

India's Position Sandwiched Between Geopolitical Expediencies – Analysis

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This article presents a view of India's contemporary geopolitical role in Asia, with special emphasis on New Delhi's relations with China and Russia and various other regional actors, including Iran and Pakistan. India's approach towards Afghanistan and aspects of Indo-US relations are also discussed in terms of Washington's current interests and policy direction in South Asia.

India has been experiencing remarkable economic growth since the onset of the 21st century, albeit a slowdown has been witnessed in recent months. By comparison, China maintains a more consolidated and sustained growth phase than does India. However, as India is still gaining on economic fronts and securing its own geopolitical standing, now is the appropriate time to start asking some questions which will help in understanding the basis for the rise of the newest Indian 'superpower'. Several unanswered questions must be closely addressed that will shed light on the possible contradictions, paradoxes and obstacles facing the growth of any Asian country, especially India.

Many observers believe that the challenges facing India today are threefold. The first is the western-style economic globalization and whether India can, within this context, maintain its unique millennium culture or be subjected to the cultural leveling which is already evident internationally. The second challenge is based on geopolitics and international relations. Will India be able to maintain a substantially autonomous foreign policy in the new world order? The third problem pertains to India's internal economic, political and social obstacles that it faces on the chosen path of development and whether or not it will be able to achieve superpower status. If India can deal effectively with these challenges in the coming years it will be positioned to evolve into a superpower; however, there are many factors that may distract from this complete metamorphosis.

India plays a huge geopolitical role as the sub-continent's landmass, lying in the Indian Ocean, is located midway between the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca, two crucial economic and military points in the geopolitical divide between present and future great powers. From the maritime point of view, India's geopolitical importance is undeniable, as it can extend its influence from the Eden Gulf, located between Yemen and Somalia, to the South China Sea. At the same time, due to the vast extension of its land borders, India can even impact political affairs in the Middle East, Central Asia, Far East and Southeast Asia. It is the particular geographical location and heterogeneous ethnic and religious components that sets India apart from other nations. India has consistently tried over time to achieve a great measure of balance between various regional political powers in order to serve its own vested interests. The important geostrategic role of India appears to be well understood by Washington, Moscow and Beijing, the three major players competing in Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific region for power, influence and natural resources. Over the past two decades China has often perceived India's military and economic actions, and its accompanying rise, as a threat to its interests, particularly because of India's proximity to the South China Sea. Because of the rhetoric used by regional countries and the military agreements being mooted between India, Vietnam and Japan, this region could become highly-contested and a flashpoint of

state conflicts. Similarly, the military and economic links developing between India, Australia, the United States, Japan and Singapore are perceived in Beijing as means of containing the country of the “Rising Sun.” However, the simultaneous emergence of China as a superpower with interests in the Indian Ocean and its fast becoming a dominant player in the South Asia and beyond the Asia-Pacific are negatively assessed by New Delhi. The commercial and military agreements that Beijing has concluded with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar and Bhutan, and especially the military and nuclear alliance with Pakistan, have been described in Indian circles as attempts by China to encircle India. The Indo-Chinese rivalry is often emphasized by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and this is echoed in the media and among both Indian and Chinese pundits. However, although there remain important differences between the two countries, for example at various points along their long mutual border, economic relations and cross border trade between India and China continue to be very strong. China is in effect one of India’s most important trading partners, second only to the United States.

Beijing has changed its perception of India owing to both the increased U.S. presence in Central and South Asia Washington’s potential use of the India’s impressive economic rise to serve its interests in Asia. Sino-Indian relations are now best described as a purely pragmatic economic pact. Such pragmatism is at the heart of mutual cooperation in various Southeast Asian regions, as reflected, for example, by various potential joint for joint natural gas exploitation and extraction projects with Myanmar.

Aside from such shared interests, China and India are also members of the BRICS, the forum of emerging economic powers, alongside Brazil, Russia and more recently South Africa. These countries share a common perspective on various global issues: the Arab Spring and accompanying riots, NATO’s intervention in Libya (perceived critically), a hypothetical Western military action in Syria and the Iranian nuclear issue. At the same time, however, there remains strong competition between them in South and Southeast Asia and, to a lesser extent, in Africa and Central Asia, although India’s penetration into these two last regions is much more recent than China’s. The achievement of a “real peace” between China and India, whose culture have attained a high level of mutual understanding throughout much of their long history, would have a positive impact on stability in Asia, but also on the world as a whole, given the growing importance and standing of these two geographical and demographical heavy weights.

Another factor to consider is that in the Chinese and Russian perspective India is often perceived negatively for having established military and nuclear energy ties with the United States. There are different schools of thought in India about a close alliance with the United States, as it is not viewed positively in some quarters. There are some discordant points in Indo-U.S. relations.

The first is India’s relations with Iran. Although India has also had strong relations with Israel ever since the end of the Cold War, especially in military terms, and the Sunni Arab world is in competition with Iran in the Middle East, New Delhi wants to keep good terms with Tehran. Still, this has not prevented India from expressing opposition to Iran’s nuclear power program. It maintains, however, that this issue can only be resolved through diplomatic means. India has consequently stopped exporting some material which could potentially be used by Tehran in its nuclear program, a move that is in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1,929 of 2010.

Geopolitical and economic factors account for New Delhi's maintenance of good relations with Tehran. From a strategic standpoint, an Indo-Iranian alliance could bring about the closing of ranks against Pakistan. Pakistan and Iran are potential enemies who need to be kept on the same side, especially if Kabul further falls under the influence of Pakistan after the announced U.S. withdrawal in 2014. Against this backdrop an alliance with Iran could assume even a greater significance. A rising Pakistan would be counterproductive to enhancing India's geostrategic interest in Central and Southwest Asia. Hence India must stay focused on these regions, not only to satisfy its growing energy demand but also to prevent the ex-Soviet republics from forging stronger bonds with Pakistan on the basis of their shared Islamic heritage.

China's presence in Iran and the Middle East more generally has also become increasingly entrenched over time, and this is increasingly unsettling New Delhi. India considers Tehran to be an important transit point in reaching markets in Afghanistan and Central Asia. This is in spite of the territorial disputes that India has with Pakistan over Kashmir, a natural and historic cross border trading point between Central and Southeast Asia. On the economic level Iran remains, after Saudi Arabia, the second largest supplier of oil and its still untouched oil and gas fields represents a potential supplier of energy for the fast-growing Indian economy.

Regional states are in advanced discussions to conclude agreements on opening energy connections by sea and/or pipeline. Negotiations on the construction of the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project (IPI) are ongoing and only a few obstacles remain to be cleared before the participants are able to finalize a deal.

The very close link between India and Russia is the second major barrier in Indo-American relations. In early December 2011, on the sidelines of a meeting between Indian and Russian foreign ministers, Moscow and New Delhi expressed their desire to revive the North-South Transport Corridor project. An agreement had been signed between India, Iran and Russia in 2001 to further develop the route. One of this project's aims is to transport Indian goods by sea, bypassing Pakistan, to Iran, from where they would reach Russia's southern territories, and possibly Europe, across the Caspian Sea.

The Indian government recently expressed a keen interest in including China and the Central Asian states in South Transport Corridor project. Aiming to facilitate trade between South Asia and Europe, the Indian initiative would be, on the one hand, in open competition with the US-led "New Silk Road" project, designed to build economic and trade bridges between Central and South Asia, the Caucasus and Europe, and, on the other hand, with China and Russia's plans on their western and southern flanks respectively. As to the "New Silk road" project, Iran and "Afpak" operations constitute the two main hindrances for its full realization. Nevertheless, India has evinced great interests in it, which could complement its own South Transport Corridor project.

Russia remains India's largest arms supplier. Indo-Russian ties are still very strong, a legacy of the post-Colonial and the Cold War periods. In addition, they have a common front in the struggle against religious extremism. Global Islamic terrorism has hit both Russia and India, and both have internal problems with terrorism in the Caucasus and the Kashmir region. This front could potentially include China, given the existence of Islamic extremism in the Xinjiang Uyghur

Autonomous Region. The entry of India into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is now being discussed, may also not only result in greater cooperation between Beijing, Moscow and New Delhi but change the general geopolitical balance decisively.

A third pressure point in Indo-U.S. relations is that both countries rarely agree about Pakistan. India has consistently criticized the excessive ties between Islamabad and Washington, although in recent months the alliance between the two countries has degenerated into an open crisis. India has also been very critical of possible dialogue between the U.S., the moderate Taliban and the Haqqani network, an insurgent group fighting against US-led NATO forces and the government of Afghanistan. To appease India, the White House has asked Pakistan to stop supporting terrorist groups along the Durand Line, the porous 2,640 kilometers-long border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

This problem is further linked to Pakistan's own "encirclement syndrome" and growing concerns over India's hegemonic designs in the region. New Delhi welcomes the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, including its military bases which are likely to remain after 2014, but is critical of the idea of entering into dialogue with the Taliban moderates, fearing a possible return of Pakistan's influence in that fledgling country.

Despite the fact that Islamabad sees the recent trade and military agreement between India and Afghanistan as a manifestation of a policy of encirclement, in recent months there has been a tentative improvement in relations between the two neighbors. An editorial in "The Hindu," devoted to Indo-Pakistan dialogue, referred to the developing relations between India and China as a possible model to resolve the border dispute with Islamabad. New Delhi and Beijing are using economic opportunities and cooperation between the two gigantic Asian states to smooth out their disagreements over borders. Important industrial sectors and social groups of the Indian society are calling for dispute resolution and final peace with Islamabad.

India intends to maintain its own policy towards Pakistan, independent of Washington, on the basis of its own vested interests. Islamabad has recently secured most-favored-nation status with India – an economic provision deriving from the rules of the World Trade Organization – although there are many internal pressures pulling it in the opposite direction. There are small signs of an improvement in their relations in general, but there are many problems as well, among which is Islamabad's failing to respond to Indian requests for it to carry out thorough investigation into the 2008 Mumbai attacks and to break Pakistan's links with the architect of the attacks, the Lashkar-e-Toiba.

Pakistan has a Janus-faced political system, with a civilian government on the one hand and the Pakistani military and the Inter-Services intelligence (ISI) on the other. The ISI, together with radical Islamic groups, have a huge influence on security policies. For this reason, the cards are stacked against any possible real progress in relations between the two countries, especially since Pakistan negatively perceives India's influence in Central Asia and Afghanistan. In addition, a definitive territorial agreement with India, and a suppression of internal radical Islamic groups, which have undermined the whole region, would destabilize the Pakistani state, as religion provides the putty in filling up the social cracks in a country divided by ethno-linguistic groups.

This possible scenario explains a lot about U.S. engagement with Islamabad, despite a mounting number of misunderstandings that recently came to the forefront. The United States tries to stay very close to Islamabad for national and international security reasons. Pakistani public opinion is now

critical of the United States, and, uncharacteristically, this is viewed negatively by India in the wake of the warming of Indo-American relations.

New Delhi is opposed, among other issues, to linking the delicate discussions over Kashmir to the situation in Afghanistan, which is part of the American objective of establishing a “Greater Central Asia,” and seeks to reduce the importance of nationalism in the region and expresses total opposition to foreign interference in regional affairs, as it is adamant about resolving the Kashmir issue bilaterally with Pakistan.

Military confrontation between India and Pakistan is now unlikely, due to the apparent Indian superiority in conventional weapons, although this is paradoxically limited by the presence in both countries of nuclear weapons. In a sense, possessing a nuclear deterrent is a disadvantage for India. It is likely that in the event of a further deterioration in relations, any “military actions” will be carried out by radical terrorist groups.

In recent months a balanced policy appears to have prevailed on India’s side. This reflects New Delhi’s international affairs approach, that is, the world should be multipolar rather than unipolar and, consequently, the problems of Central Asia and South and South-East Asia should be resolved at the regional level through cooperation between New Delhi, Beijing, Moscow and Washington.

India could in fact safeguard the region against regional destabilization and provide a forum for continued dialogue between opposing parties. This would be a sensible policy, since the primary objective of its policy is to promote its internal security. In fact, not only the Kashmir issue has the potential to cause dangerous instability for the Indian state but also religious extremism, especially groups operating within the matrix of both Hindu and Islamic separatism in some regions of the northeast, and in close proximity with the Chinese border.

The Maoist Naxalite uprisings in the centre and northeast of India, as well as the desire to gain more autonomy in some regions, could further hinder the internal growth of the state and lead to its fragmentation. The most visible and well-known case of separatism in recent months is that of the Telangana region which is part of Andhra Pradesh state in southern India. The birth of a new Telangana state, although it would still be a member of the Indian federation, could coax other regions of India to ask for more economic autonomy and sharing of resources, mainly water, as well as fanning the flames of the many ethnic conflicts that remain unresolved throughout the country.

India’s contemporary geostrategic role does not therefore appear to be overly dependent on the United States for maintaining its position as a world’s leader (although India is a democracy with many similarities with Western countries), nor is its role best defined by the loose system of alliances established by Russia and China, despite having opened an important dialogue with Moscow and Beijing on how best to maintain stability in Central Asia.

India’s objective is to then become an independent powerhouse capable of ensuring the stability of the Asian continent, whilst maintaining as equidistant a position as possible between the various regional and global players. India’s special geographical location, which is at the crossroads of various cultural and religious influences, is connected to this aspiration. Yet another driving force in India’s yearning for a truly independent foreign policy is the rise in recent years of Indian popular nationalism. Political authorities are pressured in turn to seek to become an economic and military powerhouse in Asia. Such a popular sentiment is a reflection of India’s leadership within the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War, which meant that New Delhi was neither attached to euro-

Atlantic pole nor to the Soviet camp, despite having been rather close with the Kremlin in its foreign and economic relations.

In an historical epoch in which the area from the Middle East to South Asia is the scene of strong competition between different regional and global players New Delhi will need to assess whether maintaining substantial autonomy, not only geopolitically but also economically, can be beneficial and efficient for the whole India and constitute a proper response to globalization processes inspired by the West.

India's role could dramatically change if members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) accept to offer India – and Pakistan – a membership card, an option advocated in recent months by both Russia and China, although at the moment New Delhi sees this move as premature. But at this stage it is not yet clear whether full SCO membership is in the cards, given the strengthening in recent years of economic and military ties between India and the United States. This could eventually become an important factor to consider and is certainly a very interesting prospect for the eventual normalization of India-Pakistan relations.

India has a chance to succeed in its contest against contemporary Western-style globalization, given the strength of its ancient and rich culture. This is a tough challenge, but the former British colony is well-positioned to come forward as a competitive alternative model on the international level.

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