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Multipolar Dreams, Bipolar Realities: India's Great Power Future

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Introduction

Since the turn of the century, the United States has consciously sought to assist India's rise as a great power. During the presidency of George W. Bush, this policy was explicitly enunciated when senior government officials professed the intention "to help India become a major world power in the twenty-first century."[1] Acknowledging that "we understand fully the implications, including military implications, of that statement," this momentous shift was justified on the grounds that "the future of [the Southern Asian] region as a whole is simply vital to the future of the United States."[2]

Although this assessment was colored by the prevailing Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), the policy of supporting India's rise persisted long after the GWOT itself had faded into history. In fact, its logic became even more compelling because China's ascendency as a rival of the United States made investing in India an attractive counterpoise. Consequently, successive U.S. administrations since Bush prioritized India in their foreign policies, an approach that persisted until Donald Trump's second term.

Bush set the course by concluding an epochal civil nuclear agreement with New Delhi, a controversial accord that reversed forty years of standing U.S. policy by offering support for India's civilian nuclear program despite the country's development of nuclear weapons. His successor, Barack Obama, followed suit by endorsing India's candidacy for permanent membership in the UN Security Council and by initiating defense industrial cooperation that aimed to boost India's indigenous military capabilities. During Donald Trump's first term, the United States started sharing sensitive intelligence with India and made it eligible to receive advanced technologies previously reserved only for American allies. And, under Joe Biden, Washington gave New Delhi sophisticated fighter jet engine technology and began cooperating on critical and emerging technologies.

The Bush administration's policy of aiding India's rise was grounded in the conviction that a stronger India would make for a stronger United States.

Each of these administrations thus deepened diplomatic, technological, and military collaboration with India, vivifying what has now become known as the policy of "strategic altruism."[3] This support for India's rise was not offered with the expectation of "specific reciprocity,"[4] but in the hope that India would become a great power that effectively balances China in Asia—thereby supporting the U.S. goal of preserving its own global primacy—and a sturdy partner desirous of advancing diverse common interests.[5]

Both these ambitions were first clearly articulated during the Bush era. In the run up to the U.S. national election in 2000, Condoleezza Rice, who would serve as Bush's national security adviser during his first term in office, laid out the vision of India's role in U.S. grand strategy vis-à-vis China when she wrote:

> China's success in controlling the balance of power depends in large part on America's reaction to the challenge. The United States must deepen its cooperation with Japan and South Korea and maintain its commitment to a robust military presence in the region. It should pay closer attention to India's role in the regional balance. There is a strong tendency conceptually to connect India with Pakistan and to think only of Kashmir or the nuclear competition between the two states. But India is an element in China's calculation, and it should be in America's, too. India is not a great power yet, but it has the potential to emerge as one.[6]

The Bush administration's subsequent policy of aiding India's rise was then anchored in its confidence about India's potential to help restrain China and support positive cooperation with Beijing simultaneously, with both aims in turn grounded in the conviction that a stronger India would make for a stronger United States.[7]

Years later, when the U.S.-India civilian nuclear cooperation agreement was successfully concluded, Condoleezza Rice, Bush's secretary of state during his second term, voiced the widely shared hopes about the bilateral relationship's larger impact:

> Many thought this day would never come, but doubts have been silenced now. The agreement we are about to sign is unprecedented and it demonstrates the vast potential partnership between India and the United States, a potential that, frankly, has gone unfulfilled for too many decades of mistrust, and now potential that can be fully realized. The world's largest democracy and the world's oldest democracy, drawn together by our shared values and, increasingly, by our many shared interests, now stand as equals, closer together than ever before. . . .

> Let no one assume, though, that our work is now finished. Indeed, what is most valuable about this agreement is how it unlocks a new and far broader world of potential for our strategic partnership in the 21st century, not just on nuclear cooperation but on every area of national endeavor.[8]

That the United States and India would collaborate to uphold the liberal international order, which served the interests of both nations, was envisaged as being vitalized by the successful conclusion of the civil nuclear agreement. This accord memorialized their convergence of values and interests and the desire that, in time, it would promote "not just a favorable balance of power but . . . a balance of power that favors freedom."[9]

Today, some two-odd decades after the U.S. policy shift of supporting India's rise was initiated, its fruits are now visible. Prior to Trump's second term, the U.S.-India relationship scaled new heights unmatched in the history of both countries. The official engagements between Washington and New Delhi were expansive, and the U.S. and Indian governments arguably put more effort into managing this partnership than they did most others. As a result, the United States and India possessed a mutual comfort that was simply unprecedented, and both nations came to view each other as indispensable for the attainment of their core strategic goals. For India, that entails arriving as a genuine great power in a multipolar international system, while preserving its global hegemony remains the enduring objective of the United States.

From Washington's perspective, therefore, India's evolution mattered greatly. If India were to become "one of the great democratic powers of the twenty-first century,"[10] as Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy framed it, and if it were to become one of Washington's closest partners in "every area of national endeavor," as Condoleezza Rice articulated this hope in 2008, U.S. aims would have been satisfied.

While India has indeed grown in strength over the last two decades and has partnered with the United States in pushing back on Chinese assertiveness, the larger story is more complex. For all of its achievements, India is not growing fast enough to balance China effectively. Yet despite its material weaknesses, India is still obsessed with protecting its strategic autonomy and pursues the goal of promoting multipolarity through multi-alignments at both the Asian and global levels—even though these objectives may not actually serve its strategic interests and effectively constitute a "form of soft balancing to restrain U.S. hegemony and transform the [international] system."[11] Furthermore, India's domestic political evolution could produce corrosive effects within the country and internationally if its emerging illiberalism—which under Trump presently marks the United States as well—disfigures its otherwise remarkable political experiment at a time when liberal democracy itself is under growing stress worldwide.[12]

The question of India's attributes as a great power, accordingly, deserves attention. This issue was perceptively interrogated by Rahul Sagar in the journal *International Affairs* in 2009, but Sagar's analysis focused on the ideas that shape India's worldview as debated by moralists, Hindu nationalists, strategists, and liberals within the country.[13] Although intersecting

with Sagar's work on some issues, this paper proceeds in a different direction: it explores the question of what kind of a great power India will become by examining how it is likely to match up to its peers in the international system, how it seeks to reconstruct that system to serve its interests, and how the ongoing transformations in its domestic politics could affect international politics in the future.

India's evolution as a great power promises increased prominence but not necessarily proportionate sway.

The answers offered here are admittedly speculative, but they are anchored in reasoned judgments about India's trajectory and goals. Summarily stated, it is likely that India as a great power will be marked by three distinctive traits. It will be the weakest of the great powers internationally. It will be zealously independent and focused on advancing a multipolar global order despite its limitations and the dangers for both New Delhi and Washington. And it could—not will—remain an illiberal democracy that makes a deep U.S.-Indian partnership tricky whether or not the United States recovers its own liberal inheritance after the passing of Trump's presidency. As such, India's evolution as a great power promises increased prominence but not necessarily proportionate sway, thereby embodying nettlesome quandaries for India and the United States even as the bilateral relationship deepens in unprecedented ways.

Relatively Weak Despite Continuing Success

For most of the Cold War period, India's economic performance fell short of its inherent potential. Although the country overcame the stagnation that marked the century before its independence by growing at around 3.5 percent annually from 1950 to 1980, this performance paled in comparison to many other developing countries during that time. After tepid initial reforms, India's average growth rates improved to about 5.5 percent during the 1980s and into the early 1990s, but it would require the bolder transformations initiated by then prime minister Narasimha Rao and his finance minister Manmohan Singh in 1991 to finally set India on the path to a meaningful take off.[14]

Thanks to these reforms, India chalked up growth rates of about 6.5 percent from the mid-1990s to the present day, judging from World Bank data. Despite the variations in growth during this period—the 2000s, for example, saw India achieve peak growth rates of greater than 8 percent in contrast to the following decade when growth slowed perceptibly—the overall Indian story has been impressive.[15] India's economic vibrancy, in fact, constituted one important reason why the United States began to view India as an important partner and as a potential counterweight to China during this century.

Although India's economic performance in absolute terms has thus been remarkable, it has fallen considerably short of China's achievements during the latter's reform period beginning in 1979. In contrast to India's average growth rate of some 6.5 percent, China pulled off close to 9 percent average annual growth over a much longer period. Again, drawing on World Bank data, China in fact chalked up annual double-digit growth rates some fifteen times during the last forty-five-odd years, whereas India has not managed a similar feat even once since its reforms began.[16] Not surprisingly, then, although the Chinese and Indian economies were roughly comparable in size around 1980, the Chinese economy is close to five times larger than India's today.

Although India's economic performance in absolute terms has been remarkable, it has fallen considerably short of China's achievements.

If the gross domestic product (GDP) is treated as a rough proxy for national power, China towers over India currently because of its impressive economic performance over the last few decades.[17] It is also more deeply integrated with the Indo-Pacific region in ways that enhance its economic heft and provide it with enormous, sometimes almost choking, political influence—gains that India has simply been unable to match either in its extended neighborhood or sometimes even within South Asia itself.[18] Given this disparity in power, it is not surprising that New Delhi, its often-confident rhetoric notwithstanding, has been extremely skittish about confronting China unnecessarily even when U.S. backing is visibly on offer. The critical geopolitical question going forward, therefore, is whether India can close the gap with China quickly enough and thereby serve as a check on Chinese power in ways that advantage both itself and the United States.

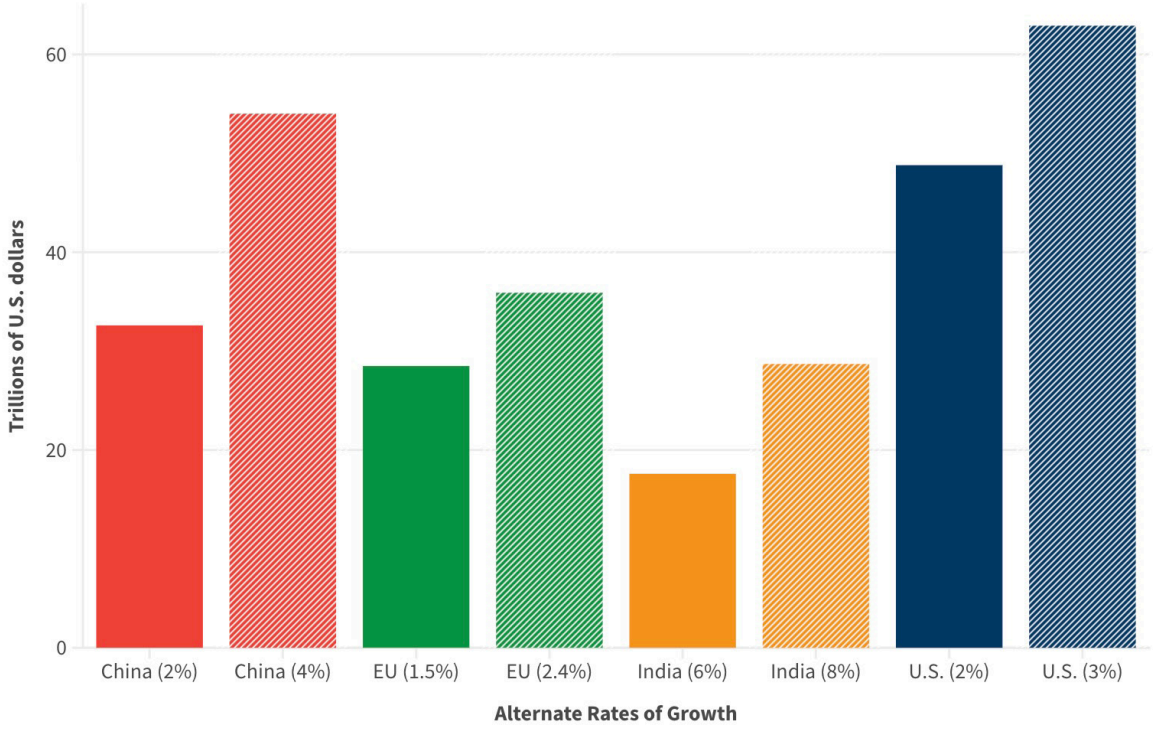
The ambitions of Indian policymakers have been aroused on this score because the Chinese economy has now slowed considerably. China today is growing at around 4–5 percent, a significant diminution in performance compared to its peak. In some ways, this slowing growth after decades of high performance may constitute merely a "regression to the mean,"[19] but it is certainly amplified by the multiple challenges now facing the Chinese economy. These include the real estate crisis, high local government debt, increasingly constrained market access to the West, and, in addition, significant demographic headwinds: China's population declined for the first time in 2022 and is ageing rapidly, leading to a contracting workforce that imperils its longer-term growth prospects and, by implication, its accumulation of national power.[20] India, in contrast, benefits from a still growing population, despite declining fertility rates, and will possess a larger working age cohort for some time to come.[21] These factors, among others, such as rising consumer demand, expanding financial inclusion, and continuing infrastructure modernization, drive the hope that India could yet rival China with dramatic consequences for Asian and global geopolitics.[22]

Unfortunately for India—and the United States—such a catch up is unlikely to occur at any time before midcentury, if at all. For all of China's weaknesses, it has enormous strengths: a more literate, skilled, and healthier population, higher levels of technological proficiency, larger capital stocks, and sheer economic size. This last element implies that even if China grows slower than before, its very mass makes it harder for a competitor like India to approximate its power in the near-to-medium term.

A crude back-of-the-envelope calculation illustrates the relative growth of four major entities that will shape the future international system at midcentury: the United States, the European Union (EU), China, and India. Reflecting the historic performance in per capita and aggregate GDP growth over the long term respectively, two alternative trend rates of growth are assumed for the United States: 2 and 3 percent.[23] The long-term growth rates of the Eurozone vary considerably: from 0.9 percent in the pessimistic case to a high of 2.4 percent if the union were to undertake truly transformative reforms. For purposes of this analysis, and assuming that modest productivity increases obtain, the EU is stipulated to grow at 1.5 percent, or at its maximum at 2.4 percent, for another twenty-five years.[24] In the best case, China is assumed to grow at 4 percent consistently and at worst at 2 percent.[25] And India, being farthest from the global production possibility frontier, is assumed to grow at either 6 percent—its likely trend growth rate over the next two decades—or, more optimistically, at 8 percent.[26]

Despite these assumptions being biased in favor of India over China, the arithmetic indicates that India does not catch up with China by 2050 (see Figure 1). It comes closest to becoming a peer only if it grows consistently at 8 percent for the next twenty-five years while China grows at 2 percent in contrast. In all likelihood, India will not do as well as this best case suggests for

Figure 1. Projected GDP of India, China, U.S., and EU (2050)



Sources: Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, Crestmont Research, the Conference Board, the European Commission, ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office, the ADB, and the World Bank. See text for full sourcing.

several reasons: it has failed to develop a significant manufacturing sector (and the largescale labor-intensive manufacturing that the country needs is nowhere in sight, even as New Delhi remains obsessed with enticing foreign capital-intensive manufacturing to reshore to India); it still clings to excessive protectionism that impedes export growth and, despite concluding several "free" trade agreements more recently, is reluctant to move toward a trade-dominant growth strategy that integrates India into global value chains (without which, as the postwar record demonstrates, higher growth rates will be elusive); it invests too little in research and development and lags in overall technological proficiency (despite possessing islands of excellence and performing impressively for its level of development); and it has not yet invested sufficiently in improving its human capital (at a time when its demographic dividend could well be somewhere around its halfway mark).[27]

Because the Indian economy is still characterized by significant inefficiencies and could benefit from bolder reforms, lower growth rates of the kind that mark China's regression to the mean may still be some time away. But the expectation that India will sustain sharply elevated trend growth rates, exemplified by double-digit growth, is likely to be unmet for the reasons enumerated above (and for others). A realistic prospect, therefore, is that India's trend growth rate for the next quarter century will probably hover closer to 6 percent than to 8 percent: India has attained 6 percent growth most frequently since it became a Republic and although it has occasionally exceeded 8 percent, this "growth acceleration lasted for only one year, and growth corrected sharply in the year after."[28] If 6 percent growth is thus assumed to be India's trend growth rate for the next two and a half decades, the power gap with China even in 2050 could be significant.

If India grows consistently at 6 percent, its standing vis-à-vis China certainly improves. How significantly though depends on China's performance. If Beijing's trend growth rate is only 2 percent, the Chinese economy will shift downward from its current almost-fivefold advantage in size to being slightly less than twice as large (Figure 1). This represents a clear increase in India's relative power. Obviously, this outcome does not consider the impact of China's current investments in sunrise technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, advanced materials, energy storage, biotechnology, electric vehicles, and information and communications. Beijing's achievements here rival innovation in the United States, its expenditures in these sectors are vastly larger than India's, and its successes could improve its trend growth rates despite its demographic constraints.[29] If these advances allow China to grow faster, say between 2 and 4 percent, it could have an economy that is up to three times as large as India's in 2050.

Admittedly, all such long-range projections are afflicted by uncertainty, but as a heuristic device they yield useful insights. For starters, if India can achieve a steady 6 percent growth over the next twenty-five years, it will join the league of great powers by the middle of this century. But it will not, as is sometimes claimed, become a "superpower."[30] Rather, it will be the weakest country in comparison to both the United States and China (as well as the EU) at that time—and will also lag all three entities in terms of distributed prosperity.

India will be the weakest country in comparison to both the United States and China (as well as the EU)—and will lag all three entities in terms of distributed prosperity.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that India will become a high-income country by 2050 based on the projections above. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has articulated the goal of Viksit Bharat, the ambition to make India a fully developed country by 2047, the centenary year of its independence. Development is obviously a multifaceted concept, but if it is reduced simplistically to per capita income, the enormous challenge before India becomes transparent. The World Bank has defined a high-income country in 2025 as one possessing a per capita income of more than $14,005 annually.[31] If the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs' Population Division's medium variant projection is accepted for purposes of illustration, India's population in 2050 will likely be about 1.68 billion.[32] If India grew at 8 percent annually between now and then—the most optimistic scenario—its 2050 GDP of $28.7 trillion would yield a per capita income of $17,083. If India grows at the more likely rate of 6 percent, however, its 2050 GDP of $17.6 trillion yields a per capita income of only $10,476, which is lower than the standard for a developed country today. Given that the definition of what constitutes a high-income country in 2050 will likely be much higher than what it is currently, it is possible that even a high trend growth rate of 8 percent will not permit India to join the band of truly developed countries by midcentury as its prime minister desires. This outcome is not surprising because World Bank research suggests that a catch-up by lower- and middle-income countries with their developed peers is proving much harder than the convergence hypothesis of neoclassical economics initially expected.[33]

Finally, even if the United States and China grow only at their lower hypothesized rates, they will end up in a class by themselves, thus making the international system effectively bipolar even though China would not match the United States along every dimension of national power.[34] This condition of asymmetrical bipolarity would be altered if the EU resembles a unified state and becomes an independent player geopolitically by 2050, in which case the international system would approximate tripolarity even though the United States would still enjoy a significant material advantage over both China and the EU. But the world will still not be multipolar unless India sustains an unprecedented trend growth rate of 8 percent between now and midcentury—and even then, there would be significant differences in capability among the four entities that would be considered "great powers." Parenthetically, if the United States and China grew at their highest postulated growth rates, the international system would then be unambiguously bipolar, despite remaining unevenly so.

This implies that under a range of scenarios—assuming U.S.-China competition and Sino-Indian rivalry remain persistent—India would need an external ally to balance China effectively. The most obvious choice is the United States, although the EU too could play a similar role depending on its future evolution. While the Eurozone might have the collective economic and military capacity to do so, the realities of geography imply that its members may not be threatened by China in the same way that the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners will be, thus making the United States the better great-power ally for India. If the United States

grew at 2 percent to China's 4 percent over the next two-odd decades, Washington would also benefit considerably from a partnership with India despite remaining more capable than both China and India on a per capita basis. The urgency of this outcome would depend greatly on the health of America's traditional alliances because if its transatlantic and Asian coalitions remain robust, the imperative of partnering with India diminishes, however desirable it may be. Because India, in contrast, has no alliance relationships it can rely upon, a productive collaboration with the United States (and possibly the EU) would be indispensable given the absence of other comparable substitutes in Asia and beyond.

Self-Regarding and Yearning for Multipolarity

If the crude prognoses of Indian and Chinese power out to 2050 suggest that India will remain weaker than China by gross measures of economic strength, this infirmity will likely find reflection in its technological prowess and military capabilities as well. The historical record in the modern era suggests a close correlation between technological and military potency and economic muscle.[35] The realities of competitive international politics would then require India to seek external sources of support vis-à-vis China. Among the Asian rimland powers, neither Japan nor Australia alone would be strong enough by midcentury to meaningfully back India in this competition, whereas the United States would be the strongest external power capable of supporting India and would arguably have the incentives to do so given the probable continuance of U.S.-China competition.[36] The EU too could play a similar role, depending on the state of EU-China and EU-U.S. relations, but the Eurozone economy would be much weaker than the United States and the intensity of European rivalry with China would in any case be an open question.

While India would obviously welcome a continued U.S. partnership against China in this context, the forms of cooperation sought will be distinctive and will likely remain faithful to its current practices. Despite the need for external balancing, New Delhi will not settle for any kind of alliance with Washington. Rather, it will—as it does today—seek U.S. assistance in expanding its national capabilities while hoping for enhanced support during a crisis, even as it persists in remaining "non-allied forever."[37]

This desire to avoid becoming a "camp follower"[38] of any other great power, as India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru once put it, derives fundamentally from India's antipathy to political subservience—an instinct reinforced by its experience of Western colonialism. Because joining an alliance, or even accepting exclusive strategic partnerships, might require subordinating India's particular interests to larger common obligations, Indian policymakers fear that accepting such constraints, particularly within relationships that include more powerful states, will not only reproduce the servility that they find unacceptable but also limit their ability to maneuver between the various geopolitical fractures that are always present in the international system.[39]

These considerations nourished India's Cold War policy of nonalignment, but the desire to avoid compacts with other great powers is also rooted in the deeper conviction that India's "very strong individuality," which has been nurtured over "the last 2,000 years," does not permit it to "tie [itself] up with this group or that group" permanently, as Nehru explained. Such solutions only embody "a complete misunderstanding of what India has been *and is going to be in the future*"[40] (italics added). The insistence on staying away from compromising entanglements is thus equally influenced by the view that, as an emerging great power, India must never accept anything in the interim that curtails the freedom of action it would enjoy once it has fully ascended. In effect, India pursues, in Nehru's words, "the realism of tomorrow. It is the capacity to know what is good for the day after tomorrow or for the next year . . . and fashion [oneself] accordingly"—to look beyond "the tip of [one's] nose"[41] in search of the more lasting advantages.

This long-term perspective, however, must be reconciled with the present reality that India is now threatened by a far more powerful state, China, which appears for the first time in its long history as a genuine superpower on its doorstep. Never has the subcontinent been menaced by a state so durably powerful and in such proximity and, furthermore, one that India may not be independently capable of balancing against today and in the foreseeable future.[42]

New Delhi seeks beneficial but unobligated partnerships even against stronger centers of power, such as Beijing, while at the same time attempting to preserve a modicum of stability in Sino-Indian ties.

To cope with this challenge, Indian policymakers believe that foreign assistance should be accepted only to the degree that it does not choke off India's freedom of action. This concession is grounded a fortiori on the canny realist judgment that New Delhi will receive external support only if it is in the self-interest of the benefactor(s). Thus, to the degree that the United States and others have a stake in balancing Chinese power, India expects their assistance without having to make any onerous compromises because this collaboration is viewed as helping to realize certain joint gains rather than representing any special favors to New Delhi. Because this position persisted even when India was weak—as it did when India competitively accepted both U.S. and Soviet assistance during the Cold War—it will subsist all the more durably when India becomes stronger.

In other words, New Delhi seeks beneficial but unobligated partnerships even against stronger centers of power, such as Beijing, while at the same time attempting to preserve a modicum of stability in Sino-Indian ties. Unlike the United States, which is extraordinarily powerful vis-à-vis China and can therefore tolerate violent oscillations in the bilateral relationship, India seeks to moderate the competition with its most dangerous rival, preferring to cooperate whenever possible. For all the convergence in U.S.-Indian relations precipitated by China's rise, India's strategy for managing China is thus more subtle than that of the United States and will deviate from Washington's current (and possibly future) approach in distinctive ways.[43]

On balance, therefore, New Delhi's strategy for managing Beijing consists of attempting to moderate the immediate threats posed by the latter primarily through diplomacy backed up by whatever military capabilities India can muster. The deficits in this strategy are compensated for by solidifying different international partnerships, but most importantly the relationship with the United States. Because this relationship is viewed, however, as serving important American interests just as well as it does Indian ones, New Delhi does not feel that it must accommodate Washington in every way that the latter may desire. In fact, India judges that it enjoys significant freedom to partner with a variety of countries, including some that do not wish the United States well, because ultimately U.S. policymakers will overlook the resulting inconveniences given the benefits to be gained from having India as a partner in their competition with China. India, accordingly, pursues "multi-alignment"[44]—having eclectic relationships with numerous states, including U.S. rivals—because this strategy advances its immediate interests and, by empowering others, helps to reconfigure the international system through the wider diffusion of power over the longer term.

The persistent yearning for multipolarity acquires special resonance in this context. Even at the high tide of American preeminence and when U.S.-Indian relations had become deeply productive, India's then prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, declared in 2004 that:

> India does not believe that unipolarity is a state of equilibrium in today's world. At the same time, we do not advocate a form of multipolarity that creates tension between the poles. We believe a stable equilibrium lies in a cooperative, multipolar world which accommodates the legitimate aspirations and interests of all its component poles and of the international community as a whole. This is the world which India is committed to working for.[45]

This view is shared across the political spectrum in India. Not surprisingly, then, many senior Indian leaders have either claimed that multipolarity is the natural state of the world, or that the international system is witnessing its emergence, or that multipolarity, even if it has not arrived yet, is nevertheless indispensable for global peace because it disperses power across many centers and thereby ensures that no single nation can impose its will on others.[46]

Consistent with these beliefs, India seeks an international system that is marked by the presence of multiple great powers. As Stephen P. Cohen summarized it, "From the Indian perspective, the ideal world would consist of many great powers, each dominant in its own region, and pledged to avoid interference across regions."[47] At its most superficial, this desire is nourished by the calculation that only a multipolar system would create sufficient space for India as a great power. But multipolarity, or for that matter any alternative configuration, will not arrive merely by India's wishing it. Nor will it materialize due to Indian actions such as resisting the United States on issues like trade preferences, data sovereignty, e-commerce rules, and global governance; or opposing U.S. sanctions on friendly third countries; or championing the so-called Global South in its campaign against Western domination; or preserving ties with countries such as Iran and Russia, even when the latter embarrasses New Delhi by the conduct of its appalling war in Ukraine; or engaging in coruscating diplomacy with, and high-level visits to, U.S. rivals in different parts of the world.

Systemic polarity is also not a synonym for systemic "complexity"[48]—the latter often mistakes the diversity of features that mark the "superstructure" of international politics for its "deep structure,"[49] which is centered on the distribution of power in circumstances where there is no overarching sovereign. Rather, systemic polarity is the inexorable result of the differences in power accumulation within states, and while the Indian actions highlighted above might increase New Delhi's power and the capabilities of its partners on the margins, they do not propel the comprehensive mobilization of resources necessary to create new great powers and thereby transform the international system.[50]

Most projections of global economic growth based on real GDP suggest that, even if India eschewed multi-alignment, it would become significant enough to be treated as a great power by midcentury, but it is unlikely to arrive as the formidable pole that China will certainly be at that time if Beijing is not already today.[51] The uneven distribution of power globally will thus persist. India has traditionally been uncomfortable with concentrated power in the international system both for ideational and, more importantly, practical reasons. Ideationally, sharp inequalities of power are resented because they produce a division between haves and have-nots that obliterate the possibility of an egalitarian international order that minimizes conflict.[52] Practically, sharp inequalities leave the disadvantaged with little bargaining power against the advantaged, and these considerations underlie New Delhi's discomfort with both unipolarity and bipolarity.

As Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India's current foreign minister, summed it up succinctly, India's grand strategy in an uncertain world consists of "advancing [its] national interests by identifying and exploiting opportunities created by global contradictions" so as "to extract [the maximum] gains from as many ties as possible."[53] A unipolar order undermines this strategy because it denies New Delhi the opportunity to play one pole against another. A bipolar order is more favorable on this count, and throughout the Cold War India did in fact play the United States against the Soviet Union and vice versa to gain significant benefits for itself—gains that will not be comparably available in a future bipolarity between the United States and China given the latter's rivalry with India. In contrast, a multipolar world would be the most favorable because it would have many more cleavages and affinities that India could use to its advantage.

New Delhi is better off engaging in "soft bandwagoning" with Washington on the assumption that even a powerful United States would have to contend with China as a nontrivial competitor.

But if the international system at midcentury is likely to be dominated either by the United States alone or by the United States and China as major rivals, New Delhi is better off engaging in "soft bandwagoning"[54] with Washington on the assumption that even a powerful United States would have to contend with China as a nontrivial competitor and, hence, would look to India and the EU as worthwhile partners in balancing Beijing. India's yearning for multipolarity in this context is unrealistic: Figure 1 indicates that a real multipolarity—understood

as the multiplicity of comparably capable great powers—in 2050 would require the United States to grow at less than 2 percent and China to grow at 2 percent, while the EU maintains 1.5 percent growth even as India grows at an astounding 8 percent, while the current growth rates in all other countries remain mostly unchanged. In other words, India would have to chalk up atypically high trend growth rates while the two most important players in the international system as well as other states remain sluggish in comparison.

This outcome is improbable. While on current expectations there are likely to be four entities that exceed 15 trillion (nominal) U.S. dollars in domestic product by 2050—and possibly five entities that exceed 10 trillion (nominal) U.S. dollars if Indonesia lives up to its potential—only the United States and China would subsist at the apex, towering above the others including India and the EU.[55] Given this likelihood and the persistence of its own competition with China, India's interests are better served by nurturing intimate ties with the United States, and secondarily with the EU, rather than doubling down on multi-alignment in the hope that this strategy could produce a larger multipolar system that India could then exploit when such a power distribution is in any case beyond New Delhi's capacity to beget.[56]

This judgment notwithstanding, it is to be expected—given India's history—that New Delhi will consistently pursue an independent foreign policy without settling for special relationships of any kind. It will also persist with its quixotic quest for multipolarity, even if that entails limiting U.S. power and influence in the future. As Stephen Cohen astutely noted, as long as Washington "is not totally supportive" of New Delhi's interests, "India will continue to see American power as essentially constraining."[57] Just as it has done thus far in the post–Cold War era, India will therefore pursue diverse partnerships with a wide variety of countries and groupings, some with strikingly anti-American agendas. While India has often played, and will continue to play, a moderating role in some of these consortia to the benefit of the United States, it persistently runs the risk of convincing itself that such engagements will midwife the arrival of multipolarity globally.

Yet the expanded interactions with different countries, and even the successful mobilization of some subsets behind specific causes, will not produce multipolarity. Only an increase in the number of global power centers generates this outcome, and there is no evidence yet that New Delhi's exertions have been fecund enough to accelerate the growth in power of any other state or coalition. On the contrary, if India's engagements with motley groupings such as BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization cannot effectively produce multipolarity but nonetheless alienate the United States, India could end up with the worst of both worlds: empowering fora where Beijing is likely to have more meaningful influence than New Delhi anyway, while exasperating Washington, whose resources it needs in order to successfully balance China. The same goes for India's relations with various individual countries as well.

Thus far, India has escaped this dilemma because successive administrations in Washington have been tolerant of New Delhi's omnidirectional dalliances. But a more nationalist administration, like that of Donald Trump or his potential successors, might be tempted to penalize India's fraternization with unfriendly countries. On this count, Trump has already put India

on notice by declaring on Truth Social that "Any Country aligning themselves with the Anti-American policies of BRICS, will be charged an ADDITIONAL 10% Tariff. There will be no exceptions to this policy. Thank you for your attention to this matter!"[58] Even discounting the melodrama of this message and its form of communication, several previous U.S. administrations, including those highly sympathetic to India, have oftentimes been disconcerted by New Delhi's policies toward states unfriendly to Washington. If future U.S. governments were to push back on India in hostile ways, the consequences would be deleterious for both the United States and India.

Even if such outcomes were averted, India should be more wary about the dangers of multipolarity for its own interests.[59] In a genuinely multipolar system, New Delhi would benefit less from the easy availability of those collective goods currently underwritten by the United States such as the freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific or the multilateral institutions that enable international coordination in diverse issue areas. To compensate, India would have to bear larger institutional, financial, and security burdens than it has shown a willingness to stomach thus far.[60] And, most importantly, it would run the risk of facing perilous balancing failures against its most serious threat because the hazards of buck-passing among the other great powers could leave India, the weakest in the mix, particularly susceptible to the dangers posed by a more powerful China.[61] Under multipolarity, India could thus end up worse off than it presently is under American unipolarity, or it might be in the future under any U.S.-China bipolarity.[62] Consequently, the current Indian strategy of seeking continued U.S. support for its own rise while simultaneously attempting to promote a multipolarity that limits American power is not merely counterproductive but unwise.

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Just Another Majoritarian State?

It is unfortunate that India's growth in material capabilities has coincided with an upsurge in illiberalism within the country. At a time when India is more successful than before, the liberal complexion of its democracy is under the greatest stress. As Sumit Ganguly summarized succinctly, "political liberalism in India is now under assault. The current right-of-center government, dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), appears intent on transforming India's pluralistic, open, and secular state into an ethnic and illiberal democracy."[63]

If democracy is understood simply in formal terms as a framework of governance that enshrines the principle of accountability—meaning that rulers are chosen by the population and hold office for fixed periods of time before their mandate to govern is either renewed or

rejected—India has been a spectacular success in that it comports with Samuel Huntington's celebrated characterization: "Elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable sine qua non. Governments produced by elections may be inefficient, corrupt, shortsighted, irresponsible, dominated by special interests, and incapable of adopting policies demanded by the public good. These qualities make such governments undesirable but they do not make them undemocratic."[64]

Proving this thesis, India, since its independence, has had eighteen national elections, almost entirely on schedule, with its voter turnout steadily increasing over time to above 60 percent of its electorate on average regularly showing up at the polling booth.[65] Strikingly, Indian citizens, right from the beginning, enjoyed universal adult franchise irrespective of their sex, caste, or economic status. Thus, in contrast to the Western experience of democracy, where voting rights expanded over long periods of time—what two scholars have labeled " incremental suffrage"—India was the world's first large democracy to be marked by "instant universal suffrage."[66]

This entitlement, to choose one's rulers, was only part of a large array of fundamental rights that all Indian citizens enjoyed as a matter of course: this included, inter alia, the rights to life, equality, and freedom; liberties with respect to religion; and the right against exploitation, all of which were enforceable by judicial action if abridged by the state. Article 32 of the Indian constitution, which enshrined the right to judicial remedies, was in fact considered by its principal drafter and one of India's greatest sons, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, to be its "heart and soul"[67] because, on the presumption that the judiciary would remain independent, it protected the citizenry against the overbearing power of the state. So strongly has democracy become "the national ideology of India"[68] that on the one occasion when a government sought to suspend these rights—in 1975, when then prime minister Indira Gandhi declared the infamous "Emergency"—the Indian people rebelled and threw her out of office when she called an election in the hope of ratifying her dictatorship.

What made India a remarkable democracy, however, was not simply that the nation gave itself a constitution that recognized protected individual rights within a system of self-governance but that this system survived robustly in a country that is still relatively poor—when many other initially democratic Third World states eventually succumbed to authoritarianism.[69] Adam Przeworski's classic study, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990,* concluded that "the odds against democracy in India were extremely high,"[70] given the strong correlation he and his colleagues discovered between the persistence of democracy and economic development. India, however, has proven to be the exception to these otherwise robust findings since its democracy has thrived even amid its startling heterogeneity and low levels of per capita income.

Yet the exceptionalism of Indian democracy is not simply related to the improbability of its survival, interesting though that may be. Rather, it is rooted in its constitutional respect for all persons from which flows many derivative consequences, the most important of which are protections against the "tyranny of the majority"[71] and the "tyranny of the state."[72]

To guard against the tyranny of the majority, India defined citizenship entirely by "jus soli" principles rather than by ascriptive markers such as religion, ethnicity, wealth, or race.[73] In one fell swoop, it thus transformed its Hindu demographic majority into a politically insignificant fact. For good measure, colored both by the painful experience of Partition and the philosophical predilections of its founding fathers, India also offered its diverse minorities meaningful legal protections beyond the broader freedom offered to all citizens to freely profess, practice, and propagate their religion. These included the recognition of the diverse personal laws pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption as well as the rights of minorities to manage their own religious and charitable institutions.

The success of the Pakistan movement, which produced the carnage of Partition, led India's post-independence leaders to fear the prospect of virulent mobilization based on religion—a threat that could endanger the unity of India itself. In this context, the danger posed by an aroused Hindu majority was especially hazardous because, as James Madison understood, "the form of popular government . . . enables it to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens."[74] Consequently, the Indian constitution, even as it enshrined civic nationalism, preserved minority rights not as a concession to these populations but as a resounding affirmation of their full citizenship in the republic.

To guard against the tyranny of the state, in turn, India's constitution set deliberate limits on executive power because its founding fathers intuitively understood that, as Sir Owen Dixon famously phrased it, "History, and not only ancient history, show[ed] that in countries where democratic institutions have been unconstitutionally superseded, it has been done not seldom by those holding the executive power." Because democratic governments "need protection from dangers likely to arise from within the institutions to be protected,"[75] the Indian antidote to despotic power then was grounded on the rule of law, which proscribed the state from exercising domineering authority over its citizens or treating them unequally in principle.

Furthermore, it subordinated all office holders, irrespective of their rank or status, to the constraints of law, thus ensuring their accountability. To cement this answerability in practice, Indian democracy instituted a separation of powers by creating legislative and judicial checks on executive authority. And, going further, it did so through "a system of territorial representation that accommodate[d the country's] diverse identities and interests," thus establishing a federalism that reproduced segregated power at both the union and provincial levels while an independent arbiter, the Supreme Court, would "adjudicate on disputes between levels of government."[76] Finally, and perhaps most remarkably for a deprived and disparate country, India's constitution created a protected space for civil society by guaranteeing the freedom of speech and expression, the right to assemble peacefully, and the right to form diverse associations to bridge the gap between citizens and the state.

India's political system, accordingly, was not merely democratic but fundamentally liberal. As Jawaharlal Nehru would phrase it, it represented a unique ambition "to build a just state by just means."[77] This is what made India exemplary: that a poor country could zealously protect individual rights and freedoms through substantive democracy and consistently reject

the lure of authoritarianism's promise of producing faster economic growth and better social order. At a time when democracy is under pressure internationally—including because of reverses in powerful nations such as the United States—an emerging India that remained steadfastly liberal would have been a striking counterpoint to the otherwise dispiriting trends in international politics.

Unfortunately, unlike the India of the Cold War that remained robustly liberal even when underperforming economically, India today, despite being more successful, has been markedly tainted by illiberalism and authoritarianism, both subsisting under a democratic scaffolding. These developments find manifestation not necessarily through a radical revamping of the constitution itself. Such discussions, however, have already surfaced as, for example, when the late Bibek Debroy, one of India's leading public intellectuals and a government official close to Modi, argued that India deserves "a new constitution" that rids itself of its "colonial legacy."[78] Although Debroy framed his argument carefully on the grounds that the existing administrative state was inadequate to satisfy India's developmental ambitions, his invocation of the need for a new document that "reclaims our forgotten [civilizational] heritage" opened the door to other voices who declared plainly that it must be one that "incorporates Bharat's cultural and spiritual dimensions," which are overlooked by the current "Western liberal model."[79]

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While such sentiments persist, though contested by others who fear that the country might be walking "down a destructive Jacobin path,"[80] the greater threat, which is already real, is that India's liberal democracy is being hollowed out through a deliberate erosion of its fundamental norms. This raises the possibility that India might be structurally metamorphosing into what Milan Vaishnav has called the "Second Republic, an inflection point that is equal in magnitude to India's constitutional moment of 1950, when the 'First Republic' was established"[81]—despite the absence of any specific plebiscite justifying such a transformation. The troubling trends underlying this conclusion are hard to overlook.

In a striking reversal, the ideology of Hindu nationalism—"Hindutva," which was defeated, but never eradicated, at the time of India's independence—has made a striking comeback in Indian life during the last quarter century. This resurgence was heralded by the electoral victory of the BJP at the national level for the first time in the mid-to-late 1990s and then more decisively from 2014 onward, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi swept into office. Among its key ambitions has been replacing the liberal vision of citizenship, which previously treated all Indians as equal, with a version of "jus sanguinis," which claims only those who profess Hinduism to be authentically Indian.

Rooted in V. D. Savarkar's 1923 tract *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?,*[82] this constricted vision of nationhood, which consciously rejects civic nationalism in favor of a communal variant, has legitimized the marginalization of India's sizeable and most important minorities, Muslims and Christians, through legal and extra-legal instruments, leading in many instances to intimidation and violence against them.[83] This targeting of minorities has been accompanied by other elements of the larger political project: on one hand, Hindutva has sought to promote the idea that many of India's other minority faiths—notably Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—are really Hinduism in disguise because, among other things, they all arose from within the Indian subcontinent; on the other hand, it is seeking to consciously reabsorb previously alienated lower caste Hindus through a new effort at "Hindu consolidation"[84] that, among other things again, melds all its almost one billion adherents into a unified voting bloc.

While the majoritarian policies of Hindutva, thus, undermine existing protections against the tyranny of the majority, the ordinary contestation of "normal" politics threatens other safeguards against the tyranny of the state. For starters, Modi has been stunningly successful in "concentrating power in himself while disempowering countervailing forces."[85] The marginalization of the cabinet and even parliament, reminiscent of the Indira Gandhi era, has produced a highly personalized system of decisionmaking where policies are formulated largely through consultations with a handful of close confidants rather than the collective wisdom of the cabinet. The dangers of such closed decisionmaking were illustrated most clearly by Modi's controversial 2016 choice to suddenly demonetize India's currency, which caused enormous hardship to the country's poorest citizens. The problematic character of such actions has only been exacerbated by the atrophy of institutional checks and balances within the larger political system, with even the Indian judiciary, the final safeguard against the violation of individual rights and constitutional norms, exhibiting an excessive and unseemly deference to executive power in the Modi era.[86]

Furthermore, the BJP's "close ties to non-elected undemocratic civil society organizations,"[87] such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), provide ideational nourishment as well as critical campaign support for Modi's "authoritarian populism,"[88] even though the RSS itself is usually uncomfortable with larger-than-life political personalities. More dangerously, Modi's government, doubling down on strategies previously witnessed during the Emergency, has used both self-serving legislation as well as the myriad tools of state power—including the tax authorities, the intelligence services, and the instruments of law and order—to intimidate India's opposition parties, its civil society, its regulatory institutions, and even the other branches of government as well as some opposition-ruled states to consolidate the BJP's political dominance.[89]

Finally, the integrity of India's electoral processes, the very foundation of representative government, is itself now under new and disconcerting threat. Initiatives that provide the ruling party with disproportionate advantages in mobilizing political finance, administrative actions that seek to disenfranchise large sections of voters who might support the opposition, and illicit benefits from the striking partiality of key oversight institutions, such as the Election Commission of India, have all combined to raise the specter "that [India's] elections are free but not necessarily always fair."[90]

The net result of these developments has been that India's storied democracy "has entered a new era of decline"[91] with an unprecedented domestic polarization accompanying it, similar to what is now occurring in the United States.[92] In India, however, the consequences are graver because both its state and its society are weaker than its American counterparts. Specifically, the growing illiberalism in India has the potential to make the country less powerful than it otherwise could be because of its economic growth. There is a grave danger that the marginalization of minorities in particular, but the weakening of the "voice" afforded to the Indian people more generally, can intensify their grievances in ways that sometimes spawn, intersect with, or intensify the armed rebellions, the "million mutinies,"[93] that have persistently arisen throughout India's post-independence history.

This unrest, in turn, often creates unhelpful spillover effects in India's own neighborhood and increases the opportunities for unfriendly neighbors, such as Pakistan and even China, to exploit to India's disadvantage at just the time when its external security challenges are also increasing in unprecedented ways. Responding to the fissiparous threats exacerbates India's internal security burdens, consuming vast resources that New Delhi could otherwise use to project influence abroad.[94] At the very least, the deepening fractures in social cohesion do not bode well for a nation that is seeking to energetically mobilize its population to accelerate the accumulation of national power as a means of grasping greatness in international politics.[95]

The deepening fractures in social cohesion do not bode well for a nation seeking to energetically mobilize its population to accelerate the accumulation of national power as a means of grasping greatness in international politics.

The dangers of India's decaying liberal democracy are thus all too real. But there may be signs of hope. For all of the BJP's efforts during the last decade, Hindutva still does not appear to enjoy the allegiance of most Indian voters. Despite the party's successes in foisting on them a sectarian vision on the strength of its victories in India's first-past-the-post parliamentary system, Modi's BJP has never enjoyed more than about 38 percent of the popular vote (which it secured at its high point in the 2019 Indian national election).[96] The resistance to its illiberalism and authoritarianism has by no means been extinguished in the Indian polity.

Although India's liberal citizenry is a beleaguered lot, its subnational entities, the states—a third of which are still governed by the opposition—have been the most important sources of resistance, battling the BJP's vision of political and religious uniformity, largely reflecting the complexities of the country's diversity.[97] Occasionally, even the judiciary and the other adjudicating bodies appear willing to push back on the executive's overreach, thus suggesting that through both structural constraints and voting behavior, India's democracy could over time correct its currently wayward direction. Consequently, the question of whether India will remain a durably illiberal democracy as it becomes a great power internationally remains an open one.

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But if it does, it will have had two significant consequences. First, it will have transformed India from being the exemplary democracy that it was for much of its post-independence history into just another majoritarian state, one more quotidian international entity that claims "civilizational"[98] status as immunity to liberal norms. Second, it will no longer remain an authentic part of the "community of democracies"[99] that, despite all its shortcomings, has sought the realization of a liberal international order that holds out the promise of both peaceful politics and economic prosperity. On these counts, India may end up having much more in common with China than its geopolitical rivalry might suggest. And if India and the United States both remain persistently illiberal democracies, the postwar international order itself—which served both countries well despite myriad current complaints to the contrary—will be at far greater risk and could subvert their security in ways that cannot be yet imagined.

In a speech in New Delhi in 2015, then president Barack Obama presciently declared, "If America shows itself as an example of its diversity and yet the capacity to live together and work together in common effort, in common purpose; if India, as massive as it is, with so much diversity, so many differences is able to continually affirm its democracy, that is an example for every other country on Earth."[100] Today, both the United States and India seem intent on failing this test.

Looking Ahead: Quandaries, Ahoy!

The transformation of U.S.-Indian relations that has been underway for the last quarter century was premised in Washington on the belief that India's growth in power advances core American national security interests. Consequently, aiding India's rise through conscious U.S. assistance would both help to preserve an Asian balance of power that favored freedom and encourage close collaboration between the two countries in preserving a liberal international order that advanced a variety of common political, economic, and ideational interests. These expectations undergirded Washington's policy of strategic altruism toward New Delhi, which, in turn, gave rise to the dramatic improvements in bilateral relations witnessed until Donald Trump's second presidential term in the United States.

Today, both the original objectives—preserving a favorable balance of power in Asia and strengthening the liberal international order—are at risk because of unfavorable developments both in India and in the United States.

At the Indian end, the failure to match China's meteoric economic—and by implication, its technological and military—growth implies that an Asian equilibrium favoring Washington and its regional partners vis-à-vis Beijing may not be realized. Even more problematically for India itself, its internal shortcomings ensure that it cannot stave off China independently in any comprehensive sense. While India will hopefully have the capacity to manage limited Chinese threats along its frontiers, it will not have the ability to parry the challenges that China poses in all functional arenas; still less will it be able to support other Asian states in combating Chinese assertiveness in their most challenging contingencies. Given its current trajectory, India is also unlikely to become a real alternative to China where manufacturing or regional economic integration is concerned, thus limiting its own growth as well as its ability to partner with other near and distant neighbors.

While India certainly desires U.S. support to overcome these deficiencies, Washington cannot from the outside easily accelerate India's economic expansion, bolster its military puissance, or increase its geopolitical influence. As was argued in 2005, when U.S.-Indian ties were on the cusp of significant breakthroughs, "India's continued rise will depend substantially on its own choices [especially] with respect to economic reform."[101] Unfortunately, India's domestic decisions on this score more recently have been tepid, no doubt producing success in absolute terms but still not permitting any plausible catch up with China.

Despite India's current weaknesses, however, its deficits in balancing China could be mitigated if it were to cement a special relationship with the United States that permitted both nations to count on the other when checkmating China, especially its military power. But New Delhi's quest for multipolarity—which ipso facto implies diminished U.S. relative power—through a strategy of multi-alignment that emphasizes cementing diversified ties with many states—some of which are U.S. adversaries—prevents the congealing of those bilateral bonds with Washington that could limit Beijing's misuse of power at a time when its coercive capacities continue to expand inexorably.

To make things worse, these shortcomings in India's external balancing are exacerbated by its recent illiberal turn, which can impede its domestic mobilization of national power while weakening the liberal international order as New Delhi pursues the supposed prerogatives of civilizational states. On both material and ideational grounds, therefore, India's evolution does not offer sturdy confidence that the Asian balance and the liberal system globally can be secured in ways that the United States had hoped for a quarter century ago.

The current developments at the U.S. end confound these earlier expectations just as consequentially. Donald Trump's extortionate behavior in his second term has raised serious questions about whether the United States cares about preserving a global—to include the Asian—balance of power that advances its interests. The indiscriminate confrontations on trade with allies and adversaries alike indicate that Trump is more obsessed with securing favorable trade balances than with preserving the geopolitical power balances that protect American primacy. Whether this is because Trump believes that American preeminence is simply a birthright and hence cannot be undermined by his blackmail or whether it is because

he is afflicted by strategic myopia, the outcome potentially is the same: the United States could undermine Asian and global stability as well as the liberal international order that nourishes its power, prosperity, and legitimacy in ways that ultimately threaten its hegemony.[102]

The uncertainties created by Trump's recent behavior understandably unnerve India and arguably deter it from seeking the closer affiliation with Washington that is in its long-term interest. But India's reluctance to pursue soft bandwagoning long predates Trump and is rooted in deeper cultural and strategic inhibitions that are indeed linked to its own great-power ambitions. Yet even if India's current concerns about Trump are accepted, the fact remains that this is his last term in office whereas New Delhi's strategic predicaments vis-à-vis Beijing are more enduring. Consequently, the imperatives of building a privileged partnership with Washington cannot be ignored given that Chinese power and assertiveness will be a persistent strategic reality for India (and for the United States) at a time when India cannot balance China successfully on its own. The fact that some in Trump's administration still harbor hope for deeper strategic collaboration with India—even if Trump himself is oblivious to its benefits—may offer opportunities for cooperative actions by New Delhi even in the near term. But the case for tight bilateral "strategic coordination"[103] hinges on realities that transcend Trump and is based on the expectation that competitive international politics will push future U.S. administrations, irrespective of their ideology, to search for coalition strategies to balance China not as a favor to Washington's partners but fundamentally out of American self-interest in easing the burdens of preserving its primacy.

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In this context, New Delhi's strategy of seeking diversified bilateral or minilateral ties with other powers, especially those that consciously seek to undermine U.S. interests, imposes increasingly high constraints on Washington's willingness to support India through political support, intelligence sharing, technology transfers, and military cooperation. This is simply because if India is not perceived to be a special partner, the United States has few incentives to aid it in extraordinary ways. After all, the United States can effectively balance China if it becomes necessary without India's help, whereas the same is not true for India. New Delhi's calculation that it can cavort with diverse states routinely while expecting that Washington will anyway assist it in exceptional ways during a crisis represents a gamble that will not pay off in the absence of a staunchly pro-Indian administration in the United States.

Consequently, the Indian obsession with pursuing policies aimed at realizing multipolarity is confounding because, even if this outcome could be realized, it would not help India to block the Chinese threat better than an advantaged association with the United States. More problematically, because India's quest for multipolarity entails the diminution of U.S. power and influence, how can Washington stand by mutely as India pursues this goal? And how can Indian policymakers expect that the United States will continue to meaningfully support

their country as it chases an ambition that implies limiting American dominance? Finally, and even worse, how does India come out ahead in its unavoidable competition with China if the United States is inhibited in bolstering Indian capabilities because its policies constrain American interests in the global system?

If the singular challenge posed by China to India was nonexistent or if India's economic ascendance was successful enough to permit effectively balancing China independently, the necessity for a tight affiliation with the United States, however desirable, would be less pressing. Yet neither of these conditions obtain presently, leaving India with fewer choices than it imagines. It is against this backdrop that the character of the domestic regimes in both India and the United States matter significantly.[104] A liberal United States will likely support a liberal India because helping it would be worthwhile vis-à-vis China both to preserve the regional balance of power and to strengthen the liberal international order. If India remains illiberal while the United States recovers its liberal inheritance after Donald Trump's second presidency, U.S. support will be more conflicted and arguably more ambivalent. If the United States, however, remains durably illiberal irrespective of India's domestic evolution, there will be no ideological reason for Washington to help New Delhi, and any U.S. support in these circumstances will be motivated largely by perceptions of its interests and perhaps based on conditional reciprocity.

To be sure, a narrower U.S.-Indian relationship centered on interests, not values, will not be a disaster for either country.[105] But it would represent shrunken ambitions. The transformation of bilateral ties between the two countries after the Cold War was once conceived as a way to help uphold and improve the liberal international order. If illiberalism turns out to be sturdily ascendent in both nations, their relationship could be largely limited to trying to constrain a common competitor, China. And if so, neither India nor the United States nor the world at large will be the better for it.

But, more dangerously, even the more constricted aim of balancing China may not suffice to protect India against Chinese depredations if New Delhi's multi-alignment deepens U.S. inhibitions in supporting India fulsomely, as has mostly been the case thus far. Resolving this dilemma does not require New Delhi to enter into any formal alliance with the United States with mutual obligations centered on collective defense. India's antipathies to such arrangements are well known, and it would be a fool's errand to advocate such a solution in either capital.

Consequently, the way forward consists not in consummating negotiated treaties but rather in realizing bilateral understandings that induce New Delhi to reconsider some aspects of its grand strategy: actually, willfully replacing its current policy of multi-alignment, which aims to create multipolarity globally, with a soft bandwagoning with Washington on the premise that continued American primacy in the international system remains the best strategic outcome all around. This change of course holds the promise of cementing a closer relationship between the United States and India, one that will yield critical benefits for both sides.

The understandings that constitute the substance of soft bandwagoning would thus be grounded, first, on a fundamental acceptance in New Delhi that U.S. unipolarity complemented by a strong bilateral partnership remains the best solution for advancing India's security interests. Even as the global system steadily evolves toward asymmetrical bipolarity, the competitive character of Sino-U.S. and Sino-Indian relations implies that New Delhi will find its greatest convergence with Washington and therefore should desist from pursuing policies that undermine U.S. interests. This will obviously require adjustments in how India approaches its relationships with third countries, especially U.S. rivals such as Russia, China, and Iran as well as other bystanders in the Global South.

The specific adjustments necessary will depend on circumstances and the relationships in question, but the general principle would be that India prioritizes the United States over and above the demands of multi-alignment—meaning its other bilateral ties—in ways that are perceptible in Washington. This alteration would be in marked contrast to New Delhi's current practice of expecting that Washington, as it did repeatedly during the Bush and Biden administrations, will simply overlook the inconveniences caused by India's interactions with various U.S. antagonists. Implementing soft bandwagoning would also involve making good on unrealized preexisting Indian commitments to the United States, which may require taking some difficult political calls as necessary, but the costs of these choices can be compensated for by the enhanced support offered by Washington in both material and geopolitical terms.

Forging a cooperative defense strategy between the United States and India is vital to advancing the common interests of both nations for the long term.

Furthermore, forging a cooperative defense strategy between the United States and India is vital to advancing the common interests of both nations for the long term. Unlike a collective defense model, where an attack on one partner is treated as an attack on all partners and thus evokes a joint response, the cooperative defense strategy entailed by soft bandwagoning would not presume any such automaticity. But it does require serious pre-conflict planning about how Washington and New Delhi can aid the other to both prevent aggression as well as respond to it should crises or wars break out. The current modus operandi of India making emergency requests for support amid conflict foregoes the benefits of deterrence that could be derived by peacetime signaling about the seriousness of U.S.-India defense cooperation.

If the dangers of empty flaunting on this count are to be averted, however, cooperative defense requires discussions about doctrinal compatibility, defense plans, procurement priorities, mutual access arrangements, and coordinated or combined operations so that each partner could better assist the other if the appropriate political decisions were forthcoming in the eventuality of a crisis. Given the dramatic expansion of Chinese military power, a collective defense response would be the ideal antidote for purposes of both deterrence and defense. But because this solution is presently beyond reach, a cooperative defense approach offers the best means by which the United States and India could collaborate at a time when the military balancing of China remains the hardest, yet most important, strategic task for ensuring regional stability.

Finally, the productive ties envisaged by this conception of soft bandwagoning cannot be realized if the United States and India do not have tangible stakes in each other's material success. It is ironic that the United States and China have the deepest mutual dependencies despite being systemic rivals, whereas India and the United States—countries that claim a "Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership"[106]—still have thinner economic ties than is justified by the size of their economies and their structural complementarity. Although bilateral economic relations have improved over the last two decades, they are still well below where they should be. India's inward-looking economic strategy, its difficult business environment, and its troubling policy inconsistency are primarily to blame for this outcome.

Despite the current antipathy to free trade in the United States, the only long-term solution consists of pushing for a genuine expansion of economic intercourse between the two countries. This will require much greater trade openness than is present in India currently (and, among other things, a recognition of India's level of development and a renewed hospitality to partial free trade agreements in the United States). But unless the two countries can move forward in creating "symbiotically linked"[107] interdependent economies that tangibly contribute to stimulating innovation, income, and employment growth in each other's homelands, it will be difficult to nurture the elite constituencies that can shape their respective national policies toward building an intimate strategic partnership.

An Indian shift toward soft bandwagoning with the United States will not come easy because it runs counter to New Delhi's political psychology, its historical memory, its own strategic ambitions—and, for now, Trump's geopolitical amnesia. Yet looking beyond the wreckage of the present moment and toward the constraints that are likely to become pressing by midcentury, such a reorientation is necessary because New Delhi's strategy of multi-alignment will not deliver multipolarity or the U.S. support necessary to ease India's path toward great-power status. Because even the most pro-India administration that could emerge in Washington in the aftermath of Trump's presidency could be inhibited from unstintingly embracing New Delhi if its other partnerships undercut U.S. interests, soft bandwagoning with the United States becomes the better foreign policy alternative. Even if it does not deliver as fulsomely as India might want, it is still superior to all other substitutes because, at the end of the day, neither multi-alignment nor India's collaboration with other nations (or groups thereof) can sufficiently compensate for the material, institutional, and strategic benefits offered by a special relationship with the United States.

For its part, Washington can ease New Delhi's shift toward this end. By eschewing collusion with China in high politics at the expense of its allies and partners, by refusing to subsidize Pakistan's revisionist ambitions within the subcontinent and its threats beyond, by sustaining the two-decade old policy of leavening India's civilian and defense technology base, by deepening the integration between the U.S. and Indian economies across all factors of production, by expanding the already productive ties between American and Indian societies, and by working with New Delhi in international institutions both to renew them and to enlarge collective gains, the United States can visibly demonstrate to India that bandwagoning provides superior benefits in comparison to the latter's default strategy of geopolitical diversification.

The United States can persist with its erstwhile strategic altruism toward India because the likelihood that India would become a fierce rival of the United States in the foreseeable future is low.

If the prognosis about the prospects of the major powers in the international system offered in this paper is defensible, then the United States can in fact persist with its erstwhile strategic altruism toward India because the likelihood that India would become a fierce rival of the United States in the foreseeable future is low. This danger—which animates some in the Trump administration and is colored greatly by the U.S. role in aiding the rise of China—is attenuated in the case of India. As long as this condition obtains, Washington can persist with magnanimous policies toward New Delhi. Pursuing this course also serves as a prudent hedge in the unlikely event that China outpaces the United States in the decades ahead, or even if it merely remains a truculent rival, in which case Washington would need capable allies and partners, including India.

Coping with the challenges posed by China in the future will therefore require diverse actions on the part of both India and the United States in geopolitics, defense, and economics. But absent these changes, the transforming U.S.-India relationship will, for all the eye-catching headlines both positive and negative, make little difference to really altering the global power configurations in ways that benefit both nations.

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