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WILL RISING INDIA JOIN THE WEST?

— C. Raja Mohan

Sustained high economic growth rates, averaging around 8 percent in the first decade of the 21st century, have made India one of the top economies in the world. With current GDP at over US\$1 trillion and per capita income at over \$1,200, India is now the world's 11th largest economy. In purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, India puts itself in the top five.

India's impressive performance during the current economic crisis and its national plans to grow at 9 percent in the coming years mean India's relative weight in the international system will continue to grow steadily. The economic slowdown in the West and the prospect of China's growth rate decelerating to single digits might well make India the fastest growing economy in the world in the not-too-distant future.

With India's international trade reaching nearly half a trillion dollars, Delhi's political engagement with the great powers and its extended neighborhood in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions has acquired a new depth and range. This, in turn, has resulted in expanded diplomatic influence for India across a broad front.

Underlying India's new engagement with the world has been a significant evolution of its worldview. It has tended to de-emphasize its traditional focus on the nonaligned movement (NAM) to devote more of its diplomatic energies to narrowly focused multilateral groupings with other middle-ranking powers like Brazil and South Africa, and to participate in smaller strategic groupings with Russia and China as well as with the United States and Japan.

After long disparaging regional economic multilateralism, India is now an active participant in the efforts to build an Asian economic community and such regional institutions as the East Asia Summit and the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation.

High economic growth rates have also increased India's economic interdependence with the rest of the world. India has begun to respond to this with unilateral initiatives on resource security and more intensive participation in multilateral economic rule-making. Liberated from the traditional state controls, the Indian capitalist class has shown extraordinary dynamism in building large manufacturing enterprises at home, acquiring well-known companies in the West, and establishing a strong presence in emerging markets.

The rapidly increased size of its economy means India can now invest ever larger amounts on defense modernization and on other strategic programs like the exploitation of outer space. It is also stepping up investment in science and technology and carving out a few niches for itself in sectors such as information technology and pharmaceuticals.

The international impact of India's emergence has already been visible in the global negotiations on climate change, the Doha Round of trade talks, the construction of a political security order in Asia, and in the emerging debate on managing the global commons.

Nonetheless, despite the unfolding transformation of India's international engagement and its growing relevance to the resolution of international challenges — from global warming to trade liberalization, and

from democracy promotion to the protection of the commons — there are persistent questions on whether India is ready and willing to shoulder the regional and global burdens that come with being a major power.

Ready to be a Major Power?

One set of issues arises from the internal challenges that limit India's ability to realize its full potential on the world stage. Its slow pace of economic reforms, its inability to provide adequate infrastructure for economic growth, its failures in providing basic social needs and imparting skills to its large and young population are out there in public for everyone to see. Further, India's slow and cumbersome responses to the million and one mutinies and conflicts engulfing the country, including a large Maoist threat spread across scores of districts, are nobody's idea of a well-kept secret either.

Externally, India's perennial conflict with Pakistan and an uncertain relationship with many of its neighbors continue to limit the prospects for the larger global role that Delhi might easily otherwise carve out for itself. The widening gap between the economic and military capabilities of India and China is also a major constraint on Delhi's aspirations for leadership in Asia.

While China is seen as encircling India on the subcontinent, Delhi's ability to mount a possible counter-containment of China in the rest of Asia has been limited. The extraordinary U.S. outreach to India during the last few years has been marked by Washington's determination to craft an exception to Delhi from the current rules of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. Yet, India's ability to take full advantage of it has been constrained by an enduring suspicion of the United States among the Indian political classes.

On the multilateral front, too, India has disappointed many in the West with positions that seem to echo the "third worldism" of the past. These trend lines leave a number of unanswered questions about India's strategic future. What does India's emergence as a major power mean for international politics? Has India defined a purpose for its accumulating power? Would a rising India be a "Western Power" or an "Eastern power"?

These questions need answering. The rest of this paper will examine five sets of issues that have a bearing on how Delhi might resolve its internal tensions and how the persistent strategic gap between India and the West can be bridged. These are India's ability to:

- lead its immediate neighborhood, the subcontinent, to peace and prosperity;
- contribute to stability and balance in Asia;
- develop a framework for use of force abroad;
- participate constructively in the making of a new international order; and
- recast its own international identity.

The paper concludes that the pace of India's transition on all these issues will depend upon the kind of approach the West, especially the United States, will adopt toward India's rise.

Pacifying the Subcontinent

Stabilizing one's own immediate geographic neighborhood, and preventing other powers from exercising too much influence there, has always been an important task of any great power. Like the British Raj that preceded it, independent India too has sought to acquire primacy in the political affairs of the subcontinent, but with much less success.

India has bristled at the intervention in regional affairs by other great powers, and insisted on bilateralism in resolving the disputes between it and its South Asian neighbors. India, however, did not have the power of the Raj to enforce its writ on the region. Three factors further complicated the situation.

One was the great Partition of the subcontinent along religious lines that broke up the strategic unity of the region, and pitted India into a perennial conflict with Pakistan. Second was India's inward-looking economic policy agenda that deliberately de-emphasized trade and discounted the virtues of economic regionalism. Third, as the politics of the Cold War spilled over into the subcontinent, India was severely constrained from pursuing its own regional objectives. The U.S. alliance with Pakistan, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and the expanding Chinese influence in the subcontinent all undermined Delhi's aspirations to exercise leadership in the region.

The end of the Cold War and the reorientation of the Indian economy created a more favorable environment for Delhi to regain regional primacy. The improved relations between India and the United States since the end of the Cold War also meant Delhi was no longer suspicious of every American move in the region. Under the Bush Administration, there was an attempt to develop consultative mechanisms on regional issues.

The Obama Administration, too, has continued with the policy of encouraging India to take the lead on most regional security issues. India's regional

concerns now have more to do with a rising China, and Delhi is not obsessed about “Western machinations” in the subcontinent. As Chinese power began to radiate into the subcontinent beyond its traditional special ties with Pakistan, Delhi is now scrambling to deal with the consequences. A rising China, however, has helped focus India’s policy attention to strengthening South Asian regionalism, adopting unilateral trade liberalization vis-à-vis the smaller neighbors, and promoting cross-border energy and transportation projects. Since the mid 1990s, India has also affirmed its commitment to walk more than half the distance in resolving its longstanding political disputes with its neighbors.

While the United States is eager to encourage and endorse India’s regional initiatives, there is no denying the profound differences between the two on how best to deal with the current turbulence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The traditional divergence between Delhi and Washington on Pakistan goes back to the very beginnings of the Cold War. This had been mitigated somewhat during the Bush years (2001-09), when Washington adopted an approach that “dehyphenated” its ties with India and Pakistan. That is to say, unlike his predecessors who viewed India through the prism of its conflict with Pakistan, Bush sought to develop relations with India and Pakistan each on their own merits and on separate tracks.

As the current crisis deepens in the Af-Pak region and the Obama Administration reviews its options, there is some temptation in the West to please Islamabad by demanding Indian concessions on its dispute with Pakistan over Jammu and Kashmir. This in turn revives Delhi’s suspicion of U.S. motives. Meanwhile, India had sought to resolve the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan on its own through back-channel negotiations with General Pervez Musharraf during 2004-07.

Delhi is now frustrated that the current army chief, General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, is walking away from the understandings arrived at during that period with his predecessor, General Musharraf. Three Indian prime ministers since the mid 1990s — Inder Kumar Gujral, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Manmohan Singh — have sought a comprehensive normalization of relations with Pakistan, but have been unable to bring the peace process to a successful conclusion.

Both India and the West have a big stake in ending the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan that has raged since the late 1970s and has begun to destabilize Pakistan, a pivotal state for the future of South, Central, and Western Asia. India and the West have a common stake in encouraging the evolution of

Pakistan toward political moderation, economic modernization, and regional integration. Neither India nor the West can achieve their objectives in the Af-Pak region on their own. It is only by working together that they can finally bury the dangerous detritus from the Partition and defeat the sources of extremism and terrorism in the northwestern parts of the subcontinent.

Toward an Asian Balance

As the United States and the West come to terms with rapidly rising Chinese power, they have debated the best possible ways of integrating Beijing into the global order and organizing a new framework for Asian security. The recent Chinese assertiveness on a range of issues — from territorial disputes with its neighbors to contesting the current order in the global commons — has inevitably begun to dash past illusions that managing the rise of China would be trouble-free.

At one end of the Western debate are those who believe that Asia will return to a presumed “natural order” of Chinese primacy. They underline the cost and futility of trying to contain China in Asia. At the other end are those who see a conflict between the West and China as inevitable and emphasize the urgency of boxing it in with countervailing alliances in Asia.

Like everyone else, India, too, is deeply divided on the China question. But its China policy takes the middle path between the two extremes in the Western debate. Delhi does not, even for a moment, accept that the only way of building Asian security is the acceptance of Beijing’s primacy. India will not accept any subordinate status vis-à-vis China, nor will it endorse a Sino-U.S. condominium in Asia or an agreement between Washington and Beijing to build separate spheres of influence. What Delhi would like is a carefully structured framework, which includes the United States, for balancing China through sustained strategic coordination among the other Asian powers.

That balancing China has been an enduring element of Indian foreign policy is not often understood in the West. As the two nations re-emerged on the world stage in the middle of the last century after a long period of relative decline, India and China did not find it easy to build good neighborly relations. Even as they proclaimed high principles of friendship, the two giants drifted toward inevitable conflict. China’s entry into Tibet saw India concluding bilateral security treaties with Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim during 1949-50.

As India drew closer to the Soviet Union amid the Sino-Soviet conflict, Beijing was wary of Indian policies that appeared to focus on balancing China. Delhi in turn was concerned by what it considered China's hostile policies, especially its support for Pakistan in its quarrels with India and the strengthening of Pakistan's strategic capabilities, including its nuclear and missile programs.

This notion of mutual balancing has been partly mitigated in recent years as India and China have worked hard to construct a more cooperative relationship. Yet a sense of rivalry has not disappeared. As both nations acquire greater economic and political clout, their competition has developed a much broader front — from the maritime domain to outer space. China and India are also locked in a global competition for resources, markets, and political influence across Asia and beyond.

The Bush Administration publicly declared its commitment to assist India's rise as a great power, and offered it a full range of military cooperation from advanced conventional weapons to missile defense. Despite widespread fears, the Obama Administration did not walk away from this commitment. But how far is India willing to go in partnering the United States? Is India ready for an alliance-like relationship with Washington? Will they remain "impossible allies" forever?

A U.S.-Indian Alliance?

The record of India's foreign policy and its enduring emphasis on strategic autonomy suggest that India will never sacrifice its freedom of foreign policy action in favor of a tight alliance with the United States. Yet the rise of China has brought forth a triangular dynamic between Washington, Beijing, and Delhi. As the world speculates on the prospect of India joining the United States against China, Delhi is conscious that political and economic relations between China and the United States will remain broader and deeper than those between Delhi and Washington for quite some time to come. Delhi is also aware that Washington has not made up its mind to go beyond a hedging strategy toward China. In that sense, there is no American invitation from Washington to Delhi to join a containment party against China.

Three propositions must be kept in mind in assessing Delhi's future relationship with the United States and China. First, India's main objective is to raise its own position in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions and emerge as an indispensable element in the Asian balance of power. Second, India's emphasis

will be on simultaneous expansion of political and economic relations with all the great powers. Three, while India is not under an immediate compulsion to choose between Washington and Beijing, India is increasingly conscious of the constraining impact of rising Chinese power on its own actions.

It is reasonable, then, to expect that there will be more military and strategic content to the Indo-U.S. relationship than in the Sino-Indian relationship or the Sino-U.S. relationship. For example, the U.S. decision to help modernize India's armed forces while maintaining an arms embargo against Beijing clearly works in India's favor. This does not necessarily mean India has to become a junior partner for the United States in Asia. The United States is aware that a stronger India, even outside the U.S. alliance system, will inevitably contribute to regional stability. Finding ways to coordinate their policies and actions in Asia that will reduce the incentives for Chinese assertiveness must necessarily be an important element of India's relationship with the United States and the West.

Using Force Beyond Borders

Using force beyond one's own borders in defense of peace and stability around the world is one of the major attributes of great powers. India already possesses one of the world's largest armed forces and is embarked on a major military modernization at a time when Western powers are downsizing their forces. How and when India might use its military power is a question that is only obliquely debated in Delhi, but it has significant international ramifications.

The general impression in the West is that India will be loath to use force beyond its objectives of territorial defense. It is also widely believed that India's commitment to notions of "sovereignty" and "nonintervention" and its emphasis on the UN framework for using force limits possible Indian contributions to stabilization operations and participation in military coalitions with the Western powers. While these perceptions are largely correct, there is a steady evolution of India's thinking on the use of force, and it is entirely possible to conceive that modern India might indeed reclaim the legacy of the British Raj in providing security in the Asian and Indian Ocean region.

The trend lines of the last few years do in fact support this proposition. Contrary to its foreign policy rhetoric, India has occasionally resorted to military interventions in its neighborhood. Equally important has been the impressive record of India's participation in international peacekeeping

operations under the auspices of the United Nations. In the last few years, as part of its growing military partnership with the United States, India has begun to take the first steps away from the insistence on a UN mandate for the use of its armed forces. Lending political support to U.S. operations in Afghanistan, India escorted U.S. naval ships participating in Operation Enduring Freedom through the Malacca Straits in 2002.

In 2003, the Indian government vigorously debated the U.S. request to send troops to Iraq. While Delhi eventually backed off, fearing a domestic political backlash, the fact that it considered such a deployment at all was significant. When the tsunami disaster hit the eastern Indian Ocean in December 2004, India quickly decided to join forces with the navies of the United States, Japan, and Australia to provide relief and rehabilitation. In June 2005, India signed a ten-year defense framework agreement with the United States that involved broad-ranging bilateral cooperation as well as participation in multinational military operations. Although the left-liberal Indian opposition attacked Delhi's departure from the previous policy of participating only in UN-sponsored operations, the government held to its agreement with the United States.

As the interaction between the Indian and U.S. armed forces increases and Delhi begins to source a broader range of platforms and weapons from the United States, the question of how this military partnership could be put to use remains to be answered. The issue here is not one of principle on either side, but one of defining the terms. India is unlikely to be either a Britain or NATO that will reflexively follow the United States in supporting international military missions of the West outside the UN framework.

As a power that values the freedom to decide on when and where to use force, India cannot leave the definition of mission objectives and rules of engagement to the United States. The United States in contrast is not used to sharing the leadership of its military missions. Beyond a more substantive dialogue with Delhi on the role of intervention and successful use of force, Washington must begin to explore the possibilities for "burden-sharing," where the United States can cede leadership to India and take on a supportive role by providing intelligence, logistics and other facilities. From a longer-term perspective, it might be in the U.S. interest to encourage India to become a major security provider in the Indian Ocean, strengthen Indian capabilities for power projection, and assist Delhi in developing effective expeditionary forces.

From Autonomy to Responsibility

In the last few years, India has been so focused on improving strategic ties with the great powers and the neighborhood in Asia that its performance on the global multilateral front has been less than effective. Old style posturing, for example at the World Trade Organization, has resulted in India taking needless blame for the collective failure of trade liberalization. As new issues — such as global warming — emerged, India lost political ground by sounding rigid and inflexible.

Meanwhile, the old vehicles of India's multilateral activism — the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the G77 — have become largely irrelevant for the issues confronting the contemporary world. Put simply, there is a fundamental crisis of identity and purpose in India's engagement with the global multilateral institutions. Is India a developing country leading the mythical third world trade union, or is it a rising power that must contribute to the maintenance of the international order?

An India that takes a strategic approach to multilateralism will be better prepared to define credible positions on international trade, reconstitution of global financial institutions, mitigation of global warming, and the broader issues of global governance. A self-assured India would have fewer problems in proposing viable international compromises on trade liberalization, joint development of technologies for reducing carbon emissions, pragmatic approaches to reducing the danger from nuclear weapons, and strengthening the global nonproliferation regime.

A more purposeful multilateral strategy would demand a significant reorientation of its bureaucratic and political leadership, which has been taught for many generations to prevent the world from having an impact on India. A rising India, instead, must learn to focus on effectively managing India's growing impact on the rest of the world.

Strategic autonomy is widely considered the central tenet of independent India's foreign policy. Despite the weighty tradition and emotion attached to the notion of "autonomy," one could legitimately ask whether the emphasis on autonomy is a self-evident and enduring principle of Indian foreign policy, or the product of a specific historic circumstance.

Great powers, defined as those that enjoy global economic, political, and military reach, do not talk about autonomy. In the absence of world government, it is the function of great powers to construct and sustain a measure of order in international affairs.

Put another way, great powers define the rules for the rest. Most states tend to accept the rules, given the knowledge that a rule-based order serves their interests better than anarchy. It is only states with national ambitions to improve their relative power position that insist that they will not let the international system constrain their freedom of action and pay the costs for defiance.

The emphasis on strategic autonomy was natural for an India that emerged out of colonial rule in the middle of the last century. Yet the nation's founding fathers had a vision for India's decisive future role in world affairs. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, emphasized the importance of norms, laws, and institutions in the conduct of international relations. His liberal internationalist vision resulted in India taking the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan to the United Nations Security Council. Taken aback by the Anglo-American maneuvers on Kashmir, India steadily adapted to the realist imperatives of the early Cold War.

As a weak post-colonial state, India had a strong desire to prevent other powers from limiting its own room for maneuver. It therefore refused to abide by rules it considered discriminatory or unequal. Six decades later, as India inches toward becoming the world's third largest economy, India's debate on the balance between autonomy and responsibility remains unfinished. For example, in the debate on the civil nuclear initiative, while the government led by Manmohan Singh projected India as a "responsible nuclear power," much of the political opposition to it was rooted in the notion of "autonomy."

On the issue of global warming, too, the tension was between a government that sought to inject flexibility into the Indian position and an opposition that opposed any change to past ideological posturing. If India ineluctably acquires great power capabilities, it will increasingly be called upon to shape the international system and share the costs of managing it rather than merely avoiding the discipline of an existing set of rules. If the West is prepared to treat India as a full partner in the management of the international order, it will become a little easier for Delhi to develop a policy toward multilateralism and global governance that is focused on strategic outcomes rather than empty slogans.

India as a "Western" Power

Although India's rise (unlike that of China) has been widely welcomed, there is considerable dispute on what kind of great power India might be. Most Indians and some international polemicists like Kishore Mahbubani do emphasize India's Asian identity and its inevitable drift away from the West.

While modern India is built on "Western political values," Mahbubani argues, India's is unlikely to become a Western power.

Others, like Sunil Khilnani, have suggested that a rising India might become a "bridging power" between the East and the West. Personally, I would argue the importance of thinking about India as a "Western power." Here is why.

First, India is certainly not the first great or democratic power to emerge outside of Europe and North America. Credit for that achievement goes to Japan. Japan has consciously sought to present itself as a "Western" power. Its brief attempt at projecting an "Asian" identity in the first half of the 20th century ended in a disaster. Yet, India's rise could be far more consequential for the West, given Japan's inability to act as a great power in the traditional sense and the prospect that its current relative decline might be irreversible.

Second, Russia and China, two great powers outside Europe and North America, are deeply ambivalent about their relationship with the West. Russia's inability to consolidate a democratic form of governance and the reluctance of the Chinese Communist Party to embrace political pluralism generate deep political discomfort in the West. That brings us to the somewhat special case of India, whose rise as a great democratic power offers Europe and North America new options in managing the world system.

Third is the proposition that the "West" cannot be a geographic or racial notion, but a political concept rooted in the values of the Enlightenment. While there are cultural and social factors that are specific to Europe and North America, they alone do not define the concept of the "West." If the "West" is a narrowly conceived geographic notion, India is clearly outside it. However, if the "West" is a political idea, a democratic India must be seen as an integral part of it.

Fourth, unlike Russia, China, or Japan, where the nation could be imagined without reference to democratic values, modern India could not have been constructed without reference to political pluralism. Given its extraordinary social, religious, and linguistic diversity, India cannot survive and grow except as a democratic nation. Democracy is at the very core of the "Idea of India."

Finally, as its weight in the international system increases and its large, globalized middle classes assert themselves on the national and global stage, India's interaction with the West is bound to become once again a two-way street.

Many Indians might react as violently, as would Europeans and North Americans, to the suggestion that India is a “Western power.” The legacy of anti-colonial struggle, the construction of an “Asian identity” as distinct from the “West” during the freedom struggle, the foreign policy tradition of non-alignment, the Anglo-American alliance with Pakistan and China during the Cold War, and India’s own warm relations with the Soviet Union have left a strong residue of “anti-Western” sentiment within the Indian political class. Many have assumed that these are enduring features of India’s self-image and will pit it against the West for the foreseeable future. I would venture to suggest, however, that these ideas were products of specific circumstances rather than defining features of modern Indian identity.

For and Against India as a Western Nation

Four broad sources of anti-Westernism have gripped India over the last couple of centuries. One is the nativist tradition. As elsewhere in the regions outside the geographic West, India’s modern encounter with colonialism produced the impulses for modernization as well as a backlash against those impulses. Nativism remains an important force, but it is beginning to lose its potency amid the globalization of India’s middle classes and their increasing comfort level with the geographic West.

Second, during the construction of India’s modern identity, many thinkers sought to define India in opposition to the West — the idea of a “spiritual East” as opposed to a “material West.” Yet these formulations, including the one by poet Rabindranath Tagore, can be seen as part of the strong intellectual disenchantment with the West during the inter-war period that also had a great impact on literary and cultural traditions in Europe and North America. As sections of the West reacted against the many negative consequences of rapid industrialization, excessive nationalism, and power politics, Tagore and other Indian thinkers explored the possible alternatives that could be built out of the ancient Eastern wisdom. Tagore’s critique of the West, though, was rooted in universalism and entirely different from the more recent self-serving perspective in the East on “Asian values.”

Third, India’s anti-colonialism also morphed into “anti-imperialist” and “anti-Western” arguments among left-liberals in India after independence. These left-liberal arguments, once powerful when India adopted inward-looking economic policies,

have begun to lose their appeal amid India’s successful economic advances through globalization. The traditional emphasis on India’s identity as the champion of the Third World has increasingly given way to a new self-perception as a rising power. Fourth, the Cold War provided sources of tension due to the various relationships with and between the United States, Pakistan, and China referred to above. However, after the Cold War, there is less of a direct conflict between India and the Anglo-Saxon world. That India shares many of the virtues of the Anglo-Saxon world — democracy, common law traditions, entrepreneurial capitalism, and a maritime orientation — provides a credible basis for a long-term partnership between India and the United States.

Delhi’s improved relations with the United States and the West have allowed India increasingly to redefine itself on the world stage as a democracy. India’s current Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, has played a key role in the transformation of India’s self-perception. Singh, the architect of India’s economic liberalization and globalization in the 1990s as its finance minister, has been instrumental in redefining India’s relations with the United States and Europe in the first decade of the 21st century.

Although Indians were always proud of their democratic traditions, it is the success on the economic front in recent years that gives India the confidence to see itself as a democratic power. The political reconciliation with the West, marked by India’s integration into the nuclear club, seemed to complete India’s own extended political argumentation with the West during recent decades.

India’s integration with the West, however, will not be easy to complete. If India has to overcome the many demons in its own collective mind, the United States and Europe, too, must prepare themselves for a redefinition of the power hierarchy within the West. Changing the order of precedence within the West will necessarily be a central but difficult part of accommodating India’s rise. For the moment though, a stronger comprehensive engagement between India and the West — on the sets of issues discussed above — will not only benefit both, but also the construction of a more stable regional and global order.

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