A paper featured at the

2011 Pacific Symposium:

The New Security Environment – Implications for American Security in the Asia Pacific Region

Hosted by:
The Institute for National Strategic Studies
of
The National Defense University

4-5 April 2011

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INSS

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL
STRATEGIC STUDIES

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India and Multipolarity

Background

The end of the Cold War had a dramatic impact on India's grand strategy. Quite abruptly, the very foundation of its foreign policy, the doctrine of nonalignment was rendered all but meaningless.[i] Simultaneously, the abrupt Soviet collapse also denied India the support of a veto-wielding superpower at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), signaled an end to the reliable arms transfer relationship with the erstwhile Soviet Union and ended easy Indian access to Russian and East European markets.

In the wake of these dramatic changes India's policymakers adopted one of two stances. One group insisted on the continuing relevance of the Nehruvian world view and sought to resurrect nonalignment in a new incarnation: it meant, according to them, the right to pursue an independent foreign policy. [ii] Others, however, recognized that the doctrine had outlived its usefulness and sought to re-orient India's foreign policy along more pragmatic lines. Despite these broad divisions, a consensus emerged that India would maintain its fierce independence in the conduct of its foreign affairs.

Not surprisingly, its policymakers also underscored a strong preference for a multipolar world order as they feared an almost inexorable dominance of the United States.[iii] Two compelling reasons explain Indian misgivings about overweening American power. First, the two states had frequently been at odds during the Cold War over a host of issues both bilateral and multilateral.[iv] Second, at the end of the Cold War, thanks to the lack of much substance in the bilateral relationship differences on multilateral issues came to the fore. For example, India clashed with the US on questions of nonproliferation, global trade and human rights.

Two decades after the end of the Cold War Indian views of the United States, and the desirability of a multipolar global order, have evolved considerably. As the second decade of the twenty-first century dawns, despite a host of domestic problems which continue to sandbag the country, India's policymakers exude much greater self-confidence, they have managed to forge a viable working relationship with the United States and are now struggling to evolve foreign and security policies that are commensurate with its self-image as an incipient global power.

This paper will examine three key sets of closely related questions. First, it will delineate how Indian foreign and defense policy communities view the emergent global order and the likely US role in it. Second, it will discuss the roles of the countries do they deem to be the most important actors in this nascent global order while identifying those institutions that are likely to be the most significant in the maintenance of stability in this milieu. Third and finally, the paper will assess their views about the shifts in global power on regional stability and the nation's foreign and security policies.

A New Foreign Policy Consensus?

During much of the Cold War, with the political dominance of the Indian National Congress, there were few dramatic shifts in India's foreign and security policies barring the attempt at significant military modernization in the immediate aftermath of the disastrous Sino-Indian border war of 1962.[v] Also, despite its professed commitment to nonalignment India forged a strategic partnership with the Soviet Union in 1971. This partnership, which was based upon a convergence of strategic interests and little else, endured until the Cold War's end.[vi]

At the Cold War's end, India's elites came to the inexorable conclusion that Russia, the principal successor state to the Soviet Union, would no longer provide a security umbrella and that the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) could impinge on India' long-term security interests. Not surprisingly, they sought to improve relations with the United States even while expressing reservations about American global dominance.

A remarkable degree of consensus actually exists within India's foreign policy elite on the conduct of India's foreign policy. It is necessary to spell out the underlying reasons for this the existence of this convergence of views. Barring relations with immediate neighbors, such as Pakistan, China, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, foreign policy remains mostly an elite concern. Economic issues and regional political concerns mostly determine electoral outcomes. Consequently, the leadership of the vast majority of political parties in India lack foreign policy expertise and evince little interest in most foreign policy issues.

Simultaneously, India's foreign policy community remains quite small and is, for the most part, confined to the nation's capital. In recent years there has been a veritable proliferation of think tanks and expanding interest in foreign policy matters. That said, levels of professional expertise remain woefully low. Knowledge of strategic issues is both shallow and derivative and substantial area knowledge of even immediate neighbors such as Pakistan and the PRC acutely limited. Consequently, informed debate about critical foreign (and security) policy issues are acutely hamstrung. Even India's highly professional foreign service, composed of approximately 750 diplomats, is far too small to address the country's expanding international presence.[vii] Though efforts are under way to expand it they are mired in bureaucratic wrangling.

Not surprisingly, foreign policy is mostly the preserve of four national political parties, the Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M). The latter two, for the most part, are only notionally national parties as their political base has steadily shrunk in recent years. The differences between the Congress and the BJP on most global foreign policy issues are not dramatically different. Genuine differences do

exist on relations with Pakistan, Israel and, to a degree, Bangladesh. However, on the vast majority issues confronting the country there is substantial agreement.

The two Communist parties, however, have fundamental and deep-seated differences with the direction and substance of India's present foreign policy. They have expressed considerable alarm about India's growing closeness with the United States, they question the need for India to distance itself in any fashion from Iran, they would like India to more vigorously champion the Palestinian cause and simultaneously chastise various Israeli policies, they seek dramatically improved relations with the PRC and they would like India to once again become the standard bearer for the rights of the Third World.

More specifically, how then does the Indian foreign policy mainstream envision India's role in the emergent global order? There is little question that they want India to become a significant global player commensurate with its economic prowess, military capabilities and demographic status.[viii] To this end they want the country to pursue what might best be described a hedging strategy. Such a strategy involves the development of robust ties with a host of key states in particular regions and the global arena. Simultaneously, it is also sharply focused on the rise of the PRC and its growing assertiveness in South Asia and elsewhere.

Not surprisingly, to this end, India has followed a three-pronged approach. At one level, it has helped create organizations such as the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA),[ix] a loose coordinating body of middle powers with a range of common interests. India is also one of the members of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) grouping. [x] At another, it has sought to bolster its ties with the traditional great powers including the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Japan. Finally, it has long ended its neglect of South-East and even East Asia. The turn to South-East Asia came shortly after the end of the Cold War under the aegis of the 'look East" policy of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao.[xi]

The most dramatic change, however, has come about in India's relations with the United States. [xii] Despite a new administration in the US and a new governing coalition in India, the relationship has now acquired ballast that it simply did not possess during the Cold War. The real task before India's policymakers is to fathom how they would like to see the Indo-US partnership evolve. The problem that they confront is that there remain significant differences in their midst about the appropriate basis of a partnership with the United States.

One segment of the policymaking elite appears to be willing to steadily build a broader and more robust long-term relationship on the basis of a series of incremental agreements. They are also willing to accept important policy differences in the quest for a more stable and durable partnership based upon shared values as well common material interests. To them the partnership should stress overlapping interests in maintaining democratic, plural and open societies.[xiii]

Others, however, take a markedly different view and stress immediate and more-short term issues over which the US and India remain at odds. They stress the US unwillingness to address India's significant and deep-seated concerns about Pakistan's involvement with terror, US pressure on India to terminate it extensive commercial and trade links with Iran, American unhappiness with India's engagement with the military regime in Burma/Myanmar and the vagaries of US policy toward the PRC. These stated reservations, however, mask a more deep-seated distrust of the United States and reflect the serious doubts that some influential individuals within the policymaking community still harbor about the US.[xiv] Their influence on policymaking, though on the wane, nevertheless remains.

Given the existence of these divisions, the evolution of Indo-US ties, though on a mostly positive trajectory, cannot be assumed to proceed on an entirely smooth track. Ideational, bureaucratic and material factors all suggest that the evolution of this relationship will be fitful. A variant of the Nehruvian belief in preserving India's independence in foreign policymaking remains pervasive amongst India's foreign policy elites. Consequently, while India may partner with the United States on a number of key issues it will not quite become the "natural ally" of the United States contrary to the fond hopes of some Indian strategic commentators.[xv] At a bureaucratic level India's cumbersome and complex defense procurement process, its continued reliance on Russian weaponry and US legal strictures on technology transfer, will also hobble the pathway toward a closer relationship with the US.[xvi] Finally, the sheer gap in material capabilities coupled with India's prickly insistence on maintaining its "strategic autonomy" will also limit the pace of the transformation of the Indo-US relationship.

Despite its attempts to forge more extensive ties to these states and expand India's influence in particular regions its policymakers have failed to articulate a clear vision for India's role in a changing world order. Their only clear cut concern seems to center around the pursuit of a foreign policy that grants India the greatest freedom of maneuver in international affairs.[xvii]

Responding to the Shift in Global Power

Do Indian elites believe that shifts in global power are fundamental? To this there is no clear-cut answer. Some within the Indian policymaking community fear that the dramatic costs of the US involvement in both Afghanistan and Iraq coupled with the country's structural fiscal deficits will have long-term adverse consequences for America's standing in the global order in general, and in Asia in particular. However, within the group that holds this view there is a fundamental cleavage. One faction would view such a decline of American power as a desirable condition as it could enhance the freedom of maneuver of other states and especially India. Another component, however, fears that such a contraction of American power against a backdrop of an increasingly resurgent and powerful PRC could be detrimental to Indian interests. For the latter group, the danger may lie in the retraction of

American power in Asia thereby leaving the PRC with a disproportionate strategic clout in the region.

Thanks to the uncertainty associated with the future of American power both in Asia and on a global scale, India's policymakers are, for the most part, following a hedging strategy. To that end, within the past decade they have sought to dramatically improve ties with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Singapore without slackening their efforts to build on existing ties to the United States. [xviii] In that context it is hardly surprising that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh undertook a three- nation visit to Japan, Vietnam and Malaysia in October 2010 with the express purpose of bolstering bilateral ties.[xix] The relationship with Japan is of particular significance because of substantial Japanese foreign direct investment in India, Japan's provision of concessional bilateral assistance and its growing interest in strategic cooperation with India. [xx] The future of this bilateral relationship may now be more fraught in light of the damage that the Japanese economy has weathered in the wake of the tsunami and the concomitant earthquake.[xxi]

India has not confined its diplomatic offensive to the key states of Southeast and Northeast Asia. It has also sought to broaden and strengthen its existing ties to three key European states, most notably the United Kingdom, France and Germany. In all three cases, the growing size of India's economy has played a critical role in fostering these bilateral ties. All three states see India's burgeoning market as a key reason for engagement with the country.

Despite the decline of American power, key individuals within India's policymaking establishment still see the utility of a closer relationship with the US. [xxii]For example, they argue that all three of the aforementioned states and even the European Union (EU) have paid greater heed to India following the marked improvement in Indo-US relations. They argue that EU decided that they did not want to be shunted aside as a multi-faceted Indo-US relationship steadily evolved. To that end, they contend that the EU sought and forged a "strategic partnership" with India.[xxiii]

The most important bilateral relationship that India's policymakers have sought to revive after a significant hiatus in the aftermath of the Cold War's end is that with Russia. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, Russia's new rulers had evinced scant interest in India. However, within the last several years the relationship has been revitalized. The process of revitalizing the relationship began with the renewal of an Indo-Russian strategic partnership in 2000. Subsequently, an arms transfer relationship, which had once been the cornerstone of the Indo-Russian nexus, has again been revived despite some on-going differences. To that end, India has chosen to develop a fifth generation fighter in collaboration with Russia.[xxiv] Earlier, despite significant cost overruns, it had decided to go ahead and purchase a refurbished Russian aircraft carrier, the Admiral Gorshokov as part of its plans for naval modernization.[xxv]

The Indo-Russian relationship, though not based upon shared values or common political institutions, is likely to endure for the foreseeable future. Russia, which has a series of key differences with the United States, will court India to ensure that it the latter does not bandwagon with the United States. Instead it hopes that India, despite its new-found friendship with the US, will maintain a posture of "soft balancing" against the United States.[xxvi] Simultaneously, it sees India as a lucrative market for its weaponry and is obviously loath to cede it to other potential suppliers.

For its part, India considers it necessary to sustain the Indo-Russian relationship for at least two compelling reasons. At one level, there is simply the matter of path dependence in military acquisitions. Given that a disproportionate segment of India's military hardware is of Russian origin it is not easy to diversify suppliers even though it has taken important steps in that direction. Furthermore, the Russians are prepared to part with complex technologies, they impose no restrictions on the use of their weaponry and have not subjected India to technology denial except under acute American pressure. [xxvii]At another, some Indian elites share the Russian view that a counterpoise to overweening American power remains desirable.

In the immediate term, however, India's principal concerns about the sustainability of American power are focused on its own neighborhood. To that end, the future of the American commitment to the stabilization of Afghanistan remains vital to its policymakers. Such a concern is quite acute because of the Indo-Pakistani competition for influence in Afghanistan. India fears that in the event of a precipitate American withdrawal its very significant investments in bolstering the Karzai regime and in preventing a return of some variant of the Taliban will be at question.[xxviii] Consequently, India's policymakers are watching the developments in US-Afghan-Pakistan relations with keen interest.

The Institutions that Matter

Even before the US became embroiled in the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts and before the financial crisis contributed to a deep recession, India's policymakers had embarked on a quest to secure a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). In effect, this effort was independent of the decline of American power and part and parcel of India's inherent preference for a multipolar world order along with a formal and institutional recognition of India's status as a significant player.

For India's policymakers, the UNSC permanent seat would serve at least two important purposes. First, it would be of overwhelming symbolic significance cementing India's standing as a great power. Second, it would also confer significant strategic advantages to its policymakers. At the outset it would grant India veto-wielding privileges thereby granting it protection from any possible censure on various Achilles' heels, most notably the vexed question of the Kashmir dispute.[xxix]

To that end India has made it a virtual litmus test of its relations with a series of major powers including the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany and Russia in seeking their endorsement for a UNSC permanent seat. [xxx] During President Obama's state visit to India, his interlocutors were pleased, if not wholly satisfied, with his carefully worded endorsement of India's interest in a permanent UNSC seat.[xxxi]

However, it is far from clear that India's policymakers have carefully thought through the likely responsibilities and demands that will be placed on the country if it were to acquire a permanent seat at the UNSC. For example, India's inability to take a firm decision about endorsing a "no fly zone" over Libya as a virtual civil war engulfed the country in March 2011 brought to the fore its inability to forthrightly grasp nettlesome issues.[xxxii]

Despite this misstep, the UNSC permanent seat remains a long-term goal in India's policy calculus. In the meanwhile India remains an active member of the G-20. At the last meeting of the organization in December 2010 in Seoul, South Korea, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh spoke out vigorously against growing protectionism in the recession ravaged advanced industrial countries. With India's growing economic prowess there is every likelihood that it will continue to play a substantial role in the G20.

India's role in regional multilateral organizations still remains at a nascent stage. In considerable part this stems from India's active neglect of ASEAN throughout much of the Cold War years. India's policymakers had looked askance at ASEAN largely because of their apparent strategic subservience to the United States and, in turn, the ASEAN states saw India as a tool of Soviet interests in Asia. Both views, for the most part, were at odds with reality. However, some genuine policy differences did prevent India and ASEAN from any meaningful engagement. For example, India's unwillingness to condemn the Vietnamese overthrow of the genocidal Pol Pot regime was at odds with ASEAN's condemnation of the military intervention. India also faced criticism because of its public silence on the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

Consequently, it was only in July 1996, four years after India had embarked upon its "look East" policy, that it was invited to join the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Since then India has been a regular participant in the ARF summits. At these meetings India has focused mostly on functional issues such as anti-piracy and counter-terrorism. Also, after six years of protracted negotiations it also signed a free-trade agreement with ASEAN in 2009.[xxxiii] However, a mostly unstated reason for India's increased participation in ARF stems from the rise of the PRC and its influence in South-East Asia. Fortunately for India, a number of ASEAN states have welcomed its enhanced diplomatic, commercial and strategic presence in the region for precisely the same reasons.[xxxiv]

The Future of Regional Stability

Despite their long-standing clamor for a multipolar world India's policymakers may well regret the emergence of such an order especially if the PRC becomes one of the key actors in that milieu. Despite dramatic growth in bilateral trade the Sino-Indian relationship remains fraught with multiple differences and tensions.[xxxv] The PRC has significant territorial claims on India, it refuses to accept the legitimacy of India's nuclear weapons program and remains a staunch supporter of Pakistan, a country at odds with India since their common emergence from the collapse of the British Indian Empire.

Furthermore, if one extrapolates from present growth rates into the foreseeable future, it is more than evident that the PRC will be well ahead of India in terms of multiple indices of power. This asymmetry of power coupled with extant differences in Sino-Indian relations may well place India at a considerable strategic disadvantage thereby drastically limiting its freedom on maneuver.[xxxvi] In this context it is important to underscore that despite an apparent shared interest in a multipolar world order, it is unlikely that India will be able to forge a common front with Russia and the PRC against the United States. [xxxvii]

Even at the present time India's policymakers have noted with growing concern the PRC's ability to play wider diplomatic, strategic and commercial roles in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Burma/Myanmar in addition to its historic presence in Pakistan. [xxxviii] Furthermore, it continues to bolster Pakistan's military capabilities, has contributed to the development of critical port facilities and has helped boost Pakistan's nuclear program with potential strategic consequences for the region. It had also prevented key Pakistan-based terrorist organizations from being placed on the United Nations terrorist watch list. [xxxix] Given the closeness of the Sino-Pakistani relationship a more powerful PRC will be in a position to disregard India's concerns with increased impunity.

Consequently, it is hardly surprising that India is now engaged in a major program of military modernization designed to significantly enhance the capabilities and reach of its armed forces.[xl] These investments in new military capabilities are designed to give India the requisite capacity to not merely deal with perceived threats from Pakistan and the PRC but also to project its power beyond the immediate confines of South Asia. The quest to acquire such capabilities is not inconsistent with India's interest in preserving the freedom of navigation of sea-lanes to both South-East Asia and the Persian Gulf. In the case of the former it seeks to protect its growing sea borne trade with South East Asia[xli] and in the case of the latter, it needs to ensure access to hydrocarbons.[xlii]

In effect, India will pursue a dual strategy. It will continue to improve relations with the United States but will not act in concert with it to balance the PRC. It will also build on existing bilateral and multilateral ties with a host of states in Asia as part of its hedging strategy against the PRC. To enable itself to maintain its fierce

independence it will also resort to a strategy of internal balancing focusing on promoting economic growth, reducing domestic inequalities and also building up its military capabilities. Its ability to pursue a viable strategy of internal balancing, in considerable measure, will depend on its skill in renewing the eroded quality of its domestic institutions. As a number of recent governmental watchdog reports have underscored, a host of procedures and organizations are rife with inefficiency, corruption and inefficacy.[xliii] Whether or not India's policymakers will be able to address these extant shortcomings remains an open question.

ENDNOTES

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