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Indian foreign policy and contemporary security challenges

ROHAN MUKHERJEE AND DAVID M. MALONE

India faces numerous contemporary security challenges, many of them internal. Domestic politics plays a major role in determining which security challenges are construed by Indians as the most pressing. This article first touches on the evolution of India's domestic politics and foreign policy since independence, then discusses various domestic, regional and global security challenges relevant to India today, and concludes by considering whether the country's current foreign policy can hasten its emergence as a Great Power or conversely, will confine it to its current reach as merely a regional one.

Historical overview: from preacher to pragmatist

India's journey from 1947 to the present day, in terms of both foreign policy and domestic politics, can be seen as a transition from idealism under Nehru, through a period of 'hard realism' (or *realpolitik*) lasting roughly from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s (coinciding with the dominance of the Indian political scene by Indira Gandhi), to economically driven pragmatism today.

Unified idealism: 1950s and 1960s

From independence through the 1950s and 1960s India's foreign policy was framed for international consumption as one of some idealism, while Nehru tackled the tremendous domestic challenges of long-term cohesion and economic revitalization that the British empire had neglected in the final decades of the Raj. Within India, the dominant Congress Party coalesced around a project of state nationalism.¹ Internationally, Nehru chose the path of non-alignment in the face of the bipolar order of the Cold War, arguing that India would have to 'plough a lonely furrow'.² Indian foreign policy of the time seemed moralistic to outsiders, defining the national interest as congruent with 'world co-operation and world

¹ Zoya Hasan, 'Introduction', in Zoya Hasan, ed., *Parties and party politics in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² Extracts from Nehru's speech to the Constituent Assembly of India, 4 Dec. 1947, partially reproduced in A. Appadorai, *Select documents on India's foreign policy and relations 1947–1972*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 10.

peace'.³ Domestically, it was defended as 'the only honourable and right position' for India.⁴

Government decision-making on foreign policy was driven by the Prime Minister.⁵ Although Nehru debated the ideological moorings of India's foreign policy extensively in parliament and other public arenas, the ministry of external affairs (MEA) maintained a monopoly on information, resulting in scant public scrutiny and accountability of its policies. The domestic challenges facing the country were such that few leading national figures wasted much time on the country's international relations and profile.

India's cohesion was severely tested not only by the fallout of a murderous partition in 1947, but, following rapidly thereafter, by the Kashmir crisis, the resistance of several princely states, notably Hyderabad, to joining the Indian Union, and some leftover business with respect to decolonization (managed peacefully with France and less so with Portugal, which was militarily expelled from Goa in 1961). Even language politics threatened the Indian union. Above all, the country's greatest burden was its poverty.

India's international actions during this period were consonant with its domestic limitations and Nehru's outlook, though its posture on crises in Indochina and Hungary was seen by the US-dominated West as inconsistent with its purported non-alignment. The dissonance was aggravated by the brilliant but often grating (to western ears) sermonizing of Nehru's preferred envoy, V. K. Krishna Menon.⁶ But external events in the form of China's successful aggression in 1962 soon compelled the Indian establishment to face the realities of international power politics. Even so, upon Nehru's death in 1964 Lal Bahadur Shastri upheld India's 'moral duty' to eradicate colonialism and imperialism.⁷ Subsequently, India having weathered further storms, notably an attack by Pakistan in 1965, Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi came to power in 1966, ushering in a new era of Indian foreign policy (as well as more fractious domestic politics).

Intermittent realism: 1970s and 1980s

The general election of 1967 initiated the decline of Congress hegemony. The following two decades were characterized by 'the politics of exit', whereby new regional parties were formed by groups breaking away from Congress.⁸ Domestically, Mrs Gandhi used every method possible—constitutional and unconstitutional—to centralize power and to bring recalcitrant political actors into line,

³ Extracts from Nehru's speech to the Constituent Assembly of India, 4 Dec. 1947.

⁴ Extracts from Nehru's speech to the Constituent Assembly of India, 4 Dec. 1947.

⁵ Baljit Singh, 'Indian intellectuals and their foreign policy', *Background* 9: 2, Aug. 1965, pp. 127–36.

⁶ A more elegant and agreeable posture, at least to western eyes, was adopted by Nehru's talented sister, Mrs Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, who served as Indian envoy to the Soviet Union, US and UK and also served in the high-profile if ceremonial role of president of the UN General Assembly in 1953–4.

⁷ Extract from Lal Bahadur Shastri's first broadcast to the nation on 11 June 1964, in Appadorai, *Select documents*, p. 59.

⁸ Pradeep K. Chhibber, *Democracy without associations: transformation of the party system and social cleavages in India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 90.

making extensive use of 'President's rule' in suspending state governments.⁹ It is a tribute to the roots put down by Nehru's democratic outlook that the damage to the democratic process inflicted by Mrs Gandhi, reaching its nadir during the Emergency years (1975–7), was rewarded by a massive electoral defeat in 1977.

In August 1970, while paying tribute to her father's ideal of non-alignment, Mrs Gandhi asserted that the problems of developing countries needed to be faced 'not merely by idealism, not merely by sentimentalism, but by very clear thinking and hard-headed analysis of the situation'.¹⁰ This judgement reflected a growing realization that India's interests could not be fully protected by its earlier international stance. On the international stage, the realist turn was evident as India veered away from non-alignment towards alignment with the Soviet Union, marked by the Indo-Soviet treaty of 1971. A few months later, military intervention in the Bangladesh war enabled India to shatter Pakistan and halve its size and weight in response to Pakistani atrocities and the influx of Bangladeshi refugees into India. In 1974 India conducted its first nuclear test, a response to that of China in 1964 at Lop Nor. In 1975 India intervened during internal unrest in independent Sikkim and incorporated it into the Indian union.

In 1984, amid upheavals in India over the Sikh Free Khalistan movement's campaign for an independent Punjab, Mrs Gandhi, back in power, was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, a shocking event for the country. Her assertive style endured, nevertheless, in Delhi's approach to the Sri Lankan crisis of the mid-1980s under her son, Rajiv Gandhi, who succeeded her as prime minister (and was himself assassinated in 1991 by the Tamil separatist movement in Sri Lanka), and in an economic blockade of Nepal in 1989 to bring it to heel after Kathmandu's brief flirtation with Beijing.

In sum, this era dominated by Indira Gandhi was characterized by lip service to anti-imperialism, Third World solidarity and non-alignment abroad, but was marked in practice by a drift towards power politics.

The birth of pragmatism: 1990s and onward

The year 1991 marked another turning point in Indian politics, economic orientation and foreign policy. It coincided with the collapse of the post-1945 world order characterized by Cold War confrontation. In India, over four decades of socialist economic policy and poor fiscal management culminated in a severe balance of payments crisis. This forced the testing of a new approach, championed by the then Finance Minister (and today Prime Minister) Manmohan Singh, involving much greater economic pragmatism and reform. As these measures took hold during the 1990s, most pretensions to idealized conceptions of India's society, polity and role in the world were gradually discarded, although reaction against

⁹ National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, 'A consultation paper on article 356 of the constitution', 11 May 2001. Chhibber (*Democracy without associations*, p. 97) disputes some of the figures, but not the basic drift.

¹⁰ Appadorai, *Select documents*, p. 62.

these changes remained lively. And throughout this decade and the following one Indian politics continued to fragment, producing resort to coalition governments and wider alliances at union and state levels.¹¹ Identity-based politics and other ideologies waxed and waned as dictated by political expediency.

The ideological unmooring of the domestic sphere was also reflected in the international arena. India shed its non-aligned and anti-western ideologies in favour of a pragmatic foreign policy. This favoured some normalization of traditionally antagonistic relationships with neighbouring countries, a greater commitment to international institutions that might legitimize its emerging power status, a positive approach to relations with the world's remaining superpower and, importantly, greater focus on national defence, including in the nuclear sphere.

These shifts in India's foreign policy manifested themselves in various ways, including better relations with China; the 'Look East' Policy (launched in 1992) aimed at improved relations with Asia to the east of India; the further nuclear tests at Pokhran (1998); a significant defence procurement relationship with Israel (after diplomatic relations were established in 1992) and simultaneously enhanced energy diplomacy with Arab countries and Iran; acquiescence in the US nuclear missile defence programme (2001); support for the US invasion of Afghanistan (2002); the Indo-US nuclear cooperation agreements of 2005 and 2008; and India's votes against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency. The relationship with Pakistan remained vexed, marked by the potentially dangerous Kargil war of 1999 and Indian concerns about terrorism from across the border.

Contemporary security challenges

While the opening up of the political space to new social groups has deepened democracy in India, severe political fragmentation has created obstacles to effective policy-making. India's region is fraught with security threats arising out of unstable, often weak states such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Burma/Myanmar and Afghanistan, a near neighbour in which India is heavily invested.¹² Further afield, India could serve as a pivot in a new triangle much promoted by commentators, composed of the United States, China and India. Beyond the sphere of enjoyable geostrategic speculation, India has in recent times benefited from cooperation with the US, while it grapples with perennial potential security threats emanating from China. India's regional and global security concerns are reflected in its military modernization, maritime security and nuclear policies. Nonetheless, domestic security concerns continue to influence Indian perceptions of regional security.

¹¹ Arun R. Swamy, 'India in 2001: a year of living dangerously', *Asian Survey* 42: 1, 'A survey of Asia in 2001', Jan.–Feb. 2002, pp. 165–76. Both coalitions subsequently disintegrated.

¹² Afghanistan can be considered a part of the broader Middle East, of Central Asia and of South Asia, forming a bridge between these geostrategically sensitive regions.

Domestic security challenges

The central aim of post-colonial India's national project has been the accommodation and management of the country's extreme heterogeneity. Over the centuries India has sheltered innumerable ethnic groups, cultures and religions. Hinduism's assimilative tendencies have given rise to a broad cultural trend of coalescence, often manifested in religious syncretism, although stratification by caste has created social cleavages that the modern state has sought to eliminate. However, the political rise of Hindu nationalism, or *Hindutva*, since the 1990s has also raised questions about India's identity as a secular nation, at times producing inter-communal clashes, terrorist acts (and retaliations) and other forms of upheaval. While *Hindutva* today seems to be waning, circumstances could conspire to revive its appeal in years ahead with unpredictable consequences. The rise of identity politics of varying kinds since the 1990s has been striking.¹³ The end result has been a multitude of political parties with influence at the centre and mostly two- or three-party alliances in the states.¹⁴

The gradual shift to a more market-oriented economic policy in the 1980s and the liberalization of India's economy after 1991 have resulted in high levels of economic growth, although poverty remains a major challenge for hundreds of millions of Indians.¹⁵ Although poverty levels have fallen in the last two decades,¹⁶ economic inequality is on the rise (as elsewhere in the world).¹⁷ The uneven spread of development has resulted in significant imbalances between social groups and regions, with potentially destabilizing future consequences.

Political fragmentation The advent of coalition government as a result of political fragmentation has arguably undermined the ability of the state to respond quickly and effectively to security threats. The ability of smaller regional parties to hold national governments hostage on key security issues is a new fact of life in Indian politics. In the 1980s this was most evident in the manner in which Tamil parties used their influence to sway policy on Sri Lanka. Similarly, Hindu nationalist parties have exacerbated tensions with Bangladesh over the large-scale illegal entry of Muslim economic migrants into India. And most recently, in 2008, domestic political differences threatened to prevent India from capitalizing on the Indo-US nuclear agreement when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government was put to a crucial confidence vote in parliament that it won by only a narrow margin.

¹³ Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The nature of Indian democracy', in Veena Das, ed., *Handbook of sociology in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 451–70.

¹⁴ As discussed by E. Sridharan in 'The fragmentation of the Indian party system, 1952–1999: seven competing explanations', in Hasan, *Parties and party politics in India*, pp. 475–503.

¹⁵ Atul Kohli, 'Politics of economic growth in India, 1980–2005, part I: the 1980s', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1 April 2006, pp. 1251–9.

¹⁶ T. N. Srinivasan, 'China and India: growth and poverty, 1980–2000', Stanford Center for International Development, working paper 182, Sept. 2003.

¹⁷ Angus Deaton and Jean Dreze, 'Poverty and inequality in India: a re-examination', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7 Sept. 2002, pp. 3729–48.

Domestic insurgency Uneven development between regions and social groups, as well as identity politics, have all too often created unrest and strife; political violence is nowhere more starkly apparent than in the numerous insurgencies that have arisen on Indian soil in response to the severe neglect of certain regions and communities, and in the state's reaction to these movements. India's ethnically diverse north-east, composed of eight states, is home to numerous insurgent groups, in a region bordering on China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal.¹⁸ Yet despite pouring large (though some would still argue insufficient) sums of money into the development of the region, the central government has been unable to focus its policies in a way that might better integrate the region into the Indian Union.

As a result, tensions between ethnic groups and the central government have proliferated and endured, with state governments sometimes caught in the cross-fire and at other times turning the politics of ethnicity to their own advantage against Delhi. Demands range from greater autonomy in local decision-making to the formation of new states based on ethnic lines (with a degree of success, as evidenced by the creation of Nagaland, Manipur and other north-eastern states in the 1960s and 1970s), to outright separation from India. Many insurgents have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, creating diplomatic challenges for Delhi and the other capitals involved. In 2007 there were an estimated 30 armed insurgent groups operating in India's north-east.¹⁹ Between 1992 and 2002 insurgency and other types of armed conflict led to 12,175 deaths in the region.²⁰ The international media rarely comment on these conflicts.

More familiar to the outside world are India's persistent problems in Kashmir. The current phase of insurgency began in the late 1980s, when, in one widely held Indian view, Pakistan, having reached a dead end in its attempts to wrest the territory from India through overt military confrontation, stepped up covert support for insurgent groups to inflict 'death by a thousand cuts',²¹ channelling the *mujahedin* trained to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan towards the cause in Kashmir. A range of Pakistan-based organizations, widely thought to be supported by elements of the Pakistani armed forces and its intelligence apparatus, have fed considerable fighting capacity into the Kashmir valley, which experienced 26,226 fatalities in the peak years of the insurgency between 1988 and 2000.²²

In the aftermath of 9/11 and possibly assisted by improving relations between the US and India, Delhi was gradually able to induce Islamabad to admit that terrorists were being trained in Pakistan and to engage to curb the cross-border infiltration of terrorists into India. However, progress has been painfully slow and Indian-occupied Kashmir remains in turmoil, with rioting and deaths among

¹⁸ For a detailed account of the various secessionist movements in the north-east, see Wasbir Hussain, 'Ethno-nationalism and the politics of terror in India's northeast', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 30: 1, April 2007, pp. 93–110.

¹⁹ Hussain, 'Ethno-nationalism and the politics of terror', p. 93.

²⁰ Hussain, 'Ethno-nationalism and the politics of terror', p. 94.

²¹ This is a popular phrase in Indian media and policy-making discourse: see e.g. K. P. S. Gill, 'War of thousand cuts', *Indian Express*, 7 Jan. 2000.

²² South Asia Terrorism Portal, 'Jammu and Kashmir backgrounder', <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/backgrounder/index.html>, accessed 23 Nov. 2010.

protesters particularly pronounced during the summer of 2010.²³ India's purchase on the valley is significantly weakened by the inability of its security forces—both military and police—to maintain order without unacceptable numbers of civilian deaths. Counterinsurgency operations have led, notoriously, to extrajudicial killings, often described as 'fake encounters'.²⁴ India's management of the very real security challenges in the valley have been essentially both ineffective and corrosive to the standards of its own security forces.

Perhaps India's most insidious insurgent problem is the Naxalite movement, associated with Maoist ideology.²⁵ The original aims of the movement—to bring about 'the physical annihilation of class enemies'²⁶—have been superseded by a loose-knit set of grievances revolving primarily around land, unemployment and the socio-economic exclusion of lower-caste and indigenous tribal communities. Deaths related to its activities have risen steadily from 482 in 2002 to 721 in 2008.²⁷ Despite the recent exhortations of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Home Minister P. C. Chidambaram, neither the central government in Delhi nor the state governments affected have been unable to develop a coherent approach to the Naxal problem (which impinges on about a quarter of India's districts), oscillating between heavy-handed military tactics in reaction to specific incidents and approaches based on dialogue. Dr Singh was right in 2006 in identifying the Naxal challenge as potentially the greatest security threat to India.²⁸

Regional security challenges

Six of India's neighbours rank in the top 25 dysfunctional states in the world, as tabulated by the Failed States Index of the Fund for Peace.²⁹ India is uniquely positioned to be a driver of interstate cooperation in South Asia, which is a 'predominantly Indocentric region' because, in terms of religion or culture, or both, 'India has something in common with [each of] its immediate neighbours but the neighbouring states of India do not share similarities of such magnitude or depth among themselves.'³⁰ Yet India has been unsuccessful in generating such

²³ This was still an unfolding story at the time of writing. See e.g. 'Violence escalates in Srinagar, army called out', *Rediff News*, 7 July 2010, <http://news.rediff.com/report/2010/jul/07/violence-escalates-in-jk-army-called-out.htm>, accessed 23 Nov. 2010.

²⁴ See, for a recent example, Press Trust of India, 'Colonel, two majors among 11 chargesheeted in Kupwara "fake encounter" case', *Times of India*, 16 July 2010.

²⁵ See Ashok Handoo, 'Naxal problem needs a holistic approach', Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 22 July 2009, <http://www.pib.nic.in/release/release.asp?relid=50833>, accessed 23 Nov. 2010. See also South Asia Terrorism Portal, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/data_sheets/fatalitiesnaxal08.htm, accessed 23 Nov. 2010. The figure comprises deaths of civilians, security forces and Naxals.

²⁶ Ajai Sahni, 'Naxalism: the retreat of civil governance', *Faultlines*, <http://satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volumes/Fault5-7asahni.htm>, accessed 23 Nov. 2010, n. 1.

²⁷ South Asia Terrorism Portal, 'Fatalities in left-wing extremism', http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/data_sheets/fatalitiesnaxalmha.htm, accessed 23 Nov. 2010.

²⁸ 'Naxalism biggest challenge: PM', *Hindustan Times*, 13 April 2006.

²⁹ Vikram Sood, 'India and regional security interests', in Alyssa Ayres and C. Raja Mohan, eds, *Power realignments in Asia: China, India, and the United States* (New Delhi: Sage, 2009), p. 252.

³⁰ Rajen Harshe, 'South Asian regional cooperation: problems and prospects', in Rajen Harshe and K. M. Seethi, eds, *Engaging with the world: critical reflections on India's foreign policy* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009), p. 321.

cooperation. Despite the great strides it has made in economic growth, it remains mired in the security dilemmas of its own region. As Vikram Sood suggests, 'Globally, India is being recognized as a rising economic power but not in the region where economic development has become hostage to security issues.'³¹ Varun Sahni describes India's regional status as one of 'contested dominance'.³²

The following sections discuss two types of regional security challenges for India. The first is a set of what might otherwise be classified as domestic law-and-order problems were it not for the involvement of India's neighbours. The second relates to bilateral disputes between India and its neighbours over resources, particularly land and water. Territorial disputes (prominently, Kashmir and Siachen with Pakistan, and Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin with China) fall within this category.

Subnational ethnic movements Indian populations in border regions tend to share common ethnic bonds with populations in adjacent countries. This is true, for example, of Tamils and Sri Lanka, Muslims in Kashmir, Punjabis with their cousins in Pakistan, Indian populations bordering the Tarai region of Nepal, and even Keralites and their ties to Gulf countries. The broad territorial division of ethnic groups within India and the strength of regional ethnic identities ensure that Indian policy towards the countries in question is often attentive to the preferences of domestic actors in these regions, as with Sri Lanka, where at one time the Indian government acquiesced in the brutal armed tactics of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).³³ Similarly, there is 'widespread sympathy' in Indian border regions for the campaign for autonomy in the Tarai region of Nepal, for which 'most [Indian] politicians and bureaucrats do not hesitate to express moral support'.³⁴ And Pakistan was widely believed to have supported Sikh separatist movements within India's state of Punjab during the 1980s.

Secessionist movements and insurgencies As noted above, because of India's vast size and heterogeneous society and polity, it has been home to many (often armed) movements aiming for sovereign status separate from the union.³⁵ Some of these secessionist movements have allowed neighbouring countries interested in destabilizing India to interfere in its internal affairs.³⁶

³¹ Sood, 'India and regional security interests', p. 252.

³² Varun Sahni, 'The agent-structure problem and India's external security policy', in Navnita Chadha Behera, ed., *International relations in South Asia: search for an alternative paradigm* (New Delhi: Sage, 2008), pp. 212–13.

³³ J. N. Dixit, *Across borders: fifty years of India's foreign policy* (New Delhi: Picus Books, 1998), pp. 182–93. See also Arun Swamy, 'India in 2000: a respite from instability', *Asian Survey* 41: 1, 'A survey of Asia in 2000', Jan.–Feb. 2001, pp. 91–103.

³⁴ International Crisis Group, *Nepal's troubled Tarai region*, Asia Report 136, 9 July 2007, p. 22. The report goes on to state that 'unless the situation significantly deteriorates, Madhesi issues are unlikely to become a rallying point for Indian parties beyond the immediate border'. However, the significance of the cross-border ethnic bond is evident.

³⁵ Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, eds, *Nationalism, democracy and development* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³⁶ Dixit, *Across borders*, p. 146. For a brief discussion of Pakistan and the Khalistan movement, see K. Shankar Bajpai, 'India in 1991: new beginnings', *Asian Survey* 32: 2, 'A survey of Asia in 1991: part II', Feb. 1992, pp. 207–16.

The separatist assertion of regional identities has sharply accentuated the importance attached by Delhi to the territorial integrity of the Indian Union ever since independence.³⁷ Indeed, this theme first arose during the early months of independence, when Delhi made every effort (including the use of force) to integrate the 536 princely states of India into the Union.³⁸ It was echoed in the military action taken by India to wrest control of Goa from the Portuguese in 1961; in India's integration of Sikkim into the Union in 1975; and ultimately in the lack of official support given to the LTTE, seen first and foremost as a secessionist movement. It is also reflected in India's longstanding policy of rejecting involvement in its neighbourhood by nations outside South Asia. Concern over territorial unity thus runs deep in Indian foreign policy.

New ethnic groups The cross-border movement of large populations from neighbouring countries has resulted in the creation of new (or newly large) ethnic groups in India, thus complicating policy towards the originating countries. Two examples stand out—the migration of Tibetans escaping Chinese persecution, and the steady inflow of immigrants (legal and illegal) from Bangladesh—with implications for Delhi's relationship with both countries.

In the case of China, India has walked a tightrope between official recognition of Tibet as an integral part of China and granting asylum to the Dalai Lama and his followers on Indian territory. Tibetan migrants have integrated relatively well into Indian society. By contrast, the domestic response to Bangladeshi immigrants has been much less forgiving, possibly as a result of their purely economic motivation for migration, leading to riots in Assam against migrant Bengalis as far back as the 1960s and 1970s. This has produced a negative impact on Indo-Bangladeshi relations, with India in 1984 initiating construction of a still unfinished 4,000-kilometre concrete barrier along the Indo-Bangladeshi border.³⁹

Religious conflict Religion has a significant impact on social stratification and political mobilization in India. The religious composition of Indian society influences social and economic policy, particularly with regard to minority rights. The frequent occurrence of violence between religious groups—predominantly between Hindus and Muslims—in various parts of the country, sometimes on a startling scale, has led to instances of radicalization, for example through the Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). Religiously inspired terrorism has also been attributed to Hindu activists following serial bomb attacks in the predominantly Muslim town of Malegaon in 2006.

While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) generally proved responsible when in power (1998–2004), its connections with radical Hindu organizations hostile to Islam and Christianity have at times stoked tension, which early on benefited

³⁷ Sushil Kumar, 'Rethinking security in South Asia', in Kanti Bajpai and Siddharth Mallavarapu, eds, *International relations in India: theorising the region and nation* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2005).

³⁸ Dixit, *Across borders*, p. 26.

³⁹ Roland Buerk, 'Villagers left in limbo by border fence', BBC News, Dhaka, 28 Jan. 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/4653810.stm, accessed 23 Nov. 2010.

the party politically, as in the case of the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992 and the Gujarat riots of 2002. In the former case the BJP's connections with these organizations tended to polarize public opinion further, while in both cases cadres from these organizations were involved in events on the ground. The BJP's current lack of traction is largely attributable to an ageing leadership and ideological fatigue, as well as a failure to build on limited breakthroughs into southern India. But it is likely to persist as a potentially volatile faction in Indian politics, and one that could complicate relations with Muslim countries.

Bilateral issues: Pakistan The last 60 years have witnessed two major wars (in 1965 and 1971) between India and Pakistan, and two major acts of aggression by Pakistan (in 1948 over Kashmir and 1999 in Kargil), in addition to numerous small-scale incidents across their borders. During the Cold War, Pakistan was the ally of choice for both the United States and China in South Asia, while India inclined towards, and eventually allied itself with, the Soviet Union. Pakistan received billions of dollars' worth of military aid and equipment over the years from its major patrons, much of which was employed in conflicts with India and to sponsor insurgency in Indian-occupied Kashmir. Pakistan's alliance with China, which has endured since the 1950s, is a much greater source of worry to India than Pakistan's erratic friendship of convenience with the US, particularly in respect of China's transfer of nuclear weapons technology and missile systems to Pakistan.

In recent years both China and the US have established a more balanced approach to the Indo-Pakistani rivalry, notably at the time of the Kargil war of 1999. Pakistan's nuclear tests of 1998, following those of India in the same year and establishing at least notional nuclear parity, promoted strategic stability of sorts in the volatile relationship. But peace initiatives involving Indian prime ministers Vajpayee (1998–2004) and Singh (since 2004) and their Pakistani counterparts have failed to yield meaningful results. The deadly terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 created fresh challenges in Indo-Pakistani relations. However, international pressure eventually forced Islamabad to acknowledge Pakistani connections with the perpetrators, and after a long freeze bilateral high-level contacts resumed, albeit amid much mutual distrust, in 2009.

Prime Minister Singh has been roundly criticized by many at home for his handling of the Mumbai attacks and his post-Mumbai overtures towards Pakistan.⁴⁰ However, others have praised the resumption of dialogue with Pakistan. Siddharth Varadarajan suggested: 'Over time, India has realised the best way to deal with the threat of terror is by strengthening its internal capabilities while utilising engagement as a lever for influencing Pakistan's behaviour over the long run.'⁴¹ C. Raja Mohan, while supporting Dr Singh's overtures, nevertheless worries about Pakistan as a reliable interlocutor: 'Put simply, is Pakistan a country or a grievance? States negotiate with others on the basis of an enlightened

⁴⁰ See Jim Yardley, 'Balancing act for India as talks with Pakistan resume', *International Herald Tribune*, 25 Feb. 2010.

⁴¹ Siddharth Varadarajan, 'Time to end the impasse with Pakistan', *The Hindu*, 26 April 2010.

self-interest and are open to give and take. But revanchists consumed by real and imagined grievances find it hard to split the difference in a negotiation.’⁴²

Further significant terrorist attacks credibly linked to Pakistan would probably force targeted retaliation, and could produce wider escalation if not carefully managed, including by Washington and Beijing.

Bilateral issues: China Increasingly, China is more worrying than Pakistan for India, whatever the provocations launched against India from within the latter’s territory. While India has experienced significant economic success over the past 20 years, China initiated its economic reforms well before India did, and has consistently outstripped India’s impressive growth by 2–3 percentage points every year since then. The result is that China’s economy has expanded to nearly three times the size of India’s, enabling Beijing to invest significantly in its military sector.⁴³ Thus, while China and India are often grouped together as ‘emerging’ countries, China is well on the way to establishing itself as the principal global competitor of the US, while India, for all its recent economic achievements, lags well behind.

India’s relationship with China has been a tense one since the mid-1950s, reaching its nadir with their border war of 1962, in which India suffered a humiliating defeat. The Sino-Indian border disputes continue to be a thorn in the side of bilateral relations. And mutual needling by the two capitals abounds (although it mostly does not involve Pakistan).

The matter of Tibet looms over the bilateral relationship. After a tense decade in Lhasa following China’s takeover in 1950, India gave asylum to the fleeing Dalai Lama in 1959, since when the Tibetan refugee population in India has grown steadily. Tibet is a hot-button issue for China, a nation at least as worried about territorial integrity as India. Beijing watches the Dalai Lama’s activities in India keenly—and its anxieties about a seemingly powerless Dalai Lama living there may not be as irrational as they seem, in the light of history. In 1910 the 13th Dalai Lama, the immediate predecessor of the current incumbent, fled a Chinese Qing dynasty invasion of Tibet, establishing residence in India. Three years later, he reclaimed his throne and authority in Tibet triumphantly, the distant Qing regime having collapsed.

India and China, while cooperating in a variety of multilateral processes ranging from trade negotiations to discussions on climate change, are increasingly competitors in a global race for wealth, energy and influence as emerging (or, in China’s case, now emerged) powers. Whether in commodity-rich Africa or the oil and gas fields of Central Asia, India and China are increasingly rubbing up against each other. To complicate matters, both nations espouse parallel nationalistic mythologies of civilizational greatness that breed a sense of entitlement to Great Power status and a tendency to be irritated by the pretensions of others.

⁴² C. Raja Mohan, ‘Balancing act in Thimphu’, *Indian Express*, 28 April 2010.

⁴³ See World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2010*, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators/wdi-2010>, accessed 23 Nov. 2010. According to 2008 figures, China’s GDP was \$4.327 trillion compared to India’s \$1.159 trillion. China’s GDP per capita at \$3,267 was also roughly three times that of India’s at \$1,017.

Indian analysts fear a Chinese strategy of encirclement in Asia. This refers to China's numerous investments in building up port facilities in the Indian Ocean, seen by some strategists as a 'string of pearls' strategy to constrain India's freedom of manoeuvre.⁴⁴ China's booming exports and hunger for international markets have also led it to develop substantial trading relationships with India's neighbours. China's penetration of India's neighbourhood presents a finely calibrated challenge to Indian foreign policy, seen by some as deriving from the following calculus: 'Restricting India to the Asian subcontinent remains Chinese policy. The tactics are simple: keep borders with India tranquil but do not solve the [border] dispute, trade with India but arm Pakistan and wean away Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.'⁴⁵

Bilateral issues: Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal India's relationships with other nations in its region are far from settled. India's hegemonic status—or at least its perceived aspiration to this status—creates threat perceptions among its smaller neighbours. They see India's varying military (and other) interventions with and in neighbouring countries in terms of 'the outward projection and demonstration of military might'.⁴⁶

In the case of the Sri Lankan conflict, India's justifications for military intervention during the 1980s were based on the security imperatives associated with the influx of Tamil refugees, the purported risk to commerce, and the danger of external Great Powers involving themselves in the conflict; but India's peace-keeping action proved counterproductive, alienating the Tamil community, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. Similarly, India's action in 1971 in East Pakistan to relieve West Pakistan's military oppression, while justified in humanitarian terms and on the basis of massive refugee flows to India, was widely viewed internationally and in the region as primarily an attempt to dismember an arch-rival. Moreover, contrary to India's expectations, the assistance it rendered to Bangladesh did not win it an ally but rather produced a neighbour that has often proved prickly and resentful.

While some in India saw the hand of Maoists in Nepal behind the early success of India's own Naxalite movement, any such claim today is far-fetched. However high-handed India's past approach to Nepal has been, and however hostile Maoists in Nepal may have been towards India, the Naxalite movement in India is home-grown and driven by local factors.⁴⁷

Bilateral issues: Afghanistan Aside from smaller nations such as Bhutan and the Maldives, perhaps the one country in the region where India's involvement has not played against it to date is Afghanistan. Indians tend to see Delhi's Afghan policy as

⁴⁴ For more on this bilateral relationship, see David M. Malone and Rohan Mukherjee, 'India and China: conflict and cooperation', *Survival* 52: 1, Feb.–March 2010, pp. 137–58.

⁴⁵ Sood, 'India and regional security interests', p. 261.

⁴⁶ Harshe, 'South Asian regional cooperation', pp. 321–2.

⁴⁷ See Sebastian von Einsiedel, David M. Malone and Suman Pradhan, eds, *From people's war to fragile peace in Nepal* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2011).

altruistic.⁴⁸ But this assessment glosses over a simple calculus—the need to prevent Kabul from tilting excessively towards Pakistan and allowing itself to be subsumed by Islamabad into its security space. Delhi worries that when the US-led NATO forces begin to pull out, as the Netherlands and Canada have pledged to do in 2010 and 2011 respectively, Kabul could submit to the combined influence of Pakistan (supported by China) and the Taliban, leaving India as the loser in a geostrategic tug-of-war. As of mid-2010 Delhi's worries are not ill-founded: desperate for an exit strategy of its own, Washington appears to be encouraging a negotiated solution to the conflict that could only strengthen Pakistan's hand locally. India is rumoured to have opened up channels of its own with the Taliban, despite maintaining that there is no distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban.⁴⁹ A western withdrawal from Afghanistan would leave numerous Indian assets there highly vulnerable. Even under present circumstances, with NATO troops thick on the ground, the Indian embassy in Kabul was attacked twice in 15 months in 2008–2009.⁵⁰ Delhi's remaining option if NATO and President Karzai compromise with the Taliban, that of seeking (perhaps with Moscow, conceivably also with Tehran) to revive the Afghani Northern Alliance, would doubtless prove a disappointing and expensive consolation prize.

Global security challenges

International terrorism, nuclear proliferation and India's relations with the United States, while playing an important role in India's regional perspectives and policy, also play out at the global level.

International terrorism India has long been a victim of what it calls 'cross-border terrorism' on its territory committed by groups India alleges to be based in and sponsored by the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment. Although Al-Qaeda has not been directly involved in attacks in India, the equally Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba has, and India is a potential target for further attacks following the incidents in Mumbai.⁵¹ India also worries about links between domestic terrorist groups such as SIMI and like-minded elements in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan.

India's domestic response to terrorism has been less than satisfactory. Excluding left-wing extremist groups, terrorist activity in India between 1994 and 2005 claimed the lives of over 18,000 civilians, 6,700 security personnel and almost 23,000 terrorists.⁵² The 2008 Mumbai attacks were only the most visible in a long line of incidents that reveal the inability of the Indian state to control its borders, collect and process relevant intelligence and develop security protocols to pre-empt

⁴⁸ 'The good Afghan', *Indian Express*, 26 April 2010.

⁴⁹ Shishir Gupta, 'India shifts Afghan policy, ready to talk to Taliban', *Indian Express*, 29 March 2010.

⁵⁰ M. Karim Faiez and Mark Magnier, 'Taliban claims responsibility for Kabul embassy attack', *Los Angeles Times*, 9 Oct. 2009.

⁵¹ 'Al-Qaeda planning to target India: Gates', *Indian Express*, 20 Jan 2010.

⁵² South Asia Terrorism Portal, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/database/indiafatalities.htm>, accessed 23 Nov. 2010.

terrorist attacks, and in many cases to react convincingly to terrorist attacks when they occur. Indeed, Indians were furious over the inept security response to the 2008 events in Mumbai, forcing the resignation of the Home Minister and over time a number of shifts in Delhi's machinery of government. Although India has initiated cooperation with other countries on counterterrorism strategies and intelligence-sharing, progress has been limited, as other powers display little overt confidence in Delhi's security and intelligence apparatus, a perception Delhi could work harder at addressing.⁵³ Alas, the Mumbai attack is unlikely to be the last.

India–US relations For most of the period between India's independence and the end of the Cold War, with the brief exception of the 1962 Sino-Indian war, India and the US remained at loggerheads over matters of both principle and national interest. Like China, but less reliably, the US used Pakistan as a military ally in the Cold War, especially during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Americans essentially viewed their relationships with India and Pakistan as a zero-sum game between the two South Asian nations⁵⁴—improved relations with one were perceived to carry unacceptable costs for the US in its relations with the other. Unfortunately for India, Pakistan was generally favoured by the US for instrumental reasons.

The 1990s provided a period of gradual *rapprochement* between the US and India, achieved through increased trade and private sector ties. India's nuclear tests of 1998, while sharply criticized and met with sanctions by the US, were not allowed to obstruct the Clinton administration's shift to viewing India as a growing market for US companies and a potentially helpful player in South Asia in the wake of Pakistan's adventurism at Kargil in 1999, which induced a regional rethink in Washington. The upward trend in India–US relations continued through the fallout of 11 September 2001, even though Pakistan became central to American strategies on Afghanistan. Although Pakistan has received more than \$15 billion in economic and military aid from the US since then,⁵⁵ this has not significantly hampered India–US relations. Despite some initial mis-steps by the Obama administration on the Kashmir issue, the relationship between India and the US has progressed on a relatively even keel, though relations are clearly not as warm as they were under George W. Bush, who sought to make radically improved US–India relations one of his chief foreign policy legacies.

One of the key US motivations in courting India, especially through the game-changing deal on nuclear cooperation consummated in 2008, was doubtless to bolster Delhi as a reliable democratic counterweight to authoritarian China's growing influence in Asia and indeed the world. The US has supported India's inclusion in restricted elite decision-making groups in various international forums on multilateral trade, climate change and management of the international economy following the global financial crisis of 2008. India's much

⁵³ Stanley A. Weiss, 'The United States, India and the politics of benign neglect', UPI, 28 April 2010.

⁵⁴ See Ashley J. Tellis, 'India as a new global power: an action agenda for the United States', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, 2005, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Weiss, 'The United States, India and the politics of benign neglect'.

improved relationship with Washington has not gone unnoticed by Beijing, and Sino-Indian relations have improved somewhat in the new millennium. However, India was alarmed by Washington's vulnerability to Chinese financial surpluses (and its own deficits) during the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, which, for a time, led to a more conciliatory US approach to Beijing, in combination with unsuccessful prodding aimed at inducing flexibility in the latter's exchange rate policies. This has prompted some Indians to question the logic of picking a side in the unpredictable Sino-US relationship: 'Our strategic gurus were whistling in the dark when they dreamt up India's future as a "balancer" in the Asian power dynamic. The ... government's willingness to be drawn into a "quadrilateral alliance" against China, it now seems, was an embarrassing goof-up, unprecedented in its naivety.'⁵⁶ Another Indian writer has observed less caustically that 'the Bush–Rice doctrine of containing China is being replaced by the Obama–Clinton doctrine of co-opting China to deal with the economic crisis'.⁵⁷

The best strategy for India would appear to be an interests-based balancing act between the US and China. India has much to offer both, actively and passively, even if the US and China, in the medium term, jointly take on the task of managing the international system.

Nuclear proliferation While the Bush administration justified the US–India nuclear deal as a way to draw a troublesome and self-interested conscientious objector into the non-proliferation regime through the back door by imposing various safeguards and monitoring mechanisms on its civilian facilities, Indian leaders viewed it as a vindication of India's own record on non-proliferation and of its self-imposed moratorium on nuclear testing after May 1998.

Although India has reason to celebrate over the US-backed global recognition of its status as a responsible nuclear weapons power, it also has reason to worry about nuclear proliferation, particularly in relation to China and Pakistan. China is a known proliferator of nuclear weapons technology to Pakistan,⁵⁸ and Pakistan a known proliferator to North Korea, Iran and Libya. Following the US–India nuclear deal, China made known a similar deal between itself and Pakistan for the transfer of civilian nuclear technology, about which India, however concerned, could hardly complain. Indeed, this development may encourage some in Pakistan to pursue a 'sub-conventional war that Delhi is yet to find effective ways to cope with'.⁵⁹ In all-out war, damaging to both, India, given its weight and assets, would certainly prevail. But in a controlled conflict Pakistan may calculate that it can fight India to a draw or rely on its international friends to rescue it should the tide turn against it decisively.

⁵⁶ M. K. Bhadrakumar, 'Challenges for Indian foreign policy', *The Hindu*, 6 March 2009.

⁵⁷ Sanjaya Baru, 'India in a changing world', *HT Mint*, 30 March 2009.

⁵⁸ See Shirley A. Kan, 'China and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and missiles: policy issues', CRS Report for Congress RL31555, 13 Dec. 2007.

⁵⁹ C. Raja Mohan, 'The battle for Pakistan', *Indian Express*, 21 June 2010.

Indian policy in the context of security challenges

Given the evolution of its domestic politics and foreign policy over the past 60-odd years, what conclusions can be drawn about India's ability to manage effectively key security challenges, domestic and international?

Sumit Ganguly notes the absence of an overall strategic framework for Indian foreign and defence policy and relates this lack to 'institutional mechanisms ... and planning capabilities' that he sees as deficient.⁶⁰ These are relevant, but so is the absence of agreement on a wider vision for India's role in the world at a time when other challenges loom.⁶¹ The perspectives of India's influential defence establishment often clash with those of others in India concerned with wider international relations, just as Indian politicians find the bureaucracy at times obdurate in resisting policy direction or in ignoring changing realities.⁶² The latter problem was acute in the early 1990s, when the Indian foreign policy bureaucracy found it hard to shed its ideological baggage and traditional diplomatic attachments, particularly its ties with Moscow.⁶³ Also, open turf battles are legion in Delhi (while they are mostly concealed in Beijing).⁶⁴ And India's fractious debates, including on China, can play against it internationally. The run-up to the visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to India in November 2006 was marked by near-hysterical attacks in the media against China's trustworthiness as a neighbour, eventually spilling over into an unattractive debate in parliament. Not surprisingly, the visit proved only a moderate success.

The preoccupation of leaders with urgent, sometimes intractable, domestic factors (as well as limits on bureaucratic capacity and key deficits in domestic security and intelligence capabilities) largely account for a sense among Indian and some other authors that the country lacks effective coordination on international relations and related domestic issues, producing a foreign policy some view as reactive, and prone to 'ad hocism' and 'drift'.⁶⁵

The rise of economic diplomacy

In the absence of a unifying strategic vision, and with India's economic performance improving by leaps and bounds each year, economic diplomacy provides

⁶⁰ Sumit Ganguly, 'Indian defense policy', in *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 550.

⁶¹ See C. Raja Mohan, 'Peaceful periphery: India's new regional quest', Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania, 24 May 2007; also Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'Not so credible India', *Indian Express*, 24 April 2008, and Harsh V. Pant, 'Four years of UPA: foreign policy adrift', *Rediff News* (May 12, 2008), <http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/may/12guest.htm>, accessed 23 Nov. 2010.

⁶² K. P. Saksena, 'India's foreign policy: the decisionmaking process', *International Studies* 33: 4, Aug. 1996, pp. 391-405.

⁶³ Sumit Ganguly, 'Indian foreign policy grows up', *World Policy Journal*, Vol. XX, No. 4, Winter 2003-2004, pp. 41-7.

⁶⁴ An example of this was the public turf battle for policy-making authority between the prime minister's principal secretary (Brajesh Mishra) and the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission (Jaswant Singh) that complicated India's diplomatic efforts after the nuclear tests of 1998. See George Iype, 'War in MEA cripples India's battle for world support', *Rediff News*, 14 July 1998, <http://www.rediff.com/news/1998/jul/14bomb4.htm>, accessed 23 Nov. 2010.

⁶⁵ Pant, 'Four years of UPA'.

the path of least resistance for coalition governments struggling to pull their members together on foreign policy decisions. This was evident from the US–India nuclear deal—a hot-button political issue in India—that was sold far less as a strategic alignment with the US than as part of a quest for energy security that would benefit the Indian economy and the masses.

From a foreign policy perspective, economic prosperity (the ‘tide that lifts all boats’)⁶⁶ is now seen as the key to India’s attainment of Great Power status by those who seek it, and the imperative of attaining it is the driving argument behind India’s current world-view. No longer willing to lead the poor nations of the Third World in a struggle against imperialism, and wishing to outgrow its own neighbourhood, India is pressing its suit on the world stage, not least within the World Trade Organization, in the company of such other rising, essentially ‘emerged’ powers as Brazil and South Africa, and occasionally China.

Trade and bilateral economic cooperation have become the cornerstones of India’s relations with the world, even with China, today India’s largest trading partner. India is willing to do business with all. Both moralizing and power politics on the international stage are now viewed as potentially bad for business, whereas economic linkages are seen as promoting stability. Thus India is currently engaged in promoting economic development in Africa, securing oilfields in Central Asia, promoting trade and nuclear cooperation with the US, receiving remittances from its 3.5 million workers in the Gulf and acting as (at times) Israel’s biggest arms market.⁶⁷ As a result, ‘the long-sustained image of India as a leader of the oppressed and marginalized nations has disappeared on account of its newfound role in the emerging global order’—a similar metamorphosis to that undergone by China some years earlier.⁶⁸

Economic diplomacy provides a way for India to harness global opportunities for the benefit of domestic constituents in the hope of relieving poverty (an important electoral issue) and alleviating discontent. And its economic performance is simultaneously a very successful international calling card for a nation wishing to stake a claim as a meaningful power.

Conclusion

India’s security challenges are mostly structural in nature. Pakistan’s grievance, the China threat, the US partnership, and other challenges will all remain beyond India’s exclusive control. Those challenges that are receptive to action from Delhi, such as domestic insurgency deriving from economic exclusion, are considered by Indian policy-makers to be best addressed through improved allocation of the gains from economic growth. Prime Minister Singh’s repeated words of concern

⁶⁶ P. C. Chidambaram, ‘India empowered to me is’, in *A view from the outside: why good economics works for everyone* (London: Penguin, 2007).

⁶⁷ Ninan Koshy, *Under the empire: India’s new foreign policy* (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2006), p. 155.

⁶⁸ K. M. Seethi and P. Vijayan, ‘Political economy of India’s Third World policy’, in Harsh and Seethi, *Engaging with the world*, p. 47.

about the Naxalite insurgency seem to have made only a limited impression on public opinion, while the problematic performance of India's internal security forces, particularly the undertrained and poorly led Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), is accepted with a degree of resignation, notwithstanding the appointment after the 2008 attacks on Mumbai of an energetic home minister, P. Chidambaram.

Expanding economic relations can also provide a channel of cooperation with potential competitors or rivals, as for example in India's securing oilfields in Central Asia in collaboration with China.⁶⁹ Some Indians believe that, by pursuing economic relationships with major powers, the country can progressively build up its own institutional capacity to develop and execute a grander strategy internationally while simultaneously attending better to its key internal security challenges. However, economic growth alone will not solve all of India's problems, and will not alone secure much greater power status, which will remain a priority at least for India's security establishment, unhappy with the predominance of economic themes in the discourse of the Delhi government. Whether India will be viewed ten years from now as a global, rather than merely a regional, power remains open to question. Its efforts to outgrow its region economically and in other ways cannot fully convince until it responds more successfully to its daunting domestic security challenges; and on this front progress has been painfully slow.

⁶⁹ Recently, however, India has taken a competitive stance in its global approach to energy security with the establishment of a sovereign fund for the acquisition of energy assets abroad. See Sujay Mehdudia, 'India plans "sovereign fund" to seek energy assets abroad', *The Hindu*, 1 April 2010.