

Understanding India

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» Within a shifting world order, an emerging India is searching for its footing in international relations. Expectations of nascent global influence are high. But the country still falls short of a proactive role in international affairs. At times, India comes across as a difficult partner. For the West to develop a more harmonious relationship with the Asian power it must better understand India and the factors behind the country's external policies. First, it is necessary to identify the differences between its worldview and that of established powers. The European Union (EU) would err in thinking India is simply part way along a path of convergence towards Western norms and standards. Appreciating the deeply embedded causes of India's worldview can help the EU mitigate the reserve in its relations with the Asian power.

India's foreign policy is still relatively embryonic, prudent and constricted. It is driven by self-interest and a policy of non-interference. India is incredibly wary of the tag of hypocrisy often attached to the West. India must not be expected to mould its policies entirely around the norms set by declining Western powers. The new multipolar world order is clearly attractive to India. It allows for more inclusivity, greater equality and a larger say for emerging powers. India increasingly realises that in this new order silence and abstention reverberate loudly. The new order

Highlights

- While the West expects India to play a bigger role in international affairs, deep-seated factors constrain proactive Indian foreign policy.
- Understanding India and the factors that explain her foreign policy would greatly help the EU to develop a more harmonious relationship with the Asian power.
- This implies that the EU refrain from seeing India as inevitably converging on its own understandings of the world.



will be strongly conditioned by emerging nations' own search for new identities. Here are the factors that can help to understand and react productively to India's evolving foreign policy.

THE FOUR RATIONALES

Democratic India's rise has been dramatic. But its ability and willingness to shape the global system remains pallid. India's foreign policy has been criticised as anaemic even in its own neighbourhood, particularly towards Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan. It has refrained from collaborating with the West on international issues such as Iran's nuclear programme, the International Court of Justice and Libya. On a number of dossiers, such as climate change and nuclear proliferation, India has been intractable. As the world's largest democracy, India has also been criticised for not actively promoting liberal values, engaging instead with authoritarian regimes. The country's preference for aligning itself with other emerging nations under the BRICS or IBSA rubrics is routinely seen as a challenge to the Western world order and a reminder of India's policy of non-alignment. To the West, India has come across as a rather reluctant partner.

This gap between India's rising power status and its limited global actorness can be explained by four specific factors. First, the status of global power has been accorded to India prematurely. Awed by the glitter of India's emergence, the world risks forgetting the country's painful realities. There exist two 'Indias': a dynamic India,

with global ambitions; and an India which still faces acute underdevelopment. More than one third of the population is poor and around 400 million have no access to electricity. India still ranks 67th out of 81 countries on the Global Hunger Index. The gap between expectations and reality is wide. India has a long way to go before it has the solid economic base of a global superpower.

Second, India itself remains unclear of this status. India's 2010 National Security Annual Review openly admits that the country is at a loss as to how to exercise its newly acquired potential. India is a global actor, but is unwilling yet to assume the responsibilities of a global power. At best, India is confident only as a regional power. It holds neither pretences nor ambitions of being a superpower, but is content with shaping a more inclusive world order.

India's single biggest multilateral goal remains the reform of the United Nations, including its demand for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council (UNSC). For India, not only does the UNSC misrepresent contemporary realities, but also its own inclusion in the club is fundamental for a fair representation of the global population and the country's own contribution to the UN. However, beyond the UN issue, there is little debate on how India might project itself as a global power in international relations.

India's foreign policy is still underdeveloped. The country's interests in protecting and expanding its zone of influence are circumscribed. While India has not yet publically



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defined a sphere of interest, its reach remains visible mainly within the Indian subcontinent and displays a leaning towards needs-based relationships with the major powers. A foreign and security strategy is missing, as is a

clearly demarcated and protected maritime territory. India faces strong competition from neighbours and other regional actors like Pakistan on Afghanistan, or Russia and China on Central Asia. China's increasingly intimate relationship with Pakistan, its advances into Afghanistan and its presence in the Indian Ocean have

elicited modest reaction from India. India's foreign policy remains reactive and passive. Some Chinese encroachments into Indian territory are rebuffed, but others are disregarded.

Internally, a number of constraints compound the passivity of foreign policy. A key impediment is that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is small, with around only 700 posts. It is smaller than that of Sweden. It limits the expanse of foreign policy interests and constrains intensification of existing relations. India has begun to deliver sizeable sums of aid to the likes of Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka; but often has only a single official in-country to deliver this aid. India's cumbersome bureaucracy is difficult to navigate and militates against agile policy-making. Bureaucratic infighting has proven debilitating and counter-productive.

The number of young leaders in the Indian parliament is low. The current stock of MPs has an average age of 53 years. Only 79 out of 802 policy makers are under 42. Despite the presence of youth wings in all major political parties, the presence of youth in national politics is strikingly limited. Some of the new-generation leaders like Rahul Gandhi, Sachin Pilot and Agatha Sangma could bring a long-overdue, fresh perspective on foreign relations. The question is whether they will be allowed sufficient political space to express a step-change in India's parliamentary debates on foreign policy.

India's political parties lack a distinct foreign policy agenda. There is little agreement within each political party on how India's overall foreign policy must develop. Political debates remain mainly inward-looking and focused entirely on domestic issues. There is little debate on how the international system is developing and what role India can play under different future scenarios. External affairs committees in the parliament often fail to find a quorum.

Domestic controversies have narrowed the space for the development of a vibrant foreign policy. The recent Anna Hazare anti-corruption movement has seized the country's interest in the pursuit of an Ombudsman bill; this has seriously encumbered the Lok Sabha from any other business. Important bills with an international dimension, such as the one on foreign investment in retail – which has an important read-over to EU-India free trade talks – have been postponed due to political



opposition. India's political decision-making reflects a mode of cooperation where necessary and opposition where possible. On the Indo-US nuclear deal, the Manmohan Singh government only narrowly survived a no confidence vote by 275-256 votes.

A third factor is that India's identity and its foreign policy have been shaped by the struggle for freedom. More than six decades on from the end of colonial rule, India still remains cautious of the West and chooses to emphasise South-South cooperation instead. India shares stronger commonalities and visions of the new world order with other emerging powers. India's chances of creating a new world order more towards its liking are better in alliance with other rising powers (even with rivals like China) than with the West

India has played some positive roles internationally. The country's external aid programme now helps project India as a global actor. The country's newly set up foreign aid agency will allocate around \$11.3 billion over the next five to seven years. India's NGOs and private sector also play an important role. Its pharmaceuticals industry has managed to reduce HIV treatment costs from \$10,000 in the 1990s to less than \$100 today, through the production and distribution of cheap generic drugs. India is careful to define all this as South-South cooperation rather than calling it an external aid programme as such. In such endeavours India ritually seeks likeminded partners like Brazil or South Africa, which are aware of similar development challenges.

Under a philosophy of non-interference, India will resist aligning militarily with the West on interventions like those carried out in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan. In Libya, Indian officials maintain that there was no clear opposition to the Gaddafi regime and that the Transitional National Council was handpicked by the West. India did extend humanitarian assistance of \$1 million through the UN agency OCHA and relief material and medicines to the tune of \$1 million to Benghazi and Tripoli. Although the Libyan case may have put the strict non-interference approach on the back-foot, India will not be willing to fight someone else's war. It would be extremely difficult for the Indian government to explain to a domestic audience any involvement in an international issue that does not directly affect Indian interests. India's multilateral engagement thus manifests itself in the primacy it accords to the role of the UN. India is the third largest personnel contributor to UN Peacekeeping Operations, with 8,423 troops deployed as of July 2011.

Fourth, while Nehru's India did have a foreign policy with a moral purpose, upholding norms, human rights and ideals, today India's foreign policy caters mainly to its economic gain. India makes little effort to support governance reforms in African countries with which it has energy deals like Sudan, Nigeria or Ivory Coast. Business is strictly business. India was criticised for its friendliness towards regimes like the Myanmar junta when the West pushed for international isolation of the country. While New Delhi remains genuinely unconvinced of the efficacy of sanctions and conditionality, there was



an added impetus to engage Myanmar lest China seek to expand its influence in the country. Similarly, with Iran, India has important energy interests at stake. India in turn criticises the West for its very selective approach to human rights when it comes to its own interests in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or China.

Despite on-off border skirmishes with China, Indian officials and analysts alike stress the need to maintain good relations amidst healthy competition. China is currently within India's top five trading partners. The two neighbours are set to become each other's leading trading partners by 2030. With Pakistan, India hopes renewed dialogue will bring about two-way economic growth and a change in Indo-Pak relations. That said, India remains pragmatic in recognising the importance of hard power. India has become the world's largest arms importer and is currently modernising its military apparatus. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) affirms that India accounted for 9 per cent of all weapon imports between 2006 and 2010 and has earmarked a budget of \$50 billion over the next five years for military modernisation. Indian armed forces count on a sizeable 1.4 million troops. India's air force is the fourth-largest in the world with 900 combat aircrafts.

India's approach to democracy promotion differs greatly from that of the West. India believes that it promotes democracy best by example and non-intrusive capacity-building. India invites diplomats and business representatives to its parliament and other politico-industrial venues. Constitutional

experts and electoral assistance missions are sent abroad on request. India offers scholarships for students to study in India and promotes education in many countries, especially in its neighbourhood. In Nepal, New Delhi silently helped forge a compromise between all parties, in spite of the fact that a Maoist party took the lead. In Afghanistan, India is constructing the Afghan parliament building amongst many other initiatives. India is the second-largest contributor to the UN Democracy Fund. New Delhi believes in constructive engagement even when it comes to authoritarian regimes.

HOW MUST THE EU WORK WITH INDIA

Just as India had refused to be part of either of the Cold War camps, India will refuse to walk the course of an 'old world order' power. India as a global power will be, as Indira Gandhi once said, a different power and will continue to chart its own path in the world. As the EU aims to upgrade its relationship with emerging India, it must realise that some priorities from the 1970s remain valid. It must adopt a twin-track approach. While there are vast commercial opportunities, the EU must also re-establish itself as a partner in India's development. For some time, India's priorities will remain domestic. In this light, expecting too much from India on international issues will only lead to disappointment and divisions. The EU should consider handpicking a limited number of international dossiers to work on with India. Consultations within the UN system must be intensified.



To improve the EU-India strategic partnership, bilateral dialogue must be underscored and enriched. It is necessary to step-up political engagement, including regular visits by top EU officials and politicians. Greater consultations can lead to a better understanding of how to deepen the relationship. Understanding and addressing India's concerns more astutely is a prerequisite to propelling relations forward. India's foreign policy will be closely aligned with likeminded emerging partners that share the same challenges and aspirations. The EU must factor this reality into its diplomacy, not try to fight it by trying to pick India off as an ally against other powers.

India needs to bear its share of global responsibilities, but will determine its own means of contributing. The outcome will depend strongly on how India sees the emerging world order developing. The EU should discuss with India far more about how the latter sees the new global order and what role it wishes to play within it. India will seek to create a more inclusive and balanced international system, led by its demands for reform of international governance institutions. In this regard, the EU and India can enhance dialogue within the UN system. Given that India prefers not to interfere in what it considers sovereign matters of third nations, the EU can consult India on how to collaborate in a mutually acceptable and non-imposing manner in places like Myanmar.

Interdependence and inclusiveness are the catchwords of the new global order in which both the EU and India must co-exist. A better understanding of each other

is paramount for global governance in an increasingly inter-linked world in which both the EU and India as global actors must share global responsibilities. Events of the previous century created deep divides and must now be bridged. While intrinsic differences will continue to exist, a better understanding can at least narrow the gap. As partners in the new international system, the EU and India need to comprehend each other to become better collaborators in managing global affairs and to enhance their bilateral relationship towards a real strategic partnership.

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