

India's strategic diffidence

India has not had a truly strategic foreign policy since before its 1962 war with China – if “strategic” means focusing on major issues of international import that concern Asian equilibrium and global security. The military humiliation India suffered on that occasion sucked the self-confidence out of the country, turning it inwards.

Before the war, India’s “Third World” status had not prevented it striding like a giant on the world stage in the period 1947–1961, led by Jawaharlal Nehru. India advocated nuclear disarmament in the First Committee of the United Nations; led the charge in international forums against colonialism and racism, winning the gratitude of recently freed peoples of Asia and Africa; facilitated disengagement from the Korean conflict; participated in the Geneva talks to restore peace in Indochina; and established itself as the leader of the non-aligned group – the key balancer in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

India viewed itself as so indispensable to the wellbeing of the world that Nehru (in a fit of startling self-abnegation for which the country continues to pay dearly) blithely rejected a permanent seat on the UN Security Council offered by Washington and Moscow to replace Chiang Kai-shek’s Chinese government.¹ Nehru believed such membership would continue to be India’s for the asking, and argued that the seat should go to the then-pariah communist China instead! It was a period of splendid gestures, grand pretensions, and matching hubris.

¹ The issue is tackled in the author’s book, *Why India is Not a Great Power (Yet)* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 50–51. The source is K.P. Fabian, “Bitter truths”, *Frontline*, 19 September 2014, available at <http://www.frontline.in/books/bitter-truths/article6365018.ece>. Fabian, who served as India’s ambassador to Italy, sources this information to an official note to the Foreign Office written by Nehru after a June 1955 visit to the USSR.

However, it was also a time, and this is not widely appreciated, when Nehru planted the seeds for India's emergence as a great power – both in its nuclear weapons capability and in the conventional military field. For example, he imported the renowned designer Kurt Tank to design and produce the HF-24 Marut – the first supersonic combat aircraft to be built outside Europe and the US.

Some 50 years later, the situation is much improved, but the self-belief required for India to be a leader, to do big things, is still missing. Indian foreign policy has aimed low, and achieved still lower; intent only on “short-term value maximising”, in the words of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, used in another context. This is reflected in the absence of a national vision, and the confusion about means and ends, soft power and hard power, and about how to get where it wants to go. Most immediately, India is unsure of how to deal with China. Standing up to this behemoth and emerging as the other nodal power in Asia may define India as a great power in the twenty-first century.

However, this ambition is undermined by diffidence and skewed capabilities. India, paradoxically, is self-sufficient in strategic armaments – nuclear weapons and delivery systems, including advanced and accurate ballistic and cruise missiles, and nuclear-powered submarines. But in the 50-odd years since the HF-24 first flew, India has become the world's largest importer of conventional weaponry, leaving its foreign policy hostage to the whims and interests of vendor states.

A risk-averse mindset

Attempts to take a bolder approach to foreign policy run into an institutional “mental block” and ideological debris from the past. The foreign ministry, for instance, equates military prowess with bellicosity, viewing power projection as “imperialistic” and foreign bases in India's extended neighbourhood as neo-colonial manifestations (India currently has, amongst others, Ainee in Tajikistan and Nha Trang in Vietnam; with promised access to Subic Bay and Clark Air Base in the Philippines, the Agaléga Islands in Mauritius, Chabahar in Iran, and a naval base in northern Mozambique). The Indian army that won an empire for Britain is reduced to border defence, and Indian foreign policy is left without strategic underpinnings. It follows that India does not prize distant defence, and that its leadership lacks what the pioneering geopolitical theorist Halford Mackinder called “the map-reading habit of mind”. By

focusing militarily on a measly Pakistan and ignoring China's challenge, India inspires little confidence about its judgment, resolve, and prospects as a consequential power and potential *gendarme* in the extended region.

A risk-averse mindset has spawned tremulous policies and led to a shrunken role for the country. Where Nehru contemplated an Asian Monroe Doctrine backed by Indian arms, New Delhi now seems content dallying with the proposal of a "security diamond" involving India, Japan, the US, and Australia, and gingerly working the India–Japan–US and India–Taiwan–Japan "trialogues". And despite China's provocation in claiming an Indian northeastern state, Arunachal Pradesh, New Delhi's desire to pacify Beijing keeps it from wielding the potent "Tibet card" and raising the issue of Tibetan independence as a counter-pressure.

A will to security

Ironically, given India's lack of political will to realise its ambitions, the current climate in Asia and internationally is conducive to India's rise. The security situation is meta-stable, with conventional wars with China and Pakistan virtually eliminated due to the nuclear overhang. This has allowed India to proactively configure a security architecture native to Asia, with a generally unreliable US playing its stock role as an opportunistic extra-territorial balancer. A primarily maritime security scheme to India's east would require getting the rimland states of Southeast Asia and Japan and Taiwan together for "compound containment" of China. Beijing's belligerence in the South China Sea and over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands has aggravated the sense of urgency around this policy. Consequently, India is fleshing out its regional security system through security cooperation; multilateral military exercises; and partner capacity-building such as transferring BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to Vietnam, training crews for the six Kilo-class submarines Hanoi has acquired from Russia, and servicing Malaysian and Indonesian Su-27/Su-29 aircraft, and signing a security cooperation agreement with the Philippines.

This arrangement, with India and Japan anchoring each end of the security system, will stretch Chinese forces at the country's extremities in Asia, and keep Beijing distracted and uncertain about the outcome of any conflicts it may initiate. The India–Myanmar–Thailand highway agreement – the first stage of the long delayed east–west "Ganges–Mekong" belt mooted by New Delhi in the early 2000s to cut across China's north–south corridors (through Myanmar and

Indochina) – has just been inked. In addition, it helps that, notwithstanding its reliance on Beijing’s financial help, a wary Russia is taking measures to pre-empt a Chinese “demographic creep” into Siberia turning into a flood and the Chinese defence industry from easily reverse-engineering Russian military hardware. The “Look East” policy is complemented by India’s “Look West” policy, though this was slow to grow teeth due to New Delhi’s misplaced desire to please the US.² Investing in the development of the Chabahar port was neglected, along with the development of a south–north rail and road grid bypassing Pakistan to connect to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and to Russia’s Northern Distribution Network for Indian trade. The thaw in US–Iran relations should accelerate these outreach projects.

India can act to blunt the sharp edges of the Israel–Iran rivalry, on the one hand, and to mediate Saudi–Iranian differences, on the other. Its defence cooperation accord with Saudi Arabia and friendly relations with Iran straddle the Sunni–Shia schism. India has leverage because it has one of the largest Sunni Muslim populations in the world, and the second-largest Shia population, after Iran. New Delhi’s cultivation of both Riyadh and Tehran allows it to consolidate its energy supply sources, and gives it a potential role as stabiliser in a region rife with violence and turmoil. Israel’s alienation by the Washington–Tehran nuclear deal adds another mediator role to India’s policy toolbox. India is also reinvigorating security, trade, and economic partnerships with the Central Asian republics, which desire an Indian presence to balance spreading Chinese influence.

The Indian government under Modi has recognised the importance of Indian migrants in the West – the so-called Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), who are living abroad – in advancing India’s interests. NRIs contribute to local election campaigns, shape the thinking of local legislators, and take up senior positions in host-country governments. Not coincidentally, the US–India Political Action Committee has evolved into a lobbying force to be reckoned with in Washington. This development enhances India’s ample soft power along with its successes in the sectors of information technology and “frugal engineering” – producing less complex and cheaper versions of consumer goods for the Indian marketplace – and, more prominently, as a “brain bank” for the world to draw on.

² India refrained from pushing forward cooperation with Iran in order to placate the US. Had New Delhi gone ahead at the time – as this author had advocated all along – India wouldn’t be in the straits it is now, with Tehran - post-nuclear accord with Washington and the opening of its relations with the West - displaying reluctance to sign a Chabahar deal, and to let India invest in its southern gas fields.

India is not lacking in foreign-policy ambition, or the means to realise it. In practice, however, it translates into a will to security but not a will to power. As a result, India ends up using its resources neither wisely nor well, like the proverbial whale with the impact of a minnow.