

Human Rights and Democracy in India's Emerging Role in Asia

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India is unique among post-Colonial states in successfully building a vibrant democracy that has withstood the test of time. It is not only the largest among world democracies – close to 600 million people go to polls since the 1990s – but also a very diverse one with deep-seated differences of religion, ethnicity and regional identities. The rapid and sustained growth of the Indian economy during the last two decades has made the Indian experiment even more significant for the international community.

Almost all recent discussions about international security or economics have focused on the rise of China and India as the future agents of change in Asia. This is largely because economic expansion is rapidly translating into military power and the ability to shape events. How do India's expanding capabilities affect the ability to exercise soft power? How does a rising India balance democracy, its most significant soft power asset, against imperatives of security? As a representative of successful democracy in the third world, India should be in the forefront of promoting political rights, freedom, and justice. But Indian policies have been ambivalent on this score. Why? What has been the Indian perspective on this issue? How do recent developments, the danger from Jihadi Islam to its west and the rise of China in the east, shape India's security? What changes in its own expanded capabilities affect the emerging

balance of democracy and security in India policy, particularly in Asia? The following paper outlines ways in which we might think about these questions and identify directions in India's Asia policy.

Why Do Normative Constructions Matter?

The exercising of soft power requires an agreement among a significant number of powerful states on the larger frame of collective norms. Normative orders provide the grand narrative to explain the past and legitimize the future. The grand narrative of nineteenth century Europe was premised on the "balance of power," which was believed to preserve peace by deterring overly ambitious European states from taking aggressive action. Between the two world wars, President Woodrow Wilson sought to create a peaceful and just order based on norms of self-determination and democracy. It gave the victors in the First World War the power to redraw the map of Europe. The narrative of historic contradiction between socialism and capitalism shaped the Cold War and legitimized the bipolar world.

As the leaders of the two rival camps, the United States and the Soviet Union competed for influence but observed tacit rules of conduct that avoided mutual destruction. History then tells us that any state (or group of states) that can build a widely accepted normative frame for collective policies and root these in a set of institutionalized

relationships is likely to wield power over future developments. Grand narratives strengthen proponents to structure inter-state relations and justify actions to punish and isolate, or do its opposite, reward and befriend those excluded from the core cluster of sponsors.

Such a grand conceptual narrative is yet to evolve in the post-Cold War era although several have vied for attention. Francis Fukuyama in his famous essay heralded the “end of history” and the triumph of Western values of democracy and market economics. He claimed that individual rights, civil liberties, property rights, and freedom to profit had proved their superiority over state-led growth, collective rights, and hierarchical order. But lurking in the shadows of this triumphalism were challenges that had already surfaced to undermine his argument. Impressive growth of Asia's smaller economies – Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and Malaysia – within a frame of soft authoritarianism raised doubts about Fukuyama’s thesis. The spectacular rise of China, occurring as it has within a harder authoritarian system, undermined even more the economic claims on behalf of liberal democracy. Kishore Mahbubani in Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia have proposed a counter narrative based on the merits of ‘Asian Values’ in contrast to the Fukuyama’s argument. They suggest that these values were the true engine of Asian growth.

India in the Emerging International Context

It is in this context that democratic India, Asia's "second country," the seat of a great world civilization, and growth rates to match those of China, assumes critical weight. We might look at India's soft power asset – liberal democracy – in at least two ways: as a model or an example (although perhaps not exemplary) of a viable federal, liberal, secular democracy and as a promoter of international democracy. India's political path proves that a liberal democracy is possible in a tradition-bound, multi-ethnic, and poor society can be a solution to the problem of modernization and growth. The second perspective is to see India's democratic identity as a stepping stone to international alliances and collective diplomatic engagement. A cluster of democracies can come together to create a common formula to exclude the politically incorrect, impose sanctions, or to deny recognition. A democratic coalition will not only enable its sponsors to capture the moral high ground and shape international discourse but also bring collective power to bear on recalcitrant regimes.

India's liberal, democratic, and market-oriented economy offers an alternative to the hard authoritarian growth model of East Asia. Furthermore, India's democratic path is arguably more relevant to the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Middle East than the European road to modernization and democracy. India has developed a unique formula to balance individual and group rights, devolve federal power down to the village-level (Panchayet Raj), and use its multiparty system as a grand bargain to reconcile differences over identities, interests, and office. In this sense, India's democratic experiment is one of

the greatest political experiments of our time.

However, India has been generally reluctant to export democracy or engage in policies of regime change for at least three reasons. First, protection of its 'strategic autonomy' has compelled India to reject attempts to set any general precedent of collective intervention on behalf of intervention in the domestic affairs of other states; it does not wish to set a precedent of intervention in the name of normative principles. Second, pro-democracy coalitions (for much of the Cold War period) were military alliances in disguise led by the United States to promote U.S. interests. India was reluctant to participate in these. Third, challenges arising from ethnic demography in Punjab, Indian Kashmir, and many parts of the Northeast have made India vulnerable to charges of human rights violations. India has therefore been reluctant to support any blanket endorsement of international human rights regimes. India's policy objective is to retain maximum freedom of action so that it can consolidate its own periphery and incorporate hitherto loosely integrated communities into the Indian Union. These structural problems explain India's ambivalence regarding the promotion of democracy and human rights. While India has the military power to affect regime change in smaller neighboring states, overlapping communities, disputed borders, and fear of domestic repercussions limit India's options.

The 1971 intervention in East Pakistan and the 1987 dispatch of peacekeeping forces to Sri Lanka are two outstanding examples of interventions on behalf of democracy and

human rights. But these were never guided entirely or even largely by altruistic motives.

Critical security interests were at stake in each case. Indian policymakers continue to remain averse to exporting ideology and prefer to conduct foreign relations guided by pragmatic considerations. It is the ghost of Lord Curzon and not Mahatma Gandhi that haunts the halls of the South Bloc.

One might argue that the policy of nonalignment pursued in the early years after Independence was an expression of the second approach to soft power, namely the creation of a common platform for gaining leverage in international politics. As a leading nonaligned state, India was in the forefront of this effort. However, nonalignment was more about protecting the autonomy of newly independent countries than about promoting democracy. In fact, a large number in the nonaligned states were single party states or military juntas. They did not endorse promotion of democracy as a priority. We might then conclude that throughout the Cold War, India's ability to market its democracy as an example or as a common platform remained severely circumscribed by the distribution of global power – which was averse to India – and India's limited capabilities. The end of the Cold War, however, removed the rationale for nonalignment as it was defined in that period. The threat environment changed and India's economic and military capacities expanded. This required a different order of response to the equation between security and democracy in India's policy.

Balance of Security and Democracy in South and Southeast Asia: the Indian Perspective

While security has trumped democracy in India's foreign policy perspective, democracy has become increasingly important as an underpinning for an Asian security architecture that could be in India's interest. India's security pivots around two objectives: to make India an influential Asian power and to protect India's strategic autonomy. India's international perspective is intensely geopolitical and breaks down into series of concentric circles defined by influence, immediacy, and reach. The first order of concern is the region of South Asia; the second tier includes Central and Southwest Asian states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran and Southeast Asian states such as Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. India's ability to ward off adverse developments in the first and second tier states are shaped by the United States, China, Pakistan, and Russia, whose interests cut through the tiers important to India. For instance, China and Pakistan have border disputes with India while India is vulnerable to separatist ethnic communities that spill over across the borders into Pakistan, Myanmar, and Nepal. Close strategic ties between China and Pakistan compound the problem of India's territorial defense. Differences also exist between India and the United States over Iran, Pakistan, and Myanmar despite a mutual interest in building a strategic relationship and concluding an agreement over India's nuclear program. The United States

supports Pakistan with weapons and economic assistance to secure its cooperation in prosecuting the war on terrorism, eliminating l-Qaeda and obtaining a pro-American, stable Southwest Asia. But a militarily strong Pakistan undermines India's strategic security.

For India the first line of defense is South Asia, given its particular ethno demography and geopolitics. The overlapping nationalities in divided Kashmir and Punjab, Bengal, and the northeast – a legacy of colonial divisions – has locked India and its neighboring states into perennial conflicts over peoples, territory, and bodies of waters. Ethnic overlap preoccupies India's defense strategy and demands resources, blood, and money. For instance, the Naga insurgency spills over into Bangladesh and Myanmar, Gorkha separatism confounds relations with Nepal, and separatist violence in Punjab and Kashmir invites Pakistani interference in India's domestic affairs. Defense against China and Pakistan is made more complex by the ability of these two countries to sponsor proxies or offer sanctuaries to ethnic separatists from across the border in India.

The United States has come to occupy a central place in India's international security yet the Indian policy community cannot agree on how close it wants to be to the United States. India cannot play the role Great Britain or Canada play in U.S. global strategy; it can be neither a junior partner nor a passive neutral state for the United States. At the same time, India has much to gain from close ties, which creates a dilemma for Indian leaders. A case in point is India-Iran ties. Iran has been an important supplier of oil for India and if the Indian

economy is to grow, it must sustain and build a positive relationship. However, there is considerable pressure from the Bush administration for India to redefine its ties with Iran. Some in India argue that such a sacrifice is worth the returns from strategic support from the United States. Beyond containing China and Pakistan, the United States is important to the development of India's economy and military. Since 2001, India has opted for strategic cooperation including intelligence sharing, military training, joint exercises, purchases of weapons and technology and massive flows of investments from U.S.-based multinational corporations. The Bush administration has stated that the United States would like to see India become a great power. Obviously, it also sees India as a stabilizer in the region and as a hedge against an ambitious China. As Ashley Tellis argues, China is far more worried about the expansion of India's economic and military power than it is willing to acknowledge.²⁷

The rise of radical Islam in the areas stretching from Iraq through Central Asia to Indonesia complicates the security scenario for both the United States and India. It blocks India's easy access to the oil rich central Asian economies and endangers domestic peace by spreading religious radicalism to Indian Muslims. It undermines India's ability to control the course of the insurgency in Kashmir or to sustain progress in bilateral Indo-Pakistan negotiations. India's objective (to its northwest) is to secure steady energy supplies from

²⁷ See Ashley Tellis, "China and India in Asia," in Francine Frankel and Harry Harding (eds.) *The India-China Relationship: What the United States Needs to Know* (New York, Columbia University press, 2004) pp. 134-178.

Central Asia and Persian Gulf for its growing economy, deter Pakistan, protect Kashmir, and stop Jihadi infiltration into India. India also sees itself as a prominent South Asian state with strategic interests extending from eastern Persian Gulf States to the Strait of Malacca.

Whether it is Central Asia, Pakistan, Myanmar, Nepal, or Southeast Asian states, India is in competition with China for influence, markets, and security. Yet much uncertainty remains in India's assessment of China's future intentions. Indian policymakers are not sure whether to regard China as an aggressive, expansionist country, or a reasonable neighboring state amenable to talks and cooperation.

Recent Chinese actions have been disturbing to India. China has extended trade and security ties with the military junta in Myanmar, transferred weapons and missile technology to Pakistan, secured contracts to develop the port of Gawdar in the Arabian Sea, and obtained Central Asian cooperation via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. India therefore perceives itself to be encircled by China. To compound the problem, the India-China border dispute remains unresolved and recently China has challenged India's jurisdiction over Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh including the Tawang tract. India has sought to counter the Chinese "encirclement" using two broad policy thrusts: the Indo-U.S. Strategic Partnership and the development of a "Look East" policy. India has also made efforts to expand bilateral cooperation with China. This is more an exercise in buying time to prepare for a showdown should it ever become necessary. Meanwhile, India seeks to

broaden China's stake in good relations with India. India's prime minister visited China in January 2008 and signed an agreement to expand trade to \$60 billion by 2010. As a confidence building measure, China and India have agreed to hold joint military exercises. In short, India's approach is to cooperate and prepare; a tactic that both Japan and the United States share with India.

India's Asian Initiatives

India's "Look East" policy is an important counterthrust to break through what it considers to be Chinese encirclement. Accordingly, India has reversed its policy in Myanmar and tilted in favor of the military junta, taken a proactive role in Nepal, opened talks with Pakistan over Kashmir, expanded economic ties with Central Asian states and strengthened its border defense. India has sought entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Asian economic and security forums. Additionally, it has augmented its naval reach and power with a view to participating in the collective security of the Indian Ocean and the international waters extending from the Strait of Malacca to the Arabian Sea.

The "Look East" policy suggests that New Delhi is actively globalizing its diplomatic leverage and deploying military power to buttress diplomacy. India is Asia's third largest economy after Japan and China and has entered into numerous free trade agreements

with East Asian economies, including a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement with Singapore and an early harvest scheme with Thailand. It is also negotiating similar agreements with Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN. In turn, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore have invested large amounts of funds into India's infrastructure development.²⁸

What role can India's democratic credentials play in Asia's emerging security environment?

While India is reluctant to promote democratic forces in Myanmar (for fear of losing advantage to China), it is willing to participate in constructing a grand narrative that will secure its forward thrust in Southeast Asia. In his speech before a joint session of India's parliament in August 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe talked about common interests among of democratic states such as India, Japan and the United States. He included India in a "broader Asia" that would span "the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States and Australia." This was undoubtedly an invitation to India to participate in building a normative and security architecture for Asia but in its subtext it is also a subtle warning to Beijing that a China-centered Asia would not be countenanced by the "democratic" states in Asia. Abe noted that these states comprise as "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" of "like-minded countries" that "share fundamental values such as freedom,

²⁸ Leading Asian companies – Daewoo, Hyundai, Samsung and LG and Posco – have significant presence in India. Japanese government is building the Metro system in New Delhi. There is also the proposed investment of \$100 billion in' developing a Delhi-Mumbai freight and industrial corridor which is to begin construction this year. Japan and India are discussing bilateral currency swap agreements.

democracy and respect for basic human rights as well as strategic interests." Shinzo Abe is the third successive Japanese prime minister to visit India after Yoshiro Mori in 2000 and Koizumi in 2005. Manmohan Singh's 2006 visit culminated in signing of the "joint statement Towards Japan-India strategic and Global Partnership."²⁹

India can make significant security contributions to the alliance of “democratic” states envisaged in Premier Abe’s speech. This has been steadily demonstrated in the joint naval exercises with Singapore since 1993, with Vietnam in 2000, and with Indonesia in the Andaman Sea. The Malabar CY 07-2 naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal held in September 2007 brought the navies of Japan, United States, Australia, and India together in a well-advertised, large-scale exercise. The joint statement by the Japan, United States, and Australian governments spoke of "a partnership with India to advance areas of common interests and increase cooperation, recognizing that India's continued growth is inextricably tied to the prosperity, freedom and security of the region." Not coincidentally the first four power talks occurred at the same time that the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting was held in Manila. Similar discussions about promoting India in regional forums were conducted when President Bush, Japanese Prime Minister Abe, and Australian Prime Minister

²⁹ Arc of Freedom and Prosperity, H.E. Mr. Taro Aso, Former Minister for Foreign Affairs On the Occasion of the Japan Institute of International Affairs Seminar "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons"

Howard met at the 2007 APEC meeting in Sydney.

Conclusion

Asia's political alignments are in flux, but at least three broad security futures can be envisaged. Democratic India can play an important part in each future although each will engage India differently and to a different degree. The first is a region divided along an opposite axis, a kind of Asian bipolar order in which the United States and China constitute the opposing poles. This future assumes hardened Westphalian inter-state relations and a more blatant game of "real politick" in forging alignments. The second hypothetical future revolves around an entente of great powers, a group of leading states that strive to keep order and preserve peace by rewarding those who toe the line and punish those who deviate from it. Although the Concert of Europe (following the Congress in Vienna) comes to mind as a historic analogy, its applicability to contemporary Asia remains limited. The concert of Europe presumed an external state – England – could throw in its weight to restore balance and deter potential aggressors. No such power is on the horizon in Asia at least in the foreseeable future. Only the United States can balance a powerful China; and only China can challenge the United States in Asia. But both these states would also be the leaders of their respective clusters in the second scenario. The third future is akin to the order founded on the

1975 Helsinki agreement in Europe that established a normative consensus (claimed by 35 states in Europe as a universal guide to international relations). The Helsinki consensus does not legitimize an uneven distribution of power or at least it is not meant to do so. Nor is it a front to secure hegemony of any single state. It is meant to be an open-ended order admitting revisions, inclusion, amendment, and extension based on democratic consensus. The steady incorporation of Eastern European states to the European Union underscores the flexibility of the otherwise “value-based” Helsinki consensus.

India benefits least from the first scenario of a bipolar, divided Asia although it will be regarded an attractive prize by those competing for influence and markets in Asia. The objective of “strategic autonomy” will by definition confine India to the margins of a bipolar Asia. India’s current dilemma in dealing with China can only worsen in a divided Asia. Joining an anti-China alliance is sure to provoke Beijing; not joining an alliance will mean isolation. As in the days of Cold War, India’s democratic credentials will have a limited role to play in the first future. But the first future does not seem likely because neither Japan nor the United States wish to push China into a corner. In the second future, democracy and human rights do not become a means to exclude and punish recalcitrant regimes. Rather, it instead becomes instead an invitation to peacefully integrate into the new normative order and its rules of conduct. The Japanese proposal to build an “arc of freedom” or a “value-based alliance” is an attempt to construct a grand narrative for such a collective order. It has

the immediate purpose of preempting the moral high ground and inviting China to join in the common platform, which automatically rules out expansionist or destabilizing policies.

Supported by a strategic alliance, the “arc of freedom” would enable powerful democratic states – the United States, Japan, India, Australia – to define a common set of interests such as freedom of international seas, protection of the environment, the war against terrorism, and open access to Asian markets, but it would also seek to prevent domination of Asia by China. The fact that no country has yet acted on it forcefully is testimony to the power of China and the uncertainty it has sown about the goals it is meant to serve. But a multi-polar Asia best serves India’s interests as long as it does not become blatantly anti-Chinese or a front for promoting exclusive U.S. interests.

The possibility of creating an Asian Helsinki is remote given the force of nationalism and spread of ethnic conflicts across Asia’s borders. There is no regional consensus on how to deal with separatist nationalities nor is there a possibility of arriving at one in the near future. India would find it extremely difficult to accept external guidelines while it deals with its own ethnic separatism in its Northwest and Northeast. Should such an order ever become a reality, India’s democratic voice would assume immense importance.

Among the three futures outlined above, the second future best fits India’s current and midterm security concerns. During his recent visit to Japan, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh suggested that the time has come for Japan and India, "our two ancient civilizations to build a

strong contemporary relationship involving strategic and global partnership" and the "most important area in which we can build this partnership is in the field of knowledge economy." He was less reticent in stressing India's exceptional achievement as a developing democracy. " If there is an "idea of India" by which India should be defined," he said, "it is the idea of an inclusive, open, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society...(we) have an obligation to history and mankind to show that pluralism worked. Liberal democracy is the natural order of political organization in today's world. All alternate systems, authoritarian and majoritarian in varying degree, are an aberration."³⁰ Prime Minister Singh explicitly linked for the first time the Indian model of democracy to an alliance of democratic states in Asia; he saw it as India's obligation to reject authoritarian alternatives to prosperity.

In diplomatic parlance, this was a pointed reference to India as the alternative to China. As an authoritarian state, China could not become a core country in the proposed order for Asia. India's preferred grand narrative is then distinctly different from the one China might construct. Indian leaders remain anxious not to get ahead of the current developments in this regard; they are keenly aware nevertheless of the advantages in establishing a loose alliance of democracies. What is more, their ability to back it up has expanded substantially with the rapid growth in India's economic and military power.

³⁰ "PM's Speech at India Today Conclave," New Delhi, February 25, 2005, <http://www.pmindia.nic.in/speech/content.asp?id=78> (speech by Manmohan Singh).