INDIA AS A RISING POWER

India’s Defining Moment

India is on the verge of becoming a major power-- the key difference between this type of proclamation now versus previous periods is that India’s current path is generally viewed as irreversible. This does not mean that there are no skeptics left at all; but it does mean that Lord Meghnad Desai’s recent contention that “China is destined to be a great power, but India will just be a great democracy,” is sounding increasingly hollow. India’s changing status is leading to serious internal debate about the kind of power India seeks to be in the international system; in many ways this is a defining moment in crafting its national identity. The current political controversy in New Delhi about the civilian nuclear deal with the U.S. illustrates the competing pulls particularly well.

Overcoming its Past

India has been a frustrated power for much of its post independence history—the aspirations of its political elite consistently outstripping the country’s material capabilities. Far from being the inheritor of the British Raj, New Delhi was effectively inward looking, and obsessed with keeping extra-regional powers out of South Asia. In the international arena, India was often perceived as reaching beyond its means and being overly sanctimonious and defensive. The picture it presented to the outside world was one of confused, if not conflicted, identity.

In trying to understand India’s worldview, there are no well articulated doctrines or white papers to rely on as in the U.S.—the Indian tendency is for informal, behind the scene discussions that eventually end up as policy. India’s history has been short on political centralization, making it less conducive to single minded grand strategy. India’s definition of itself owes much more to its long social and civilizational history. Indeed, the very idea of openly discussing India’s goals in power seeking terms was positively disdained—ambivalence on power has been the hallmark.

In light of this history, the astounding changes in domestic discourse on India’s national identity and place in the world beginning in the mid 1990s, is nothing short of dramatic. The new Realists who have emerged on the scene represent the biggest break
with India’s past, but they are jockeying for position with proponents of other perspectives, and the debate is just beginning in earnest.

Means versus Ends

On the country’s major international objective—to achieve developed country status—there is almost total consensus. This general consensus on the ends however, belies divergent views on the particular paths India need to take to reach this goal. Opinion is largely split in three ways though not always mutually exclusive: between those who want to see India’s development in traditional great power terms, others who view India primarily through the lens of liberal economic interdependence, and still others who believe India should be a “bridging” power, between the west and south, emphasizing India’s uniqueness in the global system.

New thinking in India regarding its global role emerged most visibly during the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty debate that unexpectedly took the country by storm in 1996. For the first time, India’s Ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament, Arundhati Ghosh publicly called for “nuclear realism,” thus opening the door to a discourse that now freely uses realist terminology that had long been shunned up and down the political and intellectual spectrum. The 1998 nuclear tests by India indicated that it sought to go beyond its previous studied ambiguity of “existential deterrence.” It pointed to a reliance on traditional military indices of great power status, just as India was pushing through the most thorough going economic restructuring to integrate into the global economic order. At the time though, India seemed to be out of sync with its own past identity and an outside world that (rhetorically at least) was touting the value of money power over military muscle. Ten years later however, India is charting a course that is inexorably integrating it into the international arena as a rising power, and perhaps as importantly from India’s point of view, being finally accorded the high status it has always sought.

Contending Perspectives

New Realism

Those who see India’s global identity in largely military-strategic terms, were dealt a blow in the national elections of May 2004. The Bharatiya Janata Party, most closely associated with the nuclear tests and partnership with the US, lost to the Congress
Party whose coalition includes strong left parties. The BJP’s election slogan of “India Shining,” meant to evoke its new found global military and economic power, did not impress the vast number of rural voters, who had yet to see the benefits of economic liberalization or nuclearization.

Under the BJP’s rule from 1998-2004, India showed an uncharacteristic assertiveness. Influential sections of the strategic community in New Delhi even argued for sending Indian troops to Iraq in July 2003—mostly making the case that if India wanted to be a global player in a unipolar world, it would have to be willing to go out on a limb for the US as a trustworthy partner, that it could gain a claim to a stake in post war Middle East, and that it should generally behave like a global actor. None of the arguments related to fighting terrorism, all were about carving out a new international identity.

These realist proponents are not uniform, and there is a growing split, especially on India’s relationship with the U.S.:

- those who see the value of cooperating with the U.S. across the board
- those who believe in diversifying India’s partnerships significantly and maintaining traditional friends (including Russia and Iran)
- still others who believe India can “go it alone”

Loosely speaking, a group of well known strategic analysts with the ear of the government (including the highly influential K. Subrahmanyam), some sections of the Ministry of External Affairs, and the Indian Space Research Organization, are all proponents of close collaboration with the U.S. Indeed, a section of these analysts see a historic conjecture of worldviews with the U.S. on fighting terrorism; countering Islamist radicalism; and constructing a new Asian balance of power. The defense scientists and nuclear technology sectors bend toward the second view. The third view is a minority one, with a small number of security analysts leading the group—their main argument relates to developing a credible nuclear deterrent, well beyond the region. All three groups however, are strong believers in maintaining India’s historic strategic autonomy—an enduring characteristic of its foreign policy.

Indeed, India’s intense concern for protecting its political and territorial sovereignty is found in all elite circles and is unlikely to disappear—however, the groups
discussed below seem more open to the necessity of trading a level of economic and political sovereignty as a price for international economic integration. In other words, they recognize that impact on sovereignty cannot be the sole guide to Indian policymaking. (As some have noted, in the past, this basically amounted to saying “No” in the international arena).

Through The Lens of Economic Liberalization

A major development has been the rise of India’s economic managers thanks to their global success, and with it, a rise in their influence. There is no real dissent in the country regarding economic liberalization and globalization—largely because there is a new recognition that India can be a net beneficiary of globalization. Thus it is not surprising to see that even West Bengal’s ruling left wing party is courting foreign investment for the state. The extended crisis between India and Pakistan in 2002 and reactions from the economic elite to the impact on investment climate, and the government response was a reminder of this. For this group, what matters is that India’s voice is heard at G-7 meetings, rather than at the meetings of the P-5. In 2005, India was invited for the first time to participate in the meeting of the G7 finance ministers. Partnership with the U.S. is seen as vital, especially for the booming Indian information technology sector—fully two thirds of its market is in the U.S.

While again not a uniform group, corporate leaders with international links or ambitions will increasingly want a say in the country’s economic statecraft. The very notion of “economic statecraft” is gaining traction in the country’s foreign ministry formulations. China’s experience of utilizing its economic prowess to blunt unwelcome political intrusion is viewed by many in the political and economic circles as economic statecraft par excellence, and a model to emulate. The purchase of 68 Boeing commercial aircraft at a cost of $7.9 billion by the state run Air India airlines in 2006 (the largest ever purchase by an Indian carrier), rather than from Airbus which most analysts had viewed as having the advantage, suggested a new form of economic diplomacy aimed at consolidating Indo-U.S. relations, and creating future stakes in India.

The Use of Soft Power

Adherents to the third perspective seek to maximize India’s influence internationally by utilizing its traditional soft power in innovative ways. Thus this group
would argue that while the previous world order called for India to take the lead on nonalignment, the current global context provides opportunities for India to promote itself as a bridging power and a model of pluralism, tolerance and democracy. As a bridging power, India would have a special role in international institutions, from WTO to initiatives on HIV-AIDs. It could conceivably be an effective interlocutor in the international arena, for example, between Iran and the U.S. India has also begun to channel international assistance selectively—it has a large development aid program in Afghanistan. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Sigh is among those who have explicitly stated a preference for India to be a “bridge.” At another level, India’s influence may also be spread by other “attractions,” especially through its far flung Bollywood film industry—the largest in the world.

India’s commitment to strong secularism despite the enormous diversity of religion and ethnic groups is given as an important component of its soft power. The lack of any al Qaeda foothold in India despite a large Muslim minority of 150 million in a turbulent region is seen as testimony to India’s successful pluralist politics. This has implications for foreign policy orientations—Indian political elite almost across the board is in favor of keeping a studied distance from U.S. policy in Iraq and the Middle East.

Pending Questions

In its long history, a defining Indian characteristic has been its political gradualism. Extreme shifts in policy, let alone in identity constructions, are hard to find. Yet, the last decade or so has been instructive—discernible changes have occurred at almost all levels at an unimaginable speed, suggesting that India has discovered how to act in a purposeful fashion. As the debate unfolds, there are several issues at hand:

- India is still searching for the right mix of soft and hard power. Soft power alternatives offer a way of economizing on coercive instruments, but it cannot replace them. Given India’s past, it will not be able to strike a balance easily. For example, the current leadership is visibly uncomfortable with public labels for India such as “the next superpower.”
- India’s vibrant democracy ensures that identity questions cannot be easily resolved. The arguments of the left and left of center activists currently arrayed against the US-India nuclear deal have less to do with the specifics
of the agreement, than with ideological resistance to embracing the U.S., and in particular, its prevailing worldview.

- For India, the South Asian region has stood as a roadblock to its ambitions. Can India leapfrog the region to the global scene? How will it resolve its regional identity in which India looms so large, yet other states in the neighborhood almost literally define themselves as the “other” to India?

- Given India’s fierce protection of its autonomy, what types of alliance structures, or partnerships are possible? Will a form of “multi-alignment” be adopted as some have called for—one which allows for simultaneous relationships within a 360 degree perspective and soft power balancing? In a hard unipolar system, this will be difficult. To those who view U.S. power as limited, this holds great merit.