

Through forward thinking and a dynamic foreign policy, India — the world's most-assimilative civilization — can truly play the role of a bridge-builder between the East and the West. It can also serve as a link between the competing demands of the developed and developing worlds.

From nonalignment to multi-alignment

In rapid succession, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin and then-U.S. President Barack Obama for bilateral meetings between September 2014 and January 2015, thereby demonstrating India's ability to forge partnerships with rival powers and broker cooperative international approaches in a changing world. That prompted the then-Russian ambassador to India, Alexander Kadakin, to quip to reporters, "India is a rich fiancée with many bridegrooms."²⁴

India has shown that it is possible to forge close bonds with countries that don't have diplomatic relations with each other (like Israel and Saudi Arabia) or whose inter-relationship remains poisoned by historical issues (as between Japan and South Korea). The India-Japan ties, which constitute Asia's fast-growing relationship, have come to symbolize the dawn of an alliance between the world's largest democracy and Asia's oldest (and richest) democracy.

In essence, this illustrates that India — a founding leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) — is becoming multi-aligned. Building close partnerships with major powers to pursue a variety of interests in diverse settings will not only enable India to advance its core interests but also help it to preserve strategic autonomy, in keeping with its longstanding preference for policy independence.

This trend, to be sure, predates Modi's ascension to power. However, under Modi, multi-alignment has become more pronounced as the leitmotif of Indian foreign policy. India now makes little mention of nonalignment, with the Indian prime minister skipping the past two annual NAM summits. In fact, since sweeping to power in 2014 in the biggest election victory in India in a generation, Modi has shaken up the country's reactive and diffident foreign-policy establishment with his proactive approach and readiness to break with conventional methods and shibboleths. The Modi foreign policy, from early on, appeared set to move India from its long-held nonalignment to a contemporary, globalized practicality.

After the Cold War ended, the world witnessed the most-profound technological, economic and geopolitical change in the most-compressed timeframe in history. But much of the 1990s and 2000s in India was characterized by political drift, resulting in an erosion in the country's regional

and extra-regional clout. For example, the gap in power and stature between China and India widened dramatically in this period. A year before Modi assumed office, an essay in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, titled “India’s Feeble Foreign Policy,” focused on how the country was resisting its own rise, as if the political miasma in New Delhi had turned the country into its own worst enemy.²⁵

India’s foreign-policy challenges have not diminished since Modi took office. The regional challenges, if anything, have exacerbated. When Modi became prime minister, many Indians hoped that he would give a new direction to foreign relations at a time when the gap between India and China in terms of international power and stature was growing significantly. In fact, India’s influence in its own strategic backyard had shrunk. Modi may not have proved a transformative leader, but there is some evidence that he has given a new direction to Indian foreign policy.

India’s foreign-policy leeway, however, has been crimped by a strengthening nexus between the country’s two nuclear-armed regional adversaries, China and Pakistan, both of which have staked claims to substantial swaths of Indian territory and continue to collaborate on weapons of mass destruction. In dealing with these countries, Modi has faced the same dilemma that has haunted previous Indian governments: the Chinese and Pakistani foreign ministries are weak actors. The Communist Party and the military shape Chinese foreign policy, while Pakistan is effectively controlled by its army and intelligence services, which still use terror groups as proxies.

One Modi priority after assuming office was restoring momentum to the relationship with the United States, which, to some extent, had been damaged by grating diplomatic tensions and trade disputes while his predecessor was in

office. Whereas Modi has been unable to contain cross-border terrorist attacks from Pakistan or stem Chinese territorial encroachments on India's Himalayan borderlands, he has managed to lift the bilateral relationship with the U.S. to a new level of engagement by closely engaging with two successive American presidents, Barack Obama and Donald Trump. The general trajectory toward increased strategic collaboration probably won't be altered when Joe Biden enters the White House.

There remains strong bipartisan support in Washington for a closer partnership with India, a relationship that could serve as the fulcrum of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy. The White House's national security strategy report in December 2017 declared, "We welcome India's emergence as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defence partner."²⁶ Modi, for his part, considers close ties with the U.S. as essential to the advancement of India's economic and security interests.

More broadly, Modi's various steps and policy moves have helped highlight the trademarks of his foreign policy — from pragmatism and lucidity to zeal and showmanship. They have also exemplified his penchant for springing diplomatic surprises. One example was his announcement during a China visit to grant Chinese tourists e-visas on arrival, an announcement that caught by surprise even his foreign secretary, who had just said at a media briefing that there was "no decision" on the issue. Another example was during a 2015 visit to Paris: Modi pulled a rabbit out of a hat by announcing an on-the-spot decision to buy 36 French Rafale fighter-jets, a decision that led Indian opposition parties to smell a scandal involving inflated pricing and cronyism.

Modi has invested considerable political capital, and time, in high-powered diplomacy. No other prime minister since the country's independence

participated in so many bilateral and multilateral summit meetings in his first five years in office. Modi's personalized diplomacy, however, hasn't always delivered results. Modi, for example, met China's Xi Jinping 18 times. Yet, he failed to anticipate the Chinese aggression in Ladakh that began in April 2020. The aggression was proof that Modi's persistent efforts to "reset" relations with China have been a spectacular failure.

Modi, however, has been more successful in shaping a non-doctrinaire foreign-policy approach powered by ideas, such as the concept of multi-alignment. He has taken some of his domestic policy ideas (such as "Make in India" and "Digital India") to foreign policy, as if to underscore that his priority is to revitalize India economically and increase its strategic space.

The concept of multi-alignment makes eminent sense. Nonalignment suggests a passive approach, including staying on the sidelines. Being multi-aligned, on the other hand, permits a proactive approach. Being pragmatically multi-aligned seems a better option for India than remaining passively nonaligned. A multi-aligned India is already tilting more toward the major democracies of the world, as the Australia-India-Japan-U.S. "Quad" underscores. India, at the same time, has made clear that it will chart an independent course. This, among other things, is reflected in India's refusal to join American-led financial sanctions against Russia.

While China's 2020 aggression caught India off-guard, the Modi government in recent years has been building strategic partnerships with countries around China's periphery to counter that country's creeping strategic encirclement of India. New Delhi's resolve was apparent when Modi tacitly criticized China's military buildup and encroachments in the South China Sea as evidence of an "18th-century expansionist mindset."

India's "Look East" policy, for its part, has graduated to an "Act East" policy, with the original economic logic of "Look East" giving way to a geopolitical logic. The thrust of the new "Act East" policy — unveiled with U.S. blessings — is to reestablish historically close ties with countries to India's east so as to contribute to building a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. As Modi said in an op-ed published in 27 ASEAN newspapers on 26 January 2018 (the day, in a remarkable diplomatic feat, India hosted the leaders of all 10 ASEAN states as chief guests at its Republic Day parade), "Indians have always looked East to see the nurturing sunrise and the light of opportunities. Now, as before, the East, or the Indo-Pacific region, will be indispensable to India's future and our common destiny."²⁷

India's relations with Europe are a central component of its multi-aligned policy. Indeed, there is growing recognition in New Delhi that the world needs a strong and proactive European Union. A robust, forward-looking EU is essential for international peace and security, including stable power equilibrium. India sees no fundamental conflict of interest with the EU, only convergences. Not surprisingly, India has ramped up cooperation with European countries, big and small. Indeed, India sees itself as a natural strategic ally of European powers.

Significantly, India's largest trading partner in Europe is not France or Britain but Germany. German-Indian interests converge on key global issues, from sustainable development and climate change to a rules-based order. Germany and India are also on the same page with regard to reform of the United Nations Security Council. Such convergence led to the formation of the Group of Four (G-4) to press for Security Council reform, including addition of new permanent members. As the joint statement at the end of Chancellor Angela Merkel's 2019 India visit put it, "India and Germany are committed to

close cooperation, bilaterally and with partners, in the G-20, the United Nations and other multilateral forums, to address existing and emerging challenges to international peace and security and global economic stability and growth. In this respect, India and Germany particularly look forward to close cooperation during the Indian G-20 Presidency and the German G7 Presidency in 2022.”²⁸ India has forged a special relationship not just with Germany but also with the other two prominent European powers, France and Britain.

In keeping with the emphasis on multi-alignment, Modi has sought to shield India’s longstanding partnership with Russia while he has sought to deepen ties with the United States. Modi has maintained a balancing act, reassuring Moscow that the India-Russia ties remain important while keeping the India-U.S. relationship moving forward. Russia may not have many friends. But India is its Cold War-era friend that it still values. Moscow thus has a continuing interest in nurturing that relationship. “India is a reliable and time-tested partner,” Russian President Vladimir Putin said in an interview with the Press Trust of India in late 2014.²⁹ As for India, it cannot forget that Moscow was a trusted partner in India’s darkest period when the U.S. and China were both mounting pressure on it in the early 1970s. Russia also remains critical for India in countering an expansionist China, even though U.S. policy has counterproductively compelled Moscow to pivot to Beijing. However, the India-Russia camaraderie of the Cold War era has been replaced by India-U.S. bonhomie.

Modi came to office with little foreign-policy experience, yet he has displayed special interest in foreign policy, including charting a vision for building a greater international role for India. Modi, however, has not yet been able to recoup the country’s losses in its neighborhood. The erosion of India’s influence in its backyard holds far-reaching implications for its security,

underscoring the imperative for a more dynamic, forward-looking foreign policy and a greater focus on its immediate neighborhood. China's strategic clout, for example, is increasingly on display even in countries symbiotically tied to India, such as Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. If China established a Djibouti-type naval base in Pakistan or Sri Lanka, it could effectively open an Indian Ocean front against India in the same quiet way that it opened the trans-Himalayan threat under Mao Zedong by gobbling up Tibet, the historical buffer.

To be sure, Modi has injected dynamism and motivation in diplomacy.³⁰ But he has also highlighted what has long blighted the country's foreign policy – ad hoc and personality-driven actions that confound tactics with strategy. Institutionalized and integrated policymaking is essential for a robust diplomacy that takes a long view. Without healthy institutionalized processes, policy will tend to be ad hoc and shifting, with personalities at the helm having an excessive role in shaping thinking, priorities and objectives. If foreign policy is shaped by the whims and fancies of personalities who hold the reins of power, there will be a propensity to act in haste and repent at leisure. While India undoubtedly is injecting greater realism in its foreign policy, it remains intrinsically cautious and reactive, rather than forward-looking and proactive.

Despite the challenges Modi confronts, India seems set to stay on its multi-aligned path, while tilting more toward the U.S. and other democracies in Europe and Asia. A multi-aligned India pursuing omnidirectional cooperation for mutual benefit with key players will be better positioned to expand its strategic influence and promote peace and cooperation in international relations. The Indian elephant has to survive on its own because it is too big to offer itself for adoption — or be accepted for adoption. India, however, must build strength at home if it wants to project greater power overseas.

The tyranny of geography

Regional security has an important bearing on any country's foreign policy. A troubled neighborhood will burden and encumber any country's foreign policy, including a nation aspiring to a great power. India's neighborhood is so chronically troubled that Indian foreign policy faces major regional challenges, exemplified by an arc of revanchist or scofflaw states around India.

In fact, one of the most striking things about the larger Asian strategic landscape is the arc of troubled states around India. This harsh geographical reality weighs India down regionally and constricts its strategic space. With a volatile neighborhood and a range of cross-border threats, India confronts what can be called a tyranny of geography. As a result, it faces serious external threats from virtually all directions.

It is locked in an arc of dysfunctional or renegade states. To India's west lies "an arc of crises stretching from Jordan to Pakistan" — to use the title of one of the workshops at a World Policy Conference in Evian, France.³¹ For example, rapid Talibanization and spreading militancy threaten to devour next-door Pakistan. A task force of the U.S.-based Atlantic Council warned in a still-relevant 2009 report that, "We are running out of time to help Pakistan change its present course toward increasing economic and political instability, and even ultimate failure."³²

Most states in India's neighborhood are fragile states that face serious internal challenges. Take the Maldives, where an armed coup in 2012 ousted the country's first democratically elected president. Sri Lanka's internal situation remains precarious under the Rajapaksa brothers, who are working to establish a

quasi-dictatorship. The end of the country's 26-year civil war has left behind a militarized society and an emboldened Rajapaksa dynasty, which has stepped up efforts to fashion a mono-ethnic identity for a multiethnic Sri Lanka. In Nepal — a strategic buffer between India and restive Tibet, where China claims to be at “war against secessionist sabotage” — political disarray persists. Despite coming under communist rule since 2018, Nepal is in danger of becoming a dysfunctional state. Such a development would have major implications for India, with which Nepal has an open border permitting passport-free passage.

The rise of violent Islamism, meanwhile, is battering Bangladesh.³³ An abortive coup attempt in Bangladesh in 2012 showed that the world's seventh most populous country, struggling to remain a democracy under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, remains vulnerable to its unruly military. In its four decades of independence, Bangladesh has experienced 23 coup attempts, some of them successful. Another of India's neighbors — Myanmar — remains wracked by multiple insurgencies and the Rohingya problem, despite Aung San Suu Kyi's recent landslide election victory. India shares a 1,643-kilometer land border with Myanmar, and a 725-kilometer maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. New Delhi sees Myanmar as its gateway to Southeast Asia, with which it is seeking greater economic integration through its “Act East” policy.

Political turmoil in the neighborhood heightens the danger of spillover effects for India. An increasingly unstable neighborhood also makes it more difficult to promote regional cooperation and integration, including free trade. To some extent, it is a self-inflicted tyranny for India. India's security concerns over Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and even Pakistan stem from the failures of its past policies. At the very least, the events in the region expose India's inability to influence developments in its own backyard.

The rise of violent Islamism in South Asia has accompanied by anti-democratic developments. In vandalism reminiscent of the Taliban's demolition of the monumental Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2001, Islamists ransacked the Maldives' main museum in Male, the capital, on the day the country's first democratically elected president was ousted, smashing priceless Buddhist statues made of coral and limestone and virtually erasing all evidence of the Maldives' Hindu and Buddhist past before its people converted to Islam in the twelfth century. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, military intelligence agencies have nurtured jihadist groups, employing them for political purposes at home and across national frontiers.

This follows a well-established pattern in the region: Autocratic rule has tended to promote extremist elements, especially when those in power form opportunistic alliances with such forces. When a democratic experiment gains traction, as in Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina, it crimps the extremists' room for maneuver. But a broader lesson in much of the region is that even where democratic progress occurs, it remains reversible unless the old, entrenched forces are ousted and the rule of law is firmly established.

Not surprisingly, India's domestic security has come under pressure from unconventional cross-border threats, extending from illicit refugee flows to transnational terrorism. India has the dubious distinction of being the home of the largest number of illegally settled refugees. The biggest influx of refugees — estimated by the Indian government to number more than 20 million — has been from Bangladesh. In addition to the millions that have illegally settled in India, many Bangladeshis have moved within Bangladesh from rural areas to the capital city, Dhaka, as “climate refugees,” driven out by floods, cyclones and saltwater incursion from the Bay of Bengal.³⁴ Extreme weather patterns and

natural disasters in Bangladesh are set to grow in scale and intensity due to global warming.

For India, the ethnic expansion of Bangladesh beyond its political borders not only sets up enduring trans-border links but it also makes New Delhi's already-complex task of border management more onerous. As brought out by Indian census figures, Indian districts bordering Bangladesh have become Bangladeshi-majority areas. It is perhaps the first time in modern history that a country has expanded its ethnic frontiers without expanding its political borders. In contrast, Han China's demographic onslaught on Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet through a "Go West" Han-migration campaign has followed the expansion of its political frontiers.

The *New York Times* aptly described India's security plight in these words in a news report in 2020: "India was feeling increasingly hemmed in by China's expanding economic and geopolitical influence in South Asia. To the west, the Chinese are working with Pakistan, India's archenemy, and recently agreed to help construct an enormous dam on the border of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, an area India claims. To the east, China's new friend, Nepal, just produced a map that challenges where the Indian border lies; India has blamed China for stirring up the trouble. Nepal was once a close ally, but after India encouraged a punishing trade blockade in 2015, Nepal drifted closer to China. To the south, deep in the tropics, the Chinese have taken over an island in the Maldives, a few hundred miles off India's coast. Indian military experts say China has brought in millions of pounds of sand, expanding the island for possible use as an airstrip or submarine base."³⁵

Simply put, India's neighborhood is more combustible than ever. The volatile region acts as a constraint on India's great-power ambitions. This does

not mean that India will remain hemmed in by its region indefinitely and thus be unable to act as a global player. China too faces a difficult neighborhood, and it presently has unresolved land and sea border disputes with 11 of its neighbors. And even with the neighbors with whom it has reached frontier-settlement accords, border friction persists.³⁶ Yet China has emerged as a global player by building comprehensive national power, not by pacifying its neighborhood or even lifting its threat of military invasion of Taiwan.

India has little choice but to develop more innovative approaches to diplomacy and national defense to help ameliorate its regional-security situation so that it is able to play a larger global role. Toward that goal, India has unveiled a new aid diplomacy focused on its immediate neighborhood. The aid diplomacy is designed to build new trade and transportation links and win diplomatic influence. India must actively involve itself regionally to help influence developments.

Countering the Scourge of Terrorism

India, with its location next to the Pakistan-Pakistan belt, identifies Islamist terrorism and extremism as an existential threat to its pluralism, secularism and multiethnic composition. While the spreading jihad culture and the growth of transnational Islamist terrorism represent a challenge to the security of the entire free world, this threat is particularly acute for India because some of the major transnational terrorist sanctuaries are located in its immediate neighborhood. It speaks for itself that India has suffered many attacks by violent Islamists, some of which were staged with the aid of Pakistani intelligence. One example is the 2008 Mumbai terrorist siege. The then-CIA chief Michael Hayden, in his 2016

book, has dissected the role of Pakistan (“the ally from hell,” as he calls it) in the 2008 Mumbai terror attack.³⁷

More broadly, Asia is the new “ground zero” for Islamist terror.³⁸ Such is the metastasizing scourge of Islamist violence that radical Islamic groups, some affiliated with larger extremist networks, have been quietly gaining influence in an arc of countries extending from the Maldivian to the Philippine archipelagos. The threat they pose can no longer be ignored.

Islamist terror is closely connected with the spread of Wahhabism, the obscurantist and intolerant version of Islam bankrolled by Saudi Arabia and other sheikhdoms. Wahhabi fanaticism is terrorism’s ideological mother, whose offspring include ISIS, al-Qaeda, Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Boko Haram. All these groups blend hostility toward non-Sunnis and anti-modern beliefs into nihilistic rage. The unraveling of the ISIS caliphate, meanwhile, has only intensified the terrorism challenge — from Asia to Europe. Battle-hardened terrorist fighters returning home from Syria and Iraq have become a major counterterrorism concern in Europe and Asia, given their operational training, skills, and experience in staging savage attacks.

Arab petrodollars have long funded the rise of Islamic extremism. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist strikes in the United States, Saudi Arabia, for example, promised to clean up its act. Yet Saudi money has continued to flow to overseas militant groups.³⁹ In southern Asia, the rise of Islamist terror is linked to the CIA’s covert war in the 1980s against the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. Large portions of the U.S. aid for Afghan anti-Soviet guerrillas were siphoned off by the conduit, Pakistan intelligence.⁴⁰ The diverted aid, among other things, was used to ignite a bloody insurgency in Indian Kashmir.⁴¹ U.S. officials have acknowledged that Pakistan’s “intelligence service even

used Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan to train covert operatives for use in a war of terror against India.”⁴²

According to an ex-U.S. official Ashley Tellis, “India has unfortunately become the ‘sponge’ that protects us all. India’s very proximity to Pakistan, which has developed into the epicenter of global terrorism during the last thirty years, has resulted in New Delhi absorbing most of the blows unleashed by those terrorist groups that treat it as a common enemy along with Israel, the United States, and the West more generally. To the chagrin of its citizens, India has also turned out to be a terribly soft state neither able to prevent many of the terrorist acts that have confronted it over the years nor capable of retaliating effectively against either its terrorist adversaries or their state sponsors in Pakistan. The existence of unresolved problems, such as the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir, has also provided both Pakistani institutions and their terrorist clients with the excuses necessary to bleed India to ‘death by a thousand cuts.’ But these unsettled disputes remain only excuses: not that they should not be addressed by New Delhi seriously and with alacrity, there is no assurance that a satisfactory resolution of these problems will conclusively eliminate the threat of terrorism facing India and the West more generally.”⁴³

Internationally, controlling the Islamist terror scourge demands closure of the wellspring that feeds terrorism — Wahhabi fanaticism. As the late Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew said, the war on terror demands eliminating the “queen bees” (the preachers of violence) that are inspiring the “worker bees” (terrorists) to become suicide killers.⁴⁴ The U.S.-led global war on terror, launched after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks but now derailed, needs to be brought back on track.

For India, however, containing terrorism has turned into a major test. What India needs is a concerted, sustained campaign against the forces of terror. It must develop a set of credible options to deal with externally sponsored terrorism. Reacting in a measured and responsible way to any terrorist strike does not preclude developing options to deter such attacks.

India's biggest foreign-policy challenge is China

India may be a rising power but there is an even more prominent power rising in its neighborhood, posing important challenges for Indian security and foreign policy. China's rise in one generation as a global player under authoritarian rule has come to epitomize the qualitative reordering of power in Asia and the wider world. Not since Japan rose to world-power status during the reign of the Meiji Emperor in the second half of the nineteenth century has another non-Western power emerged with such potential to alter the world order as China today. China stands to more profoundly affect global geopolitics than any other country in the coming years.⁴⁵

For New Delhi, the rise of an increasingly assertive and territorially revisionist China has become the single biggest strategic challenge.⁴⁶ In addition to its Himalayan encroachments, China is opening two additional fronts against India that are both water-related: One front is from the Indian Ocean — a maritime front — and the other front relates to freshwater, specifically river waters. China is working to reengineer the cross-border flows of rivers that originate in Tibet. It unveiled plans in late 2020 to build a megaproject on the Brahmaputra just before the river enters India. The megaproject may not be related to what an officially blessed book in 2005 proposed — the northward rerouting of the Brahmaputra.⁴⁷ But the 60-gigawatt megaproject reportedly will

dwarf the Three Gorges Dam (currently the world's largest) in terms of installed electricity-generating capacity.

Even behind the Pakistan threat to India is China. The China-Pakistan axis has long generated high security costs for India and raised the specter of a two-front war. That is why some Indian prime ministers have pursued a “defensive wedge strategy,” in which the *status quo* power seeks to drive a wedge between two allied revisionist states, so that it can focus its capabilities on the more threatening challenger. But such Indian efforts have come to naught.

Meanwhile, China's growing propensity to flex its muscles is driving its economic and military expansionism, including its territorial and maritime revisionism against neighbors. China seems more determined than ever to choke off Asian competitors, such as India and Japan.

Shrewdly timing a surprise assault has been central to China's repeated use of force in Asia. In 1962, China invaded India just as the Cuban missile crisis was bringing the world to the brink of nuclear Armageddon. And in April 2020, as a distracted India was wrestling with the coronavirus that originated in Wuhan, China stealthily encroached on key vantage points in Indian Ladakh. Ancient military strategist Sun Tzu's advice to “plan for what is difficult while it is easy” led China to strike when India was vulnerable. I

China's aggression signifies a geostrategic sea change. India failed to see the aggression coming, despite growing Chinese belligerence over the past 15 years. The two countries have been engaged in border negotiations since 1981, in what is already the longest negotiating process between any two nations in modern world history. Yet the negotiations have failed to yield tangible results.

In fact, during a 2010 New Delhi visit, then-Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao bluntly stated that sorting out the Himalayan border disputes “will take a fairly long period of time.”⁴⁸ Even as old rifts fester, new issues have been roiling bilateral relations.

After the United States and India cemented a defense-framework agreement and a civilian nuclear deal in mid-2005, China turned more coercive toward its southern neighbor. In 2009, Sino-Indian relations sank to a new low in more than two decades when Beijing unleashed psychological war, employing its state-run media and nationalistic Web sites to warn of another armed conflict.⁴⁹ It was a throwback to the coarse rhetoric China had used in the buildup to the 32-day war in 1962. For example, the Chinese Communist Party’s main mouthpiece, the *People’s Daily*, berated India for “recklessness and arrogance” and asked it to weigh “the consequences of a potential confrontation with China.”⁵⁰ Such attacks escalated with the 2017 China-India military standoff on the remote Himalayan plateau of Doklam.

Apart from the growth of vituperative attacks on India in the state-controlled Chinese media,⁵¹ there has been a steady increase in the level of Chinese cross-border incursions across the Himalayan line of control since 2006, the year Beijing resurrected its long-dormant claim to the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. That state is almost three larger times larger in size than Taiwan. Through repeated cross-border forays, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has sought to test Indian defense preparedness and also incrementally alter the line of control.

As an American newspaper put it in mid-2020, “India has several reasons to feel particularly hemmed in by China. Over the past decade, China has heavily courted India’s neighbors, unraveling New Delhi’s influence on its own

doorstep. As Indian and Chinese troops clashed in the Himalayas, Nepal's government simultaneously claimed a sliver of territory on its border that India considers its own. India's defense minister recently suggested that Nepal's border actions were taken at the behest of China. In Pakistan, India's archrival, China is building huge infrastructure projects, some in territory that the Indian government disputes. With every project built, China is making it harder for India to hold on to its territorial claims. And right off India's southern coast, China took possession of a port in Sri Lanka after that country could not pay its debt to Beijing. Some Indian officials fear that China could militarize the port, which Sri Lanka denies."⁵²

What lessons should India draw? The first lesson is that China's aggressive actions bear no relation with the state of its bilateral ties with the country it targets. For example, the current Chinese aggression in Indian Ladakh began just six months after President Xi declared during an India visit that China-India relations have "entered a new phase of sound and friendly development."⁵³ Similarly, despite improving Sino-Japanese relations, Chinese incursions into the Senkaku territorial waters and airspace have steadily increased.⁵⁴ This should serve as a forewarning for India that the Xi regime's aggressive revisionism is unaffected by bilateral considerations, including diplomatic progress.

A second lesson relates to booming bilateral trade. India is paying a big price, as the current Chinese aggression shows, for wrongly assuming that economic interdependence would avert overt conflict. Before it staged the Ladakh aggression in 2020, China's trade surplus with India had more than doubled under Modi's watch. The fact is that the expanding economic ties, far from making China less aggressive on territorial disputes, only constrict the other side's strategic leeway.

For example, in response to China's brazen aggression, which has resulted in an unprecedented military standoff along the Himalayan frontier, India has refrained from slapping Beijing with trade sanctions or imposing substantive costs on China in other ways, such as stopping Indian companies from using Chinese cloud services. Chinese tech companies like Tencent and Alibaba are very active in India's cloud computing space, serving as the main competitors to their American rivals like Google Cloud and Microsoft.⁵⁵ The reason why India has shied away from meaningful steps is because of the likely repercussions for Indian companies.

Similarly, Japan's dependence on the Chinese market induces Japanese restraint even in the face of provocative Chinese actions or statements. China, in recent months, has sought to even police the waters off the Senkaku Islands, as if these Japanese-administered islands are under Chinese control.⁵⁶ The aim is to weaken Japan's control and strengthen Chinese claims of sovereignty over them. Yet, at a time when the imperative for economic distancing from China has become apparent, Japan (and another Quad member, Australia) decided to go in the opposite direction recently and economically integrate more with China by signing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement in November 2020.

A third lesson is that attempts to placate Beijing tend to backfire. After Modi became India's prime minister in 2014, he sought to befriend China. His conciliatory steps included delisting of China as a "country of concern." All warning signs in the runup to China's 2020 aggression were ignored by the Modi government. There is also a cautionary tale for Japan here. Since the 2018 Beijing visit of the then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Tokyo has laid emphasis

on improving ties with Beijing and has responded with remarkable restraint to the longest series of Chinese incursions into Japanese waters in several years.

Make no mistake: Avoiding counteractions in response to China's belligerence only increases Chinese bellicosity. One startling fact is that no Japanese defense minister has ever conducted an aerial survey of the Senkakus, so as not to provoke China.⁵⁷ But such reluctance has only invited stepped-up Chinese incursions.

A fourth lesson for India relates to China's strategy. China, after its disastrous 1979 invasion of Vietnam, has focused on winning without fighting. Deception, concealment and surprise in peacetime have driven China's bulletless aggressions — from seizing the Johnson Reef in 1988 and the Mischief Reef in 1995 to occupying the Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and now key vantage points in Indian Ladakh. All of which suggests that a Chinese strike against the Senkaku Islands could come when Japan least expects it.

A fifth lesson is that as long as China perceives strategic benefits as outweighing costs, it will persist with a strategy of attrition against India — and Japan. India's failure to impose substantive costs on Beijing risks locking India in a “no war, no peace” situation with China. Japan faces the same specter.

India, in fact, has retreated to an increasingly defensive position territorially, with the spotlight now not on Tibet's status, but on China's Tibet-linked claims to Indian territories, including areas in Ladakh and virtually the whole of Arunachal Pradesh. That may explain why Beijing invested so much political capital over the years in getting New Delhi to gradually accept Tibet as part of the territory of the People's Republic of China. Its success on that score, with New Delhi in 2003 bringing its position on Tibet in line with Beijing's

demand, has helped narrow the territorial disputes to what China claims. This has neatly meshed with Beijing's long-standing negotiating stance: What it occupies is Chinese territory, and what it claims must be on the table to be settled on the basis of give-and-take — or as it puts it in reasonably sounding terms, on the basis of “mutual accommodation and mutual understanding.”

Meanwhile, through the new maritime front it is opening against India. China is assembling a “string of pearls.” The string of pearls includes port projects and special naval-access arrangements along the great trade arteries in the Indian Ocean rim.⁵⁸ It is also working to position itself along the vital sea lanes of communication from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa. By seeking to chip away at India's maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean, China's objective is to assert itself along vital trade arteries and gain preeminence in Asia.

Concluding observations

The rise and decline of powers — an inexorable phenomenon in history — creates foreign-policy opportunities for building new and beneficial geopolitical alignments. In Asia, the ongoing qualitative reordering of power is altering the geopolitical equations between and among the major players. A rising India has cemented a close strategic partnership with the United States — a relationship that is seen as a linchpin of Asian security and stability. India has also forged closer links with other important democracies, from Europe to Asia and South America. In Asia, for example, the fastest-growing relationship is the India-Japan partnership, which is singularly free of any kind of dispute — ideological, cultural or geopolitical.

The web of growing cooperation between and among democracies portends a historic realignment in the global balance of power. In Asia, the balance of power will be determined by events principally in two regions: the Indian Ocean and East Asia. India and Japan, which see themselves as natural allies, should seek to play a central role in each of the two regions to help advance peace and stability and help safeguard vital sea lanes.

India's rise does not raise the same concerns as China's ascent for valid reasons. India essentially remains a *status quo* power, a status reflected in its foreign policy. It has repeatedly sought, but failed, to buy peace with either of its two regional foes, China and Pakistan. Such efforts could be seen as being in consonance with India's civilizational heritage as a relatively peaceful and assimilative society and the country's projection of itself as a responsible nation seeking to play a constructive role beyond its borders.

Internationally, though, India continues to punch below its weight. It needs to develop more geopolitical heft. This cannot be done in the foreign-policy realm alone. To acquire the attributes of a great power, India must build a high level of autonomous and innovative technological capability in the economic sphere, a capacity both to meet basic defense needs indigenously and to export surplus military hardware in a major way to subsidize the domestic military-industrial complex, and a capability to project power far beyond its borders, including through intercontinental-range weaponry.

Although widely seen as a great power-in-waiting, India must also ensure that it is not held down by its exceedingly difficult regional security environment. If the increasingly volatile region in which India is located is not to frustrate its great-power ambitions, the country will need to evolve a more-dynamic defense posture and a more-active and forward-looking diplomacy. Its

“Act East” policy, for example, seeks to do that, with the aim of reestablishing historically close ties with countries to the east and also contributing to the building of a stable balance of power in Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific.

India’s advancement from doctrinaire nonalignment to geopolitical pragmatism, as underscored by its foreign-policy focus on multi-alignment, augurs well for its future trajectory. India, however, remains intrinsically risk-averse, which crimps its foreign policy. Risk aversion is not always bad. This is apparent from the Indian decisions over the years not to send troops to join the U.S.-led coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan. But it also true that, without taking risks, no nation or leader can succeed. India must ensure that its risk-averseness does not weigh down its foreign policy.

More broadly, Indian foreign policy has a major role to play in how arrangements and mechanisms evolve in a fast-changing Indo-Pacific. Deterrence, stability and peace were instrumental in creating the Asian renaissance. These three elements remain central to Asia’s continued dynamism and prosperity. The central challenge in Asia is to find ways to reduce mistrust and build mutually beneficial cooperation. This can be achieved not by shying away from the contentious issues but by seeking to tackle them in a practical, forward-looking way, even if solutions are not easy to arrive at. A stable Asian power equilibrium is more likely to be realized if India averts a destabilizing trans-Himalayan military imbalance.

In the coming years, India will increasingly be aligned with the West and Asian democratic powers, even as it maintains its cherished strategic autonomy. India, however, will seek to ensure that its strengthening strategic partnership with the United States does not undermine its security relationship with Russia — a key factor in building Asian power equilibrium by putting discreet checks

on the exercise of Chinese power. The United States may have emerged as the largest seller of arms to India, but Russia has transferred to India offensive weapons that the U.S. does not export, such as an aircraft carrier and a nuclear-powered submarine. India, moreover, relies on Russian spare parts for its Russian-made military hardware.

As if to underline its multi-alignment approach, India is set to build close partnerships with different powers so as to pursue a variety of interests in different settings. This will place India in a better position to advance its interests in a rapidly changing world. Through such an approach, India can also hope to play bridge-builder between the East and the West, and between the developed and developing worlds.

The Indian government's most urgent foreign-policy problems, however, relate to the country's own neighborhood, not least a deepening strategic nexus between China and Pakistan — a dangerous combination of an aggressive neighbor and an ascendant superpower. Both these nuclear-armed allies stake claims to swaths of Indian territory. When Modi took office, many expected him to reinvigorate foreign policy at a time when the yawning power gap between India and China had widened. But, despite considerable Indian efforts, China's influence in India's backyard has grown, even in countries long symbiotically tied to India, including Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Against this background, the main priorities of Indian foreign policy ought to be external balancing against China and securing India's interests in its immediate neighborhood. To quote a former Indian official, "If India is to enjoy peace at home to develop, it will need to consolidate its periphery and ensure that it cannot be used against its interests."⁵⁹

For too long, New Delhi has taken a cautious and reactive approach. But with Beijing spreading its influence deep into India's backyard, New Delhi needs to reverse its eroding regional clout. A dynamic diplomacy needs strong, bipartisan policies. With India's fractious politics, building bipartisanship has long been tough in the world's largest democracy.

Dealing with an aggressive China or complex regional-security challenges demands a decisive Indian leadership that takes a long-term view and does not confound tactics with strategy. To be sure, India has been imbibing greater realism as its quixotic founding philosophy centered on non-violence assumes a largely rhetorical meaning. Yet India remains intrinsically diffident and reactive. Without proactive diplomacy, India will continue to punch far below its weight.

The sign "The Buck Stops Here" was on U.S. President Harry Truman's desk in his White House office. The Indian prime minister and his ministers, by contrast, should have a desk sign that proclaims: "Caution helps avert problems. Meekness compounds problems."

ENDNOTES

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