

Harsh V. Pant | The trials of a rising power

The balance of power has shifted in India's favour in the last decade. But does it have a goal in mind as it rises?

Nations take a long time to alter the parameters of their foreign and security policies. Often, mere decades are not enough. That's because a nation's foreign policy flows from several sources: from the international system to its domestic political imperatives to the cultural factors that underlie its society to the personal characteristics and perceptions of individual decisionmakers. This usually provides an essential continuity to a nation's foreign policy framework. Like most nations, India's external outlook has also traditionally been a result of these varied factors interacting and transforming each other.

Yet there are times when nations are called upon to set their sights higher. The last decade was one such period in Indian history when the country was asked to respond to its political and economic rise and reshape its foreign policy accordingly. As a nation's weight in the global balance of power rises, it is confronted with the choice about whether to become a great power. However, a state's freedom to choose whether to achieve that status is, in reality, tightly constrained by structural factors. Eligible states that fail to attain great power status are predictably punished. The last decade saw Indian foreign policy standing at such a crossroads, the foundations of which were laid at the end of the Cold War.

Throughout the Cold War period, India was concerned about getting entangled in the US-USSR superpower rivalry. It made sense to make a choice in favour of a non-aligned foreign policy posture that, at least in theory, preserved India's decision-making autonomy in the realm of international affairs. Behind all the rhetoric of the so-called Third World solidarity, there was a very cool-headed calculation that was aimed at protecting vital Indian interests. And these interests were fairly limited in scope, given India's relatively limited economic and military capabilities. Pakistan's security strategy was India's most immediate threat—India's obsession with Pakistan was not all that surprising.

But beyond Pakistan, there was little clarity—something that was vividly brought home in the stunning defeat at the hands of the Chinese in 1962. And even on Pakistan, there is little evidence to suggest that India had a coherent strategy. The wars with Pakistan kept coming and India continued to fight those wars without ever bothering to make an assessment if a policy can be evolved that would make these wars go away. The patting on the back that India didn't start any of these wars and that it fought only when provoked could not hide the fact that there was a big policy vacuum at the heart of Indian foreign and security policy. It is indeed instructive how India has failed to deal with the malevolence of a single hostile neighbour one-eighth its size for the last six decades.

The end of the Cold War came as a blessing in disguise as it forced Indian policymakers to adapt to the new global political and economic realities—it was a much-needed shock. Many of the central assumptions of Indian foreign policy had to be reviewed in light of the changed circumstances. The shape of the world changed, signalling the possibility of a new Indian foreign and national security strategy.

At this point, India's economic reforms put the nation on a high-growth trajectory, plunging it willy-nilly into the realm of great power politics. And as a new decade dawned at the beginning of a new millennium, India seemed poised on the threshold of achieving the status of a major global power, emerging as an indispensable, albeit reluctant, element of the new global order—exemplified not only by its growing economic and military might, but also the attraction of its political and cultural values.

By any objective measure of material capability, India today is a rising power in the international system—the consequences of which have been visible in the international system during the past decade. India's rising wealth and large population have enabled it to build up its military and diplomatic might. As a result, this decade saw India playing the balance-of-power game more effectively by courting the US to ward off an impending clash with the other Asian giant, China.

It also started engaging other East and South-East Asian countries to balance China's predominance in its vicinity. India has also commenced projecting its power more forcefully by

sending its defence forces to train with other regional states as well as despatching its navy to tackle piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

The high point of India's diplomatic achievement this decade was its civilian nuclear energy cooperation pact with the US. Though first proposed by the US, the way in which India negotiated the highly contentious deal epitomized the new confidence in India about its own ability to shape global trends. The pact is as remarkable for the way it signals a revolutionary transformation in US-India relations as it is for the manner in which it transforms the global nuclear discourse. This has virtually rewritten the rules of the global nuclear regime by underlining India's credentials as a responsible nuclear state that should be integrated into the global nuclear order, though it did take India more than three years to conclude this pact, underlining the political divide in the nation on fundamental foreign policy choices facing it.

This political drift has resulted in a situation where India has found it difficult to adequately respond to the rising prowess of China. Even as China has grown aggressive in pursuing its interests vis-à-vis India, India has been meek to the point of obsequiousness in demanding respect from its neighbour. Though Sino-Indian ties have improved over the last decade, with China now India's largest trading partner, the asymmetry in this relationship is more palpable than ever.

One of the most significant challenges facing Indian foreign policy today is this inability of its decisionmakers to leverage the existing structure of the international system to further their nation's strategic interests, and its relations with China showcase this. India can keep propounding the desirability of a multipolar world order, but for all the talk of a "post-American" international system, US primacy is not going anywhere in a hurry in the short to medium term. It is important, therefore, for India to develop a partnership with the US that can serve not only their mutual interests, but also specific Indian interests. This is especially important because, while the US is unlikely to face a peer competitor at the global level, the emergence of China as a major power in the Asia-Pacific is already changing the strategic reality in the region.

Recognizing the shifting balance of power in Asia-Pacific produced by China's rise, the George W. Bush administration was prescient to embrace India as a counterweight. No country will be

as significantly affected by China's regional rise as India. India needs to focus on redressing the balance of power and developing leverage over China—and the most effective way of doing it is to learn how to play the balance-of-power game from China.

There are also tensions between India's purported role on the world stage and the challenges it faces in its own neighbourhood. Admittedly, South Asia remains a difficult neighbourhood and India's strategic periphery continues to witness turmoil and uncertainty. The instability in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar is a major inhibiting factor for India to realize its dream of becoming a major global player. India is surrounded by several weak states that view New Delhi's hegemonic status in the region with suspicion.

And that's the conundrum India faces. While it is seen as unresponsive to the concerns of its neighbours, any diplomatic aggressiveness on its part is also viewed with suspicion and often resentment. The structural position of India in the region makes it highly likely that its predominance will continue to be resented by its smaller neighbours, even as instability nearby continues to have the potential of upsetting its own delicate political balance.

However, a policy of "splendid isolation"—which Britain used to its advantage in the 19th century—is not an option today. India's desire to emerge as a major global player will remain just that—a desire—unless it engages its immediate neighbourhood more meaningfully and emerges as a net provider of regional peace and stability. In this context, India's inability to articulate a credible alternative to the US-led Western policy in Af-Pak does not augur well for its leadership role in the region.

As the recent debate on the 1998 thermonuclear tests shows, the Indian elite remains obsessed with nuclear weapons. These weapons do retain their relevance in international politics, but it is increasingly a very limited one. Major global powers will keep nuclear weapons in their arsenal for the foreseeable future, but there's a clear realization that they are primarily political instruments, not actual weapons of war. India's nuclear doctrine of credible minimum deterrence serves its interests well in the near to medium term and any over-investment, either intellectual or financial, in this realm might even be counterproductive.

Moreover, the full benefits of the nuclear pact can only be realized by India if it takes appropriate follow-up measures—creating a regulatory framework that enables the nuclear industry to expand; nurturing the indigenous scientific establishment; enunciating a comprehensive energy policy; and calibrating the nation’s broader foreign policy in line with global changes. After having played its cards effectively by preserving its nuclear autonomy in negotiations with the US over the nuclear pact, the time has now come for India to move on and focus on the broader strategic realities confronting the nation at a time when it is being seen as rising rapidly in the global interstate hierarchy.

Finally, India does not yet have the capacity to project what it stands for. The French philosopher Raymond Aron has suggested that the legitimacy of a great power diminishes if that power is not associated with a vibrant set of ideas. The global reassessment of India is primarily predicated on its recent economic rise. But India’s rise will remain incomplete in the absence of a credible vision with a larger purpose. India not only appears to be devoid of big ideas backed by assertive political conviction, but also continues to lack the intellectual infrastructure essential to debate and achieve clarity on what being a great power means for India.

India has always been a nation of great ambition, but today more than ever it needs to answer the question: What is the purpose behind its ambition? India wants to rise, but what for? It’s not clear if India’s elite understands the implications of its nation’s rise.

Even as India’s rise in the interstate global hierarchy continues steadily, its policymakers still act in the international arena as if India can continue to afford the luxury of responding to foreign policy challenges on a case-by-case basis without any requirement for a long-term strategic policy framework. The same ad hocism that had characterized Indian foreign policy in the past lingers. The problem, however, is India no longer has the luxury of time on its side and the issues that have gone unresolved since Independence need a long-term resolution. One can only hope that the new decade will force India to make certain policy choices that are long overdue.

Harsh Pant teaches at King’s College, London, and is currently a visiting professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore. The article was initially published at MINT.