

## The Pragmatic Challenge to Indian Foreign Policy

A subversive pragmatic vision is increasingly challenging some of the key foundations of India's traditional nationalist and left-of-center foreign policy, diluting the consensus that shaped the policy, and raising new possibilities especially for India's relations with the United States and global nuclear arms control. This debate between two centrist foreign policy perspectives is not yet settled. The two are described here as "traditional nationalist" and "pragmatist," with the former representing the established and dominant perspective, and the latter as the emerging challenger.<sup>1</sup> Actual Indian policy mostly splits the difference, mouthing traditional nationalist (hereafter referred to as simply nationalist) slogans while following pragmatist prescriptions. One major result has been the widening of political space for closer relations with the United States, even without a stable consensus.

These taxonomies are ideal types: it is very unlikely that those characterized as either nationalist or pragmatist would agree with or accept every tenet of these categories. The categorizations are designed to provide an outline of the competing lines of argumentation about Indian foreign policy, rather than identify nationalists or pragmatists per se. It also is important to note that it is difficult right now in India to associate these perspectives with particular political parties, think tanks, or ministries. Thus, these perspectives are individualistic and do not correspond to particular organizations. They do, however, represent the views of important public intellectuals, policy analysts, academics, journalists, diplomats, and government officials.

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**The debate between two centrist foreign policy perspectives is not yet settled.**

## **The Nationalist Perspective**

The nationalist perspective traces its roots to India's traditional Cold War foreign policy. Shaped by India's anti-colonial independence movement, it emphasizes national sovereignty as well as autonomy, and sought common cause with other third-world countries and non-alignment with either side in the Cold War, instincts that still guide the nationalists.

### **Independence of Foreign Policy**

India's capacity for autonomous action in foreign policy is of fundamental importance to nationalists. This has taken on different policy manifestations at different times, including as "non-alignment" during the Cold War and more recently as "strategic autonomy." As Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna noted in a September 2009 speech, "Our main objective is ensuring a conducive international environment for consolidating our strategic autonomy."<sup>2</sup> Nationalists tend to see New Delhi as being under constant pressure to submit India's interests to those of other major powers. This usually means from the United States, though at different times it has also meant from the West in general or China. Nationalists see foreign policy as an arena of conflict, with major powers constantly seeking to subvert India's pursuit of its national interest to force New Delhi to follow policies that are in the interests of other powers.

For example, some commentators charged that India's passivity toward Pakistan over the last decade, despite evidence of Pakistani complicity in terrorism directed at India, was made at the behest of the United States because of Pakistan's importance to U.S. interests—in other words, that Indian policy was being dictated by Washington.<sup>3</sup> This criticism is often invoked by nationalists on issues as varied as India's position at the Cancun climate-change summit in December 2010, where India was seen as bending to U.S. pressure to accept legally-binding emission cuts,<sup>4</sup> or its February 2006 vote to refer Iran to the UN Security Council.<sup>5</sup> This was also one of the key objections that nationalists had to the U.S.–India civil nuclear deal. As one analyst noted, "We are forgetting that we are being sucked into a situation that will hobble the independence of our foreign policy."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to note that there were some differences within the nationalist camp on the nuclear deal, and some who could be characterized as nationalist did support the deal.<sup>7</sup>

The fear of losing independence in foreign policy is the primary reason why nationalists oppose any alliance—alliances are seen as a way of subverting Indian

interests to those of others. It was this deeply-held value that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was referring to in September 2010 when he said that “India is too large a country to be boxed into any alliance.”<sup>8</sup> The idea that alliances (indeed, even close relationships) are constraining rather than a way of security burden-sharing explains the Delhi elite’s enduring suspicion of great powers, especially the United States. This does not mean that India has no interests in common with other powers, but such common interests are likely to be on particular issues rather than in general. Thus, nationalists prefer foreign policy cooperation on a case-by-case basis to long-term alliance relationships which could tie India down.

### **Opposition to Power Politics**

Nationalist opposition to balance of power politics has its roots in the tradition of Jawaharlal Nehru, the country’s first prime minister. Even though Nehru’s ideological reasoning may have withered away, an analyst recently noted that “the Nehruvian instinct of staying away from balance of power considerations has not. . . . it is fair to say that balance of power is not the default common sense of Indian strategic thinking.”<sup>9</sup> Jasjit Singh, a leading Indian strategist, echoed that thought, saying, “Indian strategic culture does not accept conflict as inevitable.”<sup>10</sup> Writing about India’s policy toward China, Singh continued that India’s central goal in relation to other powers is “to address potential adversarial relations through political and diplomatic efforts to improve relations and rely on cooperative engagement as the primary instrument of strategy. . . [N]on-alignment itself was pursued as a strategy to diffuse the strategic challenge posed by China.”<sup>11</sup> This opposition to power politics grows out of the strongly held belief that “India can and must play its role as conscience-keeper of the world.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, there is frequent invocation of alternative paradigms such as “comprehensive security” that are designed to be “cooperative, multilayered and multilateralised.”<sup>13</sup>

The nationalist opposition to power politics also makes for continuing controversy and considerable discomfort about episodes in which India has reached out to other countries to counter a threat. Nehru’s desperate plea to President John F. Kennedy for U.S. military assistance to deal with the Chinese invasion in the fall of 1962 is particularly noteworthy because the opposition to power politics owes so much to Nehru himself.<sup>14</sup>

The streak of moralism which runs through this opposition to power politics has another manifestation: a strong and abiding commitment to global nuclear disarmament. India’s commitment to nuclear disarmament is usually treated with some skepticism outside the country, and indeed even by some within the country. But even if there is posturing in India’s diplomatic positions, there can

be little doubt about the sincerity of the sentiment regarding nuclear disarmament among sections of the Indian strategic elite.<sup>15</sup>

### India's Innate Importance

India's economic growth, information technology prowess, and rising power have reshaped global perceptions of India and India's perception of itself. A decade after India's nuclear tests, India's global relations have dramatically improved and New Delhi is increasingly wooed by major powers. Indian commentators have not been slow to notice that leaders from all of the permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) visited India in 2010.<sup>16</sup> For nationalists, this was a recognition of India's importance which called for a "noiseless celebration."<sup>17</sup>

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The possibility exists, however, that at least some of India's strategic elite are inflating India's capabilities and attractiveness. Yashwant Sinha, a senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader and former Minister for External Affairs, expressed this overconfidence well when he argued, in the context of the recent visit by President Obama to India, that "the U.S. needs India more" than India needs the United States.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the United States was forced to lift the sanctions it imposed on India

after the 1998 Indian nuclear tests because "these sanctions were causing more damage to the U.S. than India." This belief that India was so important that other powers would not stand by idly if India was invaded—possibly even leading to a world war—is presumably one of the reasons why Nehru thought that China would not attack India militarily in 1962.<sup>19</sup> The sense of India's intrinsic importance is also reflected in India's push for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.<sup>20</sup> Though all shades of foreign policy opinion in India broadly support a permanent seat for India, nationalists tend to emphasize such demands more.

### Equity and Democratic Global Governance

A key determinant of nationalist positions on specific foreign policy issues is their claim that India must stand for democratic global governance. Nationalists support the UN as the key global multilateral forum "which embodies the collective will of its member states and the rule of law."<sup>21</sup> What this means in the abstract is not often clear, but it is usually invoked in reference to the actions of other global powers rather than to India's own behavior. For example, though nationalists strongly support multilateralism, this rarely extends to issues that might impact Indian interests and sovereignty such as Kashmir or arms control.

Nationalists generally tend to equate democratization of world politics with multipolarity. Thus, nationalists propose working together with other powers in groups such as the IBSA Dialogue Forum (India–Brazil–South Africa) toward a multipolar world order.<sup>22</sup>

Equity in international interactions is another fundamental concern of nationalists, leading many times to legalist rather than political arguments on international issues. This should not be surprising since the Indian government has often been criticized for just such a predilection, and many of those who would hold nationalist views are former Indian diplomats. This was the basis of much of the opposition to the U.S.–India nuclear deal among some nationalists, who joined with other critics from both the left and the right of the political spectrum in parsing every statement and document for signs of U.S. perfidy. For example, they pointed out that the United States had unilaterally altered or reinterpreted a previous nuclear cooperation agreement for the supply of nuclear reactors to the Tarapur nuclear plant in the 1970s. This emphasis on equity can also be seen in the focus on the rights of states, especially developing ones, rather than obligations.<sup>23</sup> Such legalism tends to make nationalists inflexible and dismissive of arguments based on political changes.

### **Rising Pragmatism**

The end of the Cold War led to new challenges and new debates about India's foreign policy. Some Indian strategists, referred to here as the pragmatists, argued that India's traditional foreign policy was no longer relevant to the post-Cold War world, and pushed for the unabashed consideration of the Indian national interest rather than global justice or ethics.

**P**ragmatists emphasize Indian national interests rather than global justice or ethics.

### **The Primacy of National Interest**

One of the key arguments made by the new pragmatists is that Indian foreign policy has for far too long been driven by ideological positions which have not promoted India's national interest. Therefore, they argue that national interest rather than global concerns or ideology should guide Indian policy. Pragmatists have, for example, wondered why India is so committed to the UN. T.P. Srinivasan, a former Indian diplomat, noted that "India's commitment to multilateralism and the U.N. is firm and absolute. .. And yet, India has very little to show in reciprocal advantages, which India has gained over the years from the U.N."<sup>24</sup> Pragmatists tend to be skeptical of the UN in general, though they are

not averse to the idea of India in the UN Security Council. They tend to be much more realistic about the prospects of any such entry in the future, however, and dismissive of the urgency with which such demands are made in the Indian debate, characterizing these as “immature yearnings.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Morality and Compromise**

Pragmatists tend to be impatient with moral claims in foreign policy.<sup>26</sup> As Shashi Tharoor, who would become India’s junior foreign minister, put it once, traditionally India “seemed to take greater satisfaction in being right than being diplomatic.”<sup>27</sup> More recently—and controversially—he criticized Nehruvian foreign policy for being a “moralistic running commentary.”<sup>28</sup> But direct criticism is not the only tack that pragmatists have used to argue against the moralism in Indian foreign policy. Others have argued that Indian foreign policy was actually not particularly moralistic, which also is an argument to suggest that there is little reason for Indian foreign policy today to try to live up to such traditions.<sup>29</sup> Pragmatists tend to blame misplaced moralism for India’s previous strategic missteps, such as not conducting a nuclear test in the 1960s so that India could join the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a nuclear-weapon state.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, nationalists dismiss these new claims, suggesting that those who proclaim themselves as realists have “little awareness of what *realpolitik* means.”<sup>31</sup>

Pragmatists argue that India should be flexible in the pursuit of its national interests, especially on ideological issues. They believe that Indian policy is often geared toward consistency with past positions without recognizing India’s changed circumstances, especially in the aftermath of the 1998 nuclear tests. This is particularly visible in India’s nuclear policies. Pragmatists find the deeply held Indian opposition to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and many other nuclear arms control policies outdated and suggest that India take a fresh look at such issues.<sup>32</sup>

But as strategist C. Raja Mohan suggested, Indian foreign policy debates are so focused on semantics that “they have little time for the ‘grammar’ of global power politics.”<sup>33</sup> He argues that this focus on semantics was understandable when India was weak, when “rhetoric compensated for power,” but unnecessary for an India that has become far more consequential in global affairs. Pragmatists think that New Delhi should carefully weigh foreign policy choices, assessing the overall benefit rather than costs alone.

### **Alliances**

Pragmatists are much less doctrinaire about alliances than nationalists are. While nationalists make non-alignment the basis for Indian foreign policy, pragmatists are not as concerned about that foreign policy heritage. Although they are critics

of the excessive focus on non-alignment, pragmatists do not necessarily suggest that India needs to align with other powers. For example, while pragmatists tend to be strong supporters of closer U.S.–India relations, they do not see the relationship as an alliance. A hostile China may bring the United States and India together in the near term, but “it is far from certain on which side of the U.S.–China divide India’s long-term interests lie.”<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, pragmatists suggest much closer U.S.–India cooperation not only on political and military issues, but also on issues of the global commons.<sup>35</sup> But pragmatists also suggest closer military ties with powers other than the United States, such as Russia, as a way of hedging against any potential threat from China.<sup>36</sup> In essence, though they have not suggested that India should ally with other powers, this appears to be more because they do not yet see the necessity for such alliances rather than because of any ideological opposition.

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### **International Treaties**

Pragmatists do not share the suspicion which nationalists have of many international treaties or agreements. For pragmatists, while there might have been good reasons for India not to accede to particular international agreements in the past, India’s changed global circumstances should also lead to changes in its approaches to international treaties. This is particularly true for various arms control agreements and initiatives. Pragmatists have not only supported signing the CTBT, but also initiatives such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).<sup>37</sup> Similarly, pragmatists suggest that India should prepare the groundwork for the Fissile Material Control Treaty (FMCT) rather than simply opposing the treaty.<sup>38</sup> Since the key objection to the treaty is not having sufficient fissile materials, India should decide how much fissile material it needs and how to acquire it prior to an FMCT coming into force.

## **Opposing Perspectives, Disputed Policies, and Implications**

These opposing perspectives have led to far greater disagreements over India’s foreign policy than at any time in the past. Below are four specific policy disputes, all of which have particular policy relevance for the United States.

### **U.S. Relations**

India’s policy toward the United States has become increasingly contested. Pragmatists want closer ties—they see the United States as being useful to India

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right now—while nationalists remain suspicious that the United States seeks to contain India. For the nationalists, “there is a fundamental contradiction between U.S. and Indian long-term foreign policy objectives” because while “the U.S. wants the current so-called unipolar world order to continue, India believes that the world should be multipolar, with India itself as one of the poles.”<sup>39</sup>

Others suggest that the key problem is the U.S. dependence on Pakistan. As a former Indian Foreign Secretary asked, “If the U.S. has a long-term strategic partnership with a Pakistan that remains unremittingly hostile to India, how does it reconcile that reality with its strategic partnership with India?”<sup>40</sup> Pragmatists, on the other hand, are willing to push for closer relations with the United States, even if that increases the possibility that it could lead to greater difficulties with other powers such as China.<sup>41</sup> They suggest that it is in India’s interest to build up ties with the United States, given the close relations that China has had with Pakistan for decades and the fact that India is an attractive partner for the United States, both because of U.S. worries about a rising China and the clout of India’s burgeoning market.<sup>42</sup>

The debate over the U.S.–India civil nuclear deal is an illustration of the growing clout of the pragmatists. The Indian decision to go ahead with the deal finally owed more to Prime Minister Singh’s determination to push it through than to pragmatist success in the public debate over the issue. Nevertheless, the debate over the nuclear deal demonstrated for the first time that the pragmatists could mount a credible challenge to the traditionalist dominance over a key area of foreign policy. There is little indication that the dispute over the appropriate type of relations which India needs to have with the United States will be resolved in the near future.

**Arms Control**

India’s arms control policy is a second area of conflict between these two perspectives. Nationalists continue to be suspicious of many arms control agreements, holding out for nuclear disarmament as the right way forward. To the extent that they are willing to consider arms control measures, they require that such treaties directly contribute to nuclear disarmament rather than simply be stand-alone measures.<sup>43</sup> Nationalists tend to be particularly opposed to treaties such as the CTBT and the FMCT, which are seen as non-proliferation measures rather than steps toward nuclear disarmament.



On CTBT, for example, nationalists would suggest that India should not sign the treaty unless all others do and add conditions such as the treaty being non-discriminatory with a clearly-established link to nuclear disarmament. In essence, these conditions would suggest that India will not sign the CTBT in the foreseeable future.<sup>44</sup> But pragmatists want India to be more open to considering a different approach. For example, arguing that India took the lead on CTBT in the 1950s, pragmatists have argued that India should rejoin discussions about nuclear non-proliferation rather than dismiss them.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, pragmatists suggest that India should be more open to working with the nuclear non-proliferation regime, even if the NPT itself is considered unacceptable.

### **Iran**

India's position on Iran, specifically on Iran's dispute with the United States and the international community on the nuclear issue, has become another hotly contested foreign policy issue. The most serious conflict over Iran is between the pragmatists and leftist opinion-makers, who see the Iran nuclear issue through their traditional anti-American prism. The left has traditionally had little influence on Indian foreign policy, but was influential in the first Singh government (2004–2008) because Communist parties were part of the ruling coalition and the government depended on their support to stay in power.

The nationalists have made common cause with leftists on this issue, dismissing U.S. claims that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons and supporting Iran's right to develop civilian nuclear technology.<sup>46</sup> The nationalists are not necessarily united in their views on Iran, however. Some see Iran as "a neighbor with which India is linked by many centuries of economic, cultural and even civilizational ties."<sup>47</sup> Other nationalists tend to worry about Iran's links to Pakistan, especially on the nuclear black market, and are suspicious of Iran's efforts to compare their illegal nuclear program with India's.<sup>48</sup>

It is not that nationalists are particularly supportive of closer ties with Iran, but their objection is to what they perceive as U.S. pressure on Indian foreign policy, of which Iran is only one manifestation. Writing about the purported U.S. pressure on the stillborn Iran–Pakistan–India gas pipeline project, one former senior official wrote that "the pipeline never was really a brilliant idea. . . . But that apart, it was India's decision—good or bad, right or wrong."<sup>49</sup> Thus, India's Iran policy has become an important test of whether Indian foreign policy is sufficiently independent from the United States, with critics of the government claiming that New Delhi kowtows to Washington.<sup>50</sup> Pragmatists tend to defend India's taking a position against the Iranian nuclear program, such as voting against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), by pointing out that Iran had not lived up to its obligations and India had little reason to support Iran. Rejecting charges that such a position represented giving

in to U.S. pressure, one analyst characterized the Indian position as “Enlightened Independence.”<sup>51</sup> This is another dispute that shows little sign of ebbing.

**Third-world solidarity is increasingly dismissed as a serious foreign policy option.**

### **The Third World and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)**

The Third World and the NAM have become less important in India’s foreign policy framework. Nevertheless, nationalists continue to argue that the NAM and third-world solidarity are useful for India. They tend to see various new coalitions, such as the IBSA, BRIC (Brazil–Russia–India–China), and BASIC (Brazil–South Africa–India–China), as carrying forward the task of developing the

third-world unity which the NAM performed in the Cold War, characterizing this collectivity as the “new NAM.”<sup>52</sup> But pragmatists tend to dismiss such prospects, pointing to internal weaknesses within these coalitions and their inability—at least for India—to deal with the rise of China.<sup>53</sup> However, the disagreement over this issue is somewhat less serious, and likely to become increasingly marginal, because there is greater recognition that third-world solidarity or even these new coalitions are unlikely to be serious foreign policy options for India.

### **Continuing Commonalities and Implications**

Though the nationalist and pragmatist perspectives are locked in serious disagreements, they are essentially both centrist perspectives. Thus, significant common areas exist where Indian foreign policy is relatively uncontroversial. Five of these areas follow:

#### **China**

For different reasons, both nationalists and pragmatists want closer ties with Beijing, even as both are wary of China. Pragmatists see China as a power with which India can and must deal. Strategist C. Raja Mohan argues that “the nuclear tests of May 1998, the improved economic performance of the 1990s, and the positive evolution of India’s relations with the United States in the changed international and regional context after the Cold War have given India an opportunity for a realistic and productive engagement with China in the coming decades.”<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, though nationalists draw their perspectives from Nehru, they share none of the Nehruvian romanticism about Sino–Indian “brotherhood.” As one put it, “We have to remember that all talk of harmonious development and peaceful neighborhood notwithstanding, China will not give us space voluntarily. We have to make that space ourselves.”<sup>55</sup>

Nationalists would prefer that New Delhi use its own resources to deal with China rather than depend on others, while the pragmatists see the United States as a possible partner. Despite their suspicions, nationalists also tend to see strong similarities between India and China, suggesting that these similarities also suggest mutual interests.<sup>56</sup> While they remain uncertain about how Sino-Indian relations will evolve, they are willing to seek out areas of common interest, such as trade, and hope that such interests will help ameliorate future conflict.<sup>57</sup>

Pragmatists would also agree that India has to seek cooperation while also being prepared. As one pragmatist put it, India should be “seeking positive interaction while making itself powerful enough to shape or cope with China’s behavior.”<sup>58</sup> Another analyst went even further, expressing the sentiment well when he observed that “China’s recent assertiveness is symbolic of not just its rise, but it also signals that Beijing will be in the future, at best, our greatest challenge and, at worst, a security nightmare.”<sup>59</sup> As suggested earlier, pragmatists are willing to consider closer ties with the United States as a way to counter the possible threat from China. Thus, although they may seek different ways to deal with the challenge, for both nationalists and pragmatists, China remains a threat and a concern.

### **Pakistan**

Both nationalists and pragmatists see Pakistan as a key problem, but both see very little chance of a solution other than patience. After the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack, there was greater willingness among many analysts to consider military measures against Pakistan, even if that could involve possible nuclear escalation.<sup>60</sup> Still, among both nationalists and pragmatists there is consensus that India has few options but to keep engaging with Pakistan, despite repeated acts of violence against India by Pakistani-supported terrorists. Pragmatists recognize, as a well-respected former Indian diplomat put it, that “limited retaliation would likely fuel more terrorism” and “full retaliation is not our way.”<sup>61</sup> India simply lacks the conventional superiority that it needs to take military action against Pakistan, in addition to the risk of nuclear escalation.<sup>62</sup>

Nationalists similarly argue that India cannot undertake counterterrorist military actions, as the United States has in Afghanistan, for a variety of reasons including the fact that India has neighbors who provide active support and sanctuary to terrorist groups.<sup>63</sup> As one commentator noted, “India carries its burden of combating terrorism on its own. It would need to act alone to force a change of attitude and conviction in Pakistan...”<sup>64</sup> There is an occasional suggestion that India should retaliate against Pakistan for acts of terrorism perpetrated by Pakistani-based groups, but these are notable for their rarity.<sup>65</sup> Thus, on the critical issue of India’s policy toward Pakistan, there is both increasing frustration but also broad consensus between the two perspectives.

### **Diplomacy and Force**

It follows from the above that both nationalists and pragmatists tilt heavily toward diplomacy in the grand strategic force–diplomacy equation. Indian analysts are exploring the consequences of nuclearization on the military balance in South Asia with increasing sophistication.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, the predominant opinion across the political spectrum is that India does not really have much of a military option in dealing with either Pakistan or China. On the other hand, there are ruminations, at least among some pragmatists, about the necessity for India to develop an expeditionary military capability.<sup>67</sup> Understandably, there has been some support for such proposals from the military.<sup>68</sup> But given the predominant consensus on diplomacy rather than force, there is unlikely to be an Indian version of the “*parabellum* paradigm,” a hard realist approach to strategy.

### **Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty**

Pragmatists suggest that India needs to be less rigid in its approach to arms control issues such as the PSI and even on the CTBT. But this second look does not extend to the NPT itself. Pragmatists do see the possibility, and even the need, for India to work within the non-proliferation regime because nuclear proliferation is as much a threat to India as it is to the global community. Nevertheless, they would not go so far as to suggest that India consider joining the NPT as it is currently structured, meaning as a non-nuclear weapon state.

In practical terms, this approach matches that of the nationalists, who would not countenance any compromise with the NPT. Nationalist opposition to the NPT, however, is much broader, more rigid, and inflexible, seeing little point in even working within the existing non-proliferation order. They dismiss the argument that India can cooperate with the non-proliferation regime without actually joining the treaty itself. Since the NPT does not recognize India as a nuclear-weapon state, India’s cooperation with the broader non-proliferation regime will neither reduce India’s costs nor increase its benefits.<sup>69</sup>

### **Myanmar**

Another issue on which nationalists and pragmatists agree is Indian policy toward Myanmar, a country that is likely to grow in importance for India. Nationalists do not accept notions of democracy promotion. Indeed, democracy promotion has never been a part of Indian strategy. In his November 2010 speech to the Indian parliament, President Obama noted that “in international fora, India has often shied away” from issues such as democracy and human rights.<sup>70</sup> As Raja Mohan has pointed out, “Much of the world sees a profound commitment to democracy amidst bewildering diversity as the defining feature of modern India. Yet, democracy as a political priority has largely been absent from India’s foreign policy.”<sup>71</sup>

This is particularly true of India's policy toward Myanmar. Both nationalists and pragmatists see it as more important to compete with China, as well as deal with Indian insurgents in Myanmar.<sup>72</sup> Pragmatists argue that there is little reason for India to justify its policies to powers such as the United States and United Kingdom "that have long coddled military dictators in India's South Asian neighborhood, notably in Pakistan."<sup>73</sup> This suggests that, however squeamish India gets about the military dictators in Yangon, there is unlikely to be any change in Indian policy.

### **A Fracturing Indian Foreign Policy Consensus**

While consensus on these five critical issues exists, the increasingly active contestations over Indian foreign policy debates means many other foreign policy choices are now open to challenge, and it is likely that the number of such contested foreign policy issues will increase in the coming years.

While there have been some struggles in the past over India's policy toward the United States, there are also likely to be disputes over Indian policies toward China, Japan, and even Russia in the coming years.

One implication is that New Delhi might have more foreign policy options to consider. Domestic contestation provides policymakers with some cover to consider options which might not have been previously deliberated. It is too early to suggest that this process might lead to a new consensus, but what appears clear is that the traditional nationalist consensus over Indian foreign policy no longer holds.

For Washington, this implies that Indian foreign policy might become even more flexible. U.S. diplomacy has so far been both relatively adept and patient in dealing with the raucous Indian debate, advancing U.S. perspectives on various policy issues, usually without offending Indian sensibilities. But in Washington itself, Indian public debate has played little part in policy formulations, especially on larger Asian and global policy issues. New Delhi, of course, is not alone in being ignored in the U.S. foreign policy debate—other capitals are equally disregarded. As Washington's margin for error decreases with its relative decline, it becomes even more important for the United States to pay greater attention to the emerging debates in New Delhi (as well as other capitals).

The shift in Indian foreign policy discourse also suggests that India's global role might be more flexible than previously considered. India is not

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self-consciously debating its future global role in the centralized manner that China might be, but in a democratic and chaotic manner typical to India. But the debate itself is unmistakable.

An alternate possibility is that these increasingly acrimonious debates might slow down critical foreign policy decisions, or indeed even lead to policy paralysis. For instance, despite widespread global concern that India was being rewarded by the United States with the nuclear deal, Indian domestic opposition almost scuttled the deal more than once.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, it is important to recognize that the debate itself represents a move away from the old consensus, which had tethered India for decades.

It cannot be said right now that a new consensus is emerging. It is possible that Indian foreign policy might remain contested for a considerable period. This might be a good thing: the old consensus was the consequence of India's fairly stable international positioning for decades. The debate today is made possible precisely because India's global position is so dynamic. Until it stabilizes, it is unlikely that a new consensus will emerge.

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## Notes

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1. For an alternate categorization of Indian strategic perspectives, see Kanti Bajpai, "Indian Strategic Culture," in *Asia in 2020: Future Strategic Balances and Alliances*, ed. Michael R. Chambers (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002), pp. 245–303.
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