

India and the Global Power Shift

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The international security environment is witnessing a power shift from the developed Western states to Asia led by the rise of China and India. In the words of Coral Bell, “Because the rise and rise of China and India is the most dramatically visible signal of change, the current patch of diplomatic history can fundamentally be seen as the end of the Vasco da Gama era...of 500 years of ascendancy of the West over Asia.”¹ This power shift will have a significant impact on global geopolitics. Although a unipolar global order has been in place for a decade and a half, a non-polar world (as against a multipolar world) is in the making. Political, economic and demographic trends have made it inevitable. As Richard Haass has noted, “In contrast to multipolarity -- which involves several distinct poles or concentrations of power -- a nonpolar international system is characterized by numerous centers with meaningful power.” He adds that while “the United States is and will long remain the largest single aggregation of power... power and influence are less and less linked in an era of nonpolarity.” According to Haass, “today's nonpolar world is not simply a result of the rise of other states and organizations or of the failures and follies of U.S. policy. It is also an inevitable consequence of globalization.”²

Analysts assess that despite its pre-eminence in military, scientific and economic fields, the US remains a country in relative decline. Even if that decline is unlikely to make a difference in the near future, the certainty of new powers rising to be global players augurs for a new global power balance. Explosive rates of population and economic growth in Asian states are indicators of a new world order in which power will be more dispersed. From an Indian perspective, the critical question is, if this multipolar world will have a benign or another form. There are two likely possibilities on this. The world could fragment into competing blocs that attempt to resolve their differences through power politics as nation states did in the 19th and 20th

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¹ Coral Bell, “The End of the Vasco da Gama Era,” Lowy Institute Paper 21, Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2007

² Richard Haass, “The Age of Nonpolarity,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol.87, no.3, May-June 2008

centuries. Robert Kagan has talked of an ‘axis of democracy’, including the US, EU, India and Japan, counterbalancing a ‘club of autocrats’, including Russia, China and Iran.³ The other possibility is of existing and rising powers choosing to manage their relations through mutual interdependence, as has been attempted successfully in Europe over the second half of the last century.

Global shifts happen rarely and are even less often peaceful. The transfer of power from west to east will dramatically change the context of dealing with international challenges. In the early 20th century the imperial order and the aspiring states of Germany and Japan failed to adjust to the times. That led to wars which devastated the better part of the world. The coming shift in power will have a greater impact globally and will require assimilation of diverse political and cultural systems. Today's rising powers seek redress of past grievances, are proudly nationalistic and want to claim their rightful place in the comity of nations. Asian rise in economic terms will translate into greater political and military power, thus increasing the potential damage from conflicts. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair has noted that “In the next two decades China and India will undergo industrialisation four times the size of the United States and at five times the speed...For the first time in many centuries, power is moving East.” Blair added that “In this new world, we must clear a path to partnership, not stand off against each other competing for power. The world...cannot afford a return to the 20th century struggles for hegemony.”⁴

It is also clear that military power, however strong, is in itself insufficient to obtain the political objectives of a war. The capacity of weaker opponents to impose high costs through asymmetric or 4th Generation War fighting is enough to make even the strongest military power think carefully before embarking on a military option. The costs of managing Iraq after an easy military victory offer a clear indication of a fundamental shift in military affairs. As Fareed Zakaria has written, “On every dimension other than military power -- industrial, financial, social, cultural -- the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from U.S. dominance. That

³ Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008

⁴ Remarks by Tony Blair in speech at Yale University, May 25, 2008 at <http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/may/26blair.htm>

does not mean we are entering an anti-American world. But we are moving into a post-American world, one defined and directed from many places and by many people.”⁵

Recent studies on managing the consequences of the waning US hegemony have in turn led to the need for the US and its allies to choose between two policy approaches. One would reflect a desire to use US military capacity in 'full spectrum dominance' and its global reach to contain rising powers. The other looks at the evolving global power shift as an opportunity to build a new basis for global order, which would be predicated on cooperation and equity. According to Kishore Mahbubani, “The application of the three western principles of democracy, rule of law and social justice will go a long way towards creating a more stable world order. But the West will not be able to apply them on its own...Hitherto the most successful partnerships have been West-West, for example the Trans-Atlantic Alliance. Equally strong East-West partnerships must be created. But in working with partners from other cultures and civilizations the West will have to curtail its ideological impulses and learn to be more pragmatic.”⁶

Bill Emmott has noted that “both the US and the EU should, as a matter of urgency, scrap or reform all the top organizations of global governance in which China, India and Japan are not properly and fully represented.” This would include the G8 and the UNSC. He also recommends that “the US should support the EAS (East Asia Summit) as Asia's principal political and economic forum and state that it sees Asian integration and intra-regional cooperation as desirable.”⁷ While Australia has supported the idea, US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates has said that, “The collaborative reality of Asia’s security today is to the exclusion of no single country...There is little room for a separate ‘East Asian’ order.”⁸

Recent US policies in the wake of 9/11, clearly demonstrated the former approach. Its consequences in Iraq and the anti-American mood in the Islamic world have raised doubts on the

⁵ Fareed Zakaria, “The Future of American Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol.87, no.3, May-June 2008

⁶ Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*, Public Affairs, New York, 2008

⁷ Bill Emmott, *Rivals: How the Power Struggle Between China, India and Japan Will Shape Our Next Decade*, Allen Lane, London, 2008

⁸ Robert Gates, *Challenges to Stability in the Asia-Pacific*, Speech delivered at the Shangri-La Dialogue, May 31, 2008

viability of such a policy. What strategy initiatives will emerge from the principal determinant of the global order, i.e. the US, remains to be seen.

US Seeks to Maintain Primacy

The US has sought to maintain its position as the pre-eminent power by following a policy of defence transformation, which leverages its technological superiority. As the US National Security Strategy states, “Innovation within the armed forces will rest on experimentation with new approaches to warfare, strengthening joint operations, exploiting US intelligence advantages, and taking full advantage of science and technology.”⁹ Transformation is designed to help address not only the traditional threats but also the emerging asymmetric threats from both state and non-state actors.

According to the US Quadrennial Defense Review, “although the U.S. military maintains considerable advantages in traditional forms of warfare, this realm is not the only, or even the most likely, one in which adversaries will challenge the United States during the period immediately ahead. Enemies are more likely to pose asymmetric threats, including irregular, catastrophic and disruptive challenges.”¹⁰ The National Security Strategy notes that the US is “pursuing a future force that will provide tailored deterrence of both state and non-state threats...while assuring allies and dissuading potential competitors.”¹¹

Thus the US simultaneously has to prepare against threats from state as well as non-state actors, which have acquired greater significance post 9/11. With respect to non-state actors, the primary threat comes from Al Qaeda and associated groups against whom the US is in the midst of fighting the so-called Global War against Terror, which it admits is going to be a ‘Long War’. The Global War against Terror includes overseas fronts like Iraq and Afghanistan and also homeland defence against future terrorist attacks on US soil.

The US recognizes the asymmetric nature of the threat from China. Unable to match US military capabilities, China is seeking to negate US superiority by targeting its technological dependence.

⁹ The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, March 2006

¹⁰ Quadrennial Defense Review Report, Department of Defence, USA, February 6 2006

¹¹ op.cit., n.8

The Chinese anti-satellite test in January 2007 is an example of the new kind of asymmetric threat posed by China. Since the US depends heavily on space-based assets, this has led to fears of a new arms race in space. According to the US National Space Policy of 2006, “The United States considers space capabilities -- including the ground and space segments and supporting links -- vital to its national interests. Consistent with this policy, the United States will: preserve its rights, capabilities, and freedom of action in space; dissuade or deter others from either impeding those rights or developing capabilities intended to do so; take those actions necessary to protect its space capabilities; respond to interference; and deny, if necessary, adversaries the use of space capabilities hostile to U.S. national interests.”¹² In February 2008, the US broke a moratorium on carrying out anti-satellite tests, which it had discontinued in the 1980s, by destroying a satellite above the Pacific Ocean. This is believed to be a response to China’s own anti-satellite test of January 2007.

With respect to state actors, the Quadrennial Defense Review suggests that the primary threat comes from China. As it notes, “Of the major and emerging powers, China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages absent U.S. counter strategies.”¹³ The US is strengthening its alliances in the Asia-Pacific with Japan, South Korea and Australia as well as building bridges with emerging powers like India. This quest for building up its alliances and partnerships is primarily designed to hedge against the possibility that the rise of China may place it on a collision course with the US. Although an outright war is unlikely, the possibility that tensions in the Taiwan Straits could escalate into military action, drawing in the US cannot be ruled out.

China’s Emergence as a Peer Competitor

Pentagon’s 2005 report to Congress on China’s military power acknowledges that its goal of modernizing national defense is proceeding well: “China does not now face a direct threat from another nation. Yet, it continues to invest heavily in its military, particularly in programs designed to improve power projection. The pace and scope of China’s military build-up are,

¹² US National Space Policy, August 31, 2006. Accessed from <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdp/space.html>

¹³ *op. cit.*, n.9

already, such as to put regional military balances at risk. Current trends in China's military modernization could provide China with a force capable of prosecuting a range of military operations in Asia – well beyond Taiwan – potentially posing a credible threat to modern militaries operating in the region.”¹⁴

China has gone to great lengths to assure its neighbours that its path to development will be peaceful. A White Paper published in 2005 called China's Peaceful Development Road notes that, “China's road of peaceful development is a brand-new one for mankind in pursuit of civilization and progress, the inevitable way for China to achieve modernization, and a serious choice and solemn promise made by the Chinese government and the Chinese people,” adding that “China's development will never pose a threat to anyone.”¹⁵

The Quadrennial Defense Review states that “shaping the choices of major and emerging powers requires a balanced approach, one that seeks cooperation but also creates prudent hedges against the possibility that cooperative approaches by themselves may fail to preclude future conflict.”¹⁶ According to the US National Security Strategy of 2006, “as China becomes a global player, it must act as a responsible stakeholder that fulfills its obligations and works with the United States and others to advance the international system that has enabled its success: enforcing the international rules that have helped China lift itself out of a century of economic deprivation, embracing the economic and political standards that go along with that system of rules, and contributing to international stability and security by working with the United States and other major powers.” The NSS adds that “our strategy seeks to encourage China to make the right strategic choices for its people, while we hedge against other possibilities.”¹⁷

China's military modernization is a function of its phenomenal economic growth, which has averaged 9.5% for more than two decades. The dependence of China on foreign trade and investment for its economic modernization means that any disruption of the regional security environment in Asia will have adverse consequences for its objective of development which is still a long way away. China's rising dependency on energy imports is leading it into an

¹⁴ The Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2005, Department of Defense, USA

¹⁵ White Paper titled China's Peaceful Development Road, December 2005

¹⁶ op.cit., n.9

¹⁷ op.cit., n.8

aggressive pursuit of overseas energy assets, which could lead to confrontation with the US over its links with regimes that are opposed to the US.

US policies towards Japan and India can be seen in the light of its stated desire to hedge against the possibility of the emergence of China as a revisionist power. However the US will have to be careful not to make the latter possibility self-fulfilling through its actions. For its part China would like to prevent a balancing coalition against it that could constrain its ability to prevent Taiwan breaking away to independence. China is aware that in its quest to achieve a moderately well-off society during the next two decades, it will remain vulnerable to external pressures.

Other Powers in the Region

Russia, the successor state of the erstwhile Soviet Union, is yet to play an international role in line with its size and military power, but its huge resources of energy underline its claim as a major player. Russia's relationship with the West remains tense in the light of Western efforts to bring democracy to countries in Russia's sphere of influence and US attempts to build missile defence sites in Eastern Europe. While Russia is wary of becoming a junior partner to China, its current friction with the West has led it towards a tactical embrace of China. The two countries held unprecedented joint military exercises in 2005 and have also joined hands to keep the US out of Central Asia, which they view as their backyard.

Ever since the end of World War II, Japan's status as a close ally of the US under the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty has remained unchanged. The end of the Cold War did not have an immediate fallout on the division of labour within the US-Japan alliance, with the US continuing to bear the bulk of the responsibility for Japan's security. However Japan's inability to provide any military support towards the first Gulf War in 1991 came in for criticism and it responded by passing legislation that enabled the SDF to take part in UN peacekeeping operations. As the 1990s progressed, developments in the East Asian strategic neighbourhood gradually caused Japan to reassess its defence posture. The Taiwan Straits incident of the mid-1990s was an eye-opener to Japan of China's military capabilities and intentions, while North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT and its missile tests had a direct bearing on Japan's security.

With frequent calls also coming from the US for Japan to take on an equal share of responsibility and to contribute towards collective security, Japan revised its defence doctrine and the guidelines of its defence cooperation with the US to provide logistical support for US military operations within the region. After 9/11, the nationalist government of Prime Minister Koizumi passed special legislation that allowed for Japanese forces to be sent to the Indian Ocean to provide logistical support for the US operation in Afghanistan. In 2003 Japan even approved a contingent of ground troops for the Iraq war although their mandate was to participate in humanitarian operations in a non-combat role, which restricted their effectiveness. These were the first signs that Japan was finally on the road to becoming a normal nation. In 2004, the New Defence Policy Outline institutionalized these changes in the realm of policy by making it part of Japan's defence doctrine to undertake a role outside East Asia in association with the international community and its alliance partner, the US.

Australia is a major regional power, which has contributed to security in the region by maintaining peace and promoting state building in East Timor, Fiji and the Solomon Islands. Under Prime Minister Rudd, Australia is adapting to the power shift by following a multilateral approach while preserving its traditional ties with the US. Although Australia invoked the ANZUS treaty for the first time after 9/11, it has indicated that this does not extend to a US-China conflict over Taiwan, influenced by the benefits it could derive from China. China is going ahead to improve ties with Australia as the agreement on the sale of Australian uranium to China showed. The US, Japan, Australia and India had initiated a quadrilateral dialogue in 2007 on the sidelines of the ARF summit in Manila. This had caused concern in China, which went to the extent of serving a demarche on all four countries seeking an explanation for the meeting. However under the Rudd government, Australia has decided to pull out of the quadrilateral. Although Australia is also a member of the East Asia Community, Prime Minister Rudd has recently proposed a new regional institution for the Asia-Pacific. During a visit to Japan, he also proposed a new international body to work for nuclear disarmament called the Nuclear Non-Proliferations and Disarmament Commission, which is expected to present a set of recommendations next year.

India's Quest for Strategic Balance

The US National Security Strategy of 2002 had acknowledged India as a “growing world power with which we have common strategic interests.”¹⁸ It was not until the second Bush term in March 2005 that the US made a conscious decision to raise the stakes and decide to “help India become a major world power in the 21st century.”¹⁹ The first step in this direction was the New Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship signed in June 2005, which included a clause stating that “our defence establishments shall collaborate in multinational operations when it is in their common interest.”

The nuclear agreement, which followed three weeks later, calling for the separation of India's nuclear facilities into civilian and military, and bringing India's civilian facilities under international safeguards in exchange for nuclear energy cooperation, demonstrated the growing strategic convergence between the two countries. The deal was widely welcomed in India because it opened the doors for India to participate in civilian nuclear commerce with members of the NSG while allowing it to retain its nuclear weapons programme despite being outside the NPT. The Indian media has overwhelmingly supported the nuclear deal. India as a major energy consumer is looking closely at the nuclear energy option. Australia figures as an important player in Indian calculations. The ongoing debate in Australia on nuclear power, uranium mining and exports will be watched with great interest.

A frequent theme in the coverage of the India-US strategic convergence is the suggestion that this is intended as a potential counterweight to China. Rice elaborated on the role of the US-India relationship vis-à-vis China in a speech in Japan in 2005: “I really do believe that the US-Japan relationship, the US-South Korean relationship, the US-Indian relationship, all are important in creating an environment in which China is more likely to play a positive role than a negative role. These alliances are not against China; they are alliances that are devoted to a stable security and political and economic and, indeed, values-based relationships that put China in the context

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Background briefing by Administration officials on US-South Asia relations, Washington DC, March 25 2005

of those relationships, and a different path to development than if China were simply untethered, simply operating without that strategic context.”²⁰

China’s concerns over the emerging India-US relationship are apparent from its opposition to the nuclear agreement. While this has been expressed in a relatively guarded manner, China has also held that US-India nuclear cooperation must conform to the rules of the global nonproliferation regime, which should not be weakened by exceptions. The strategic partnership with the US now provides India with greater leverage over China although India will be cautious in exercising it. India does not view its relations vis-à-vis the US and China as a zero-sum game. The challenge before it lies in being able to build favorable relationships with both the US and China.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Indian economy in the beginning of the 1990s forced India to reposition itself strategically. The Soviet Union had provided India with a massive security net, the sudden withdrawal of which meant that India had to reassess its security policy and especially its relationship with the US, the sole remaining superpower. Simultaneously India also had to reassess its economic policy in the wake of the near bankruptcy of the economy resulting from the failed socialist policies of the past. As C Raja Mohan notes, “fundamental changes in foreign policy take place only when there is a revolutionary change either at home or in the world.”²¹ Although economic reforms had begun on a smaller scale in the 1980s, the more systematic reforms initiated by the Narasimha Rao - Manmohan Singh duo in 1991 were crucial in taking India away from the old slow rate of growth and advancing its claims as a major power

Since 1998, successive Indian governments have worked hard to obtain a measure of nuclear legitimacy for the country’s possession of nuclear weapons. India’s refusal to join the NPT arose wholly out of its belief that the treaty was discriminatory in perpetuating the ‘right’ of a few states to possess nuclear weapons. Yet, India has followed all the essential responsibilities of a NPT member. Indian authorities claim, not without considerable justification, that India’s record in nuclear export control discipline has been better than that of nuclear weapons states. Indian nuclear doctrine defines the limits placed on the use of nuclear weapons. The nuclear doctrine is

²⁰ Remarks at Sophia University, Tokyo, March 19 2005

²¹ C. Raja Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon*, Viking, New Delhi, 2003

based on the principle of No First Use. This is explained as a policy of not using nuclear weapons, unless India is first attacked with weapons of mass destruction. India has chosen not to make tactical nuclear weapons, because it does not intend to use nuclear weapons for war fighting. Nuclear weapons are thus only to be used as instruments of deterrence. India seeks recognition for its nuclear legitimacy through its record on non-proliferation of nuclear technology, its democratic political system and firm civilian control over its strategic assets, and is willing to bind itself into all nuclear regimes and their stipulations, as proof of its determination to play a greater global role. India by its emerging major power potential and commitment to nuclear disarmament, should be a solution to the challenges of proliferation, since it has never been a part of the proliferation problem.

There is a peace process in place between India and Pakistan; a ceasefire on the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir has held for nearly four years. There is significant increase in people to people contacts across the borders and the LoC. A military conflict is furthest from the perceptions of the people and leadership of both nuclear powered opponents. India and Pakistan have both formally recognized each other's need for nuclear weapons as strategic assets rather than a war-fighting instrument. Nuclear confidence building measures, albeit limited in nature, are in existence and more are being negotiated. There is also a continuing effort by both countries to improve nuclear delivery means, build credible nuclear command and control facilities and increase the size of nuclear arsenals. Yet, there is an acceptance between India and Pakistan of the need for resolving the regional conflict through negotiations. These are momentous outcomes consequent to the presence of nuclear weapons within a regional conflictual situation.

The nuclear isolation of India that had held its relations with US hostage for decades had to be ended. This realization in Washington and New Delhi was a major strategic turning point in the history of India-US relations. It was in fact the culmination of the process of re-positioning India, that had started after the collapse of Soviet Union and India's own near economic collapse. This repositioning with its strategic and economic shifts had been started by Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh. Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Jaswant Singh stayed on that course. It is in a way apt that Manmohan Singh brought that process of repositioning India in the new international

order to its present juncture although domestic opposition to the nuclear agreement in India has prevented it from reaching fruition. Today, India is in the enviable position of having stable relations with all major military and economic powers. It is a condition that had been five decades in coming and one that is valued and will be sustained.

As a swing state being courted by all other major powers, India has to perform a balancing act. The India-US strategic partnership cannot be entirely free from the context of the Sino-US relationship, since India has no control over US policies or on China's responses to those policies. The challenge before India lies in managing these two bilateral equations under this state of uncertainty and being able to build favorable relationships with both the US and China. This would also be in US interests according to Robert Sutter who suggests that "US government leaders should seek to advance US interests in Asia without overt competition with China that would try to force Asian governments to choose between Washington and Beijing."²² India would not like to make such choices.

India is participating in a trilateral dialogue with China and Russia, which met for the first time at Foreign Minister level in 2002. In May 2008, Russia hosted a stand-alone meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the BRIC countries, which includes Brazil in addition to the other three. A joint communiqué released on the occasion stated that "Building a more democratic international system founded on the rule of law and multilateral diplomacy is an imperative of our time."²³ India is also a member of the IBSA which is a trilateral forum including Brazil and South Africa. As Pranab Mukherjee has said, "We are no longer bound by the Cold War paradigm where good relations with one power automatically entailed negative consequences with its rivals."²⁴

Conclusion

The shift in global power from the West to Asia is going to be a process lasting some decades into the future. An important dimension of this shift is of major powers in the region proceeding with the modernization of their forces. The US is seeking to extend its technological superiority over its rivals while China is attempting to narrow it. Japan and India are also augmenting their

²² Robert Sutter, "China's Rise: Implications for US leadership in Asia", East-West Center, 2006

²³ *The Hindu*, May 17, 2008

²⁴ *The Hindu*, January 18, 2007

own capabilities as are a host of lesser powers. As far as US-China military competition is concerned, China is aware that a Cold War like arms race would not be in its interest. As Xia Liping has said, “China will not participate in a nuclear arms race with the United States. Firstly, it is unnecessary for China, because China only wants to maintain its minimum capability of retaliatory counterattack. Secondly, China still remembers the lessons of the former Soviet Union. Thirdly, China will be focused on its internal economic development for a long time.”²⁵

The US is also strengthening its military alliances in the region, notably with Japan, as well as supporting the rise of democratic powers such as India on the basis of common values as well as interests. If China perceives that the US is seeking to build a coalition against it that could result in greater tensions in the region and the creation of a rival power bloc led by China with support from Russia. Efforts to build mutual trust and confidence in the region have both a bilateral and multilateral component. The bilateral component seeks to defuse specific issues between countries whereas the multilateral component provides a common and inclusive forum for all the major powers in the region to engage with each other. At the moment there are several overlapping forums, which serve such a purpose, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Community, which excludes the US, and the Six Party Talks, which are confined to Northeast Asia. The key lies in harnessing the various elements of the existing architecture and using each of them to cover for the limitations of the others in order to create the conditions for peace and stability in Asia and overcome the insecurities arising from the robust military modernization programs in the region.

In this context the view of Raja Mohan that India must offer reasonable assurance that its partnership with the US is not directed against China in order to ensure that it joins the Asian balance of power without causing unnecessary turbulence is pertinent. An Indo-US strategic partnership that is built on the premise of confrontation with Beijing would deliver a serious blow to India’s hopes of emerging as a major power center in Asia that is seen as a force for stability by the region as a whole. It would also make it harder to fulfil India’s expressed desire of making the 21st century an Indian century, in Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s words, in

²⁵ Brad Roberts, ‘China and Ballistic Missile Defense: 1995 to 2002 and Beyond,’ Institute for Defense Analyses, September 2003

which “the world will once again look at us with regard and respect, not just for the economic progress we make but for the democratic values we cherish and uphold and the principles of pluralism and inclusiveness we have come to represent which is India’s heritage as a centuries old culture and civilization.”²⁶

²⁶ Remarks of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in speech at Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, January 7, 2005 at <http://www.pmindia.nic.in/speech/content.asp?id=65>