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What Good is Great Power Status for India?

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"India is better positioned than most to stake a claim to become a pole in a multipolar world, it is not preordained to do so. The pursuit of great power status is a choice and one that India need not make. Great power status would likely end up costing the country more than it would be worth."

"India [is] determined to play on the big stage, even change the stage itself where necessary to advance its interests," writes Subramanyam Jaishankar, Indian foreign minister, in his new book *Why Bharat Matters* (Rupa, 2024). It is a declaration of New Delhi's growing great power aspiration. Interlocked with it is India's intent to promote a multipolar world, which Jaishankar views as a "foundational goal". New Delhi's foreign policy ambitions are often couched in high-sounding, cryptic language. But, evidently, it increasingly envisions a world order dominated by a few great powers, including itself.

> … [The] debate misses out that great power status is not determined by merely tallying up economic or military figures. Perceptions matter much more.

The issue has come to the forefront in the last few months owing to the US President Donald Trump's bullying tactics in the ongoing Indo-US trade dispute. The squabble has pushed New Delhi to proclaim its quest to become a great power all the more loudly. In September, Jaishankar warned that American actions were accelerating the world's shift towards multipolarity. "Overall, India must operate in a multi-polar environment while itself preparing to emerge as a pole," he declared in October.

Although India is better positioned than most countries to stake a claim to become a pole in a multipolar world, it is not preordained to do so. The pursuit of great power status is a choice. And one that India does not need to make.

Great power status would likely end up costing the country more than it would be worth. To become a pole is economically pricey, diplomatically challenging, and will place India at the frontline of geopolitical power competition. New Delhi would get little in exchange in terms of security or global influence. Its experience with the 1998 nuclear tests is instructive here. While they brought the country greater international prestige, they did not improve its national security or earn it greater diplomatic influence.

India neither faces internal pressure (nationalist urge towards expansionism) nor external pressure (inescapable rivalry with another great power) that compels it to pursue the great power status. It has other paths open to it. It can choose strategies to avoid the siren song of pole position while continuing its economic rise, acting as a global leader, and maintaining its security interests in the neighbourhood and along the border. Rather than promote multipolarity, its best bet may be to lead a collective charge against polarity altogether. To do so requires boldness of vision and shedding the infatuation with the doctrine of *realpolitik*.

It is a Choice

The debate on India's great power status is often between those who see its rise as inexorable because of its large economy, population, and growth rate, and those who see its rise as implausible owing to its low per capita income or its yawning economic gap with China and the US.

This debate misses out that great power status is not determined by merely tallying up economic or military figures. Perceptions matter much more. History is replete with instances of countries with enormous material advantages that were not counted as great powers, as well as countries that managed to establish themselves as poles despite their pitifully small resource base.

> Countries rise to great power status through a series of choices. Contenders choose to trudge deeper and deeper into the balance of power competition.

In the mid-1990s, Japan's economy and defence expenditure were the second largest in the world. In 1995, according to the World Bank, Japan's gross domestic product (GDP) peaked at $5.5 trillion, reaching 73% of US GDP. It is the closest any country has ever

come to matching the American economy in the last 150 years (China's GDP is 64% of US GDP today).

Nonetheless, the 1990s is remembered as the height of American unipolarity, not the era when Japan rose to great power status. In contrast, 19th century Prussia had one tenth of the population of Russia or France and a small economy. Yet, the country was reckoned as a great power because of its excessive militarisation and cunning diplomacy.

To be sure, a large economy and powerful military are usually preconditions to becoming a pole but they are not sufficient on their own. A country becomes a great power if other countries, especially other great powers, start seeing it as one. It is a club that one can only enter if those already inside let you in. Other poles may treat a country as the new pole because they have come to believe it is an existential threat to their security, or because they want to use the new great power as a counterweight to some other great power.

To make a bid to enter the club, countries must wade into the balance of power game. A pole, premised on the scientific notion of electromagnetic poles, is wedded to the idea of balance in opposition. All great powers in a multipolar system must constantly watch and counter each other's every move to ensure that no one gets an upper hand. Of necessity, they must view each other with a zero-sum outlook, believing that another's gain is their loss. They may ally with each other as marriages of convenience or become neutral to gain temporary advantage, but maintaining the balance of power remains the overarching dynamic.

The balance of power game pushes states to pursue other trappings of pole status: claims that their interests stretch across the globe, domination of smaller states, and greater influence in international institutions. People sometimes confuse these trappings as pathways to achieving great power status, instead of recognising that they are the symptoms not the cause. France has globe-spanning interests, military deployments in several countries, and a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), yet it is not considered a great power because other great powers do not see it as a potential balancer.

A country rises to great power status through a series of interlocking choices. It chooses to trudge deeper and deeper into the balance of power competition. Other great powers choose to view it as a great power owing to either their threat perception or strategic interests. Choices of each actor affect the others.

India's Changing Worldview

The last few years have witnessed a marked shift in India's attitudes on multipolarity and great power status. Previous Indian governments, under Prime Ministers Atal Behari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, questioned the traditional concept of great power and viewed multipolarity as diffusion of power through multilateralism. In recent years, Indian officials have become explicit that their ultimate goal is to attain great power status in a multipolar world.

> Even the current Indo-US rift ... is wrapped up in the issue of India's great power status. In the past few years, Washington has grown frustrated with New Delhi's foot dragging in balancing China.

In his writings, Jaishankar declares that India's quest is "to ascend the global hierarchy". He calls for greater assertiveness and "rebalancing" against "intimidation" and argues that India's strategic horizons are expanding to become planet-wide. He sees the multipolar order as "a bazaar, with more players, less rules and great volatility" where states are busy in "single-minded pursuit of national interest".

This shift stems partly from changing international circumstances and partly from a right-wing nationalist worldview espoused by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which conceives of India as a civilisational power.

Another key driver is the current government's desire to position itself as a break from the past. Officials of the Modi government believe that foreign policy under the previous governments was beset by risk-averse attitudes, lack of assertiveness, and an absence of hard-nosed realism. India's past engagement with the world was characterised by its "discomfort with hard power", according to Jaishankar. The Modi government is intent on correcting these mistakes by embracing a more *realpolitik* outlook.

India's growing great power ambitions coincide with a favourable international environment. Despite its material weaknesses, India's claim to pole status is buoyed by a persistent global narrative. When former UK prime minister Tony Blair declared that the US, China, and India will be the only three superpowers by the middle of this century, he was articulating a widely held perception. This image is partly owing to India's economic size, population, growth rate, and population, and partly thanks to the boosterish (and

sometimes hyperbolic) economic forecasts it has enjoyed for over two decades.

More importantly, several major actors in the system are incentivised to promote India's great power claims. Since the mid-2000s, the US has pursued an avowed policy "to help India become a major world power in the 21st century", as a counterweight to China. Russia has even an older policy to bolster India's great power status and promote a multipolar world as a way to undercut American unipolarity. European states have encouraged India's pole status from time to time for their own interests. (Revealingly, Chinese commentaries often dismiss India's claim as a great power because New Delhi's elevation does not serve Beijing's interests.)

> Tellingly, during its decades-long campaign for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, New Delhi has never adequately explained what it hopes to accomplish through the permanent seat.

Even the current Indo-US rift, ostensibly a dispute over Russian oil, is wrapped up in the issue of India's great power status. In the past few years, Washington has grown frustrated with New Delhi's reluctance to balance China. Even after two decades of Indo-US strategic partnership and post-Galwan Sino-Indian estrangement, New Delhi has not joined the American coalition to wage an all-out campaign against Beijing.

This frustration has been articulated in terms of strategic autonomy versus American alliance, but at its core, the issue is that India is not behaving like a great power. If India were to start behaving so; that is, jump into the balance of power game with both feet, it is bound to clash with China and move closer to the US, goes the thinking in Washington. Otherwise, India is of little use to the US as a strategic partner.

Under President Donald Trump, Washington has switched tactics from encouragement to coercion, but the ultimate goal remains the same as before: to draw India into the great power competition. Trump's publicly heavy-handed treatment of India is also strategic. It is a reminder that New Delhi's bid for great power status rests heavily on the Washington's support. Either it gives into American wishes or the US will downgrade it to an ordinary country and start treating it as such.

The Trump administration is betting that while the current rift will be repaired, India will heed to its threat, and start behaving differently. The long-term effect of American strong-arm tactics remains to be seen. It may turn out that the narrative of India's rise is so well entrenched that even Washington cannot reverse it.

The Trade-Offs

As growing Indian ambitions and American pressure shove it along the great power path, the central question to ask is what will India gain and what will it lose. Pole status may earn India a proverbial "seat at the table" to shape the global order. However, it is unclear what it will do with that seat.

Visions of global order articulated by New Delhi are not all that dissimilar from the status quo. Most of the changes it would like to see in the international institutions are incremental. Often its demands for global governance reforms boil down to greater influence for itself, but just for influence's sake. Tellingly, during its decades-long campaign for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, New Delhi has never adequately explained what it hopes to accomplish through the permanent seat.

> A multipolar world with only three or four poles will exacerbate the enormous power differential between India and the top two states.

Recent years have witnessed the rise of rhetoric that India is a civilisational power, tying its international prestige to its nationalist self-conception. However, the country need not play the great power game to satisfy this urge. The Modi government has already demonstrated how such nationalist urges can be channelled to benign formulations such as India as Vishwaguru. Notably, New Delhi also does not have a territorial expansionist agenda that would put it in conflict with another great power (notwithstanding the fanciful demands to recover Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir which that have started to appear in some corners of the Indian political discourse).

Great power status is also unlikely to shore up Indian security against its two great rivals-Pakistan and China. Consider India's decision to test nuclear weapons in 1998. The tests indeed brought India greater prestige and paved the way for it to become a de facto nuclear power. However, they also destabilised subcontinental security by prompting Pakistani nuclear tests, which, in turn, encouraged more aggressive Pakistani behaviour and locked the two countries in a cycle of crises which continues to this day. There is also scant

evidence that the presence of nuclear weapons has had a significant impact on the Sino-Indian border dispute.

Set against such benefits, the costs to of pursuing a pole status are three fold. First, there are the usual expenses of acquiring and maintaining great power paraphernalia such as a large military, power projection capabilities, foreign aid programmes, and security commitments abroad. Such a build-up can be only offset by diverting resources from domestic development, an important issue for India given its extremely low per capita income.

Second, a great power evokes suspicion and fear from smaller countries by its very nature. Outside South Asia, India is viewed as a relatively benign actor by most countries because it usually avoids contentious issues and an overbearing diplomatic attitude. Their perception may change if India were to assume a pole position, making its diplomatic engagement more complex and costly.

Finally, to be a great power is to put a target on one's back. Since a pole can significantly alter the global balance of power, it appears as a potential existential threat to other poles. They are compelled to scrutinise its every move closely and meet it with countervailing action, under the belief that it would be better to overreact than under-react. Relationships between great powers appear zero sum, making cooperation extremely difficult.

In New Delhi's old vision of multipolarity-diffusion of power through multilateralism-India rose along with several other nations, including Iran, Turkey, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Japan, France, and Germany. However, a multipolar system premised on *realpolitik* and balance of power principles would not countenance the rise of so many poles. Due to a combination of historical, geographical, and economic factors, most of these countries will likely remain regional powers or junior partners to other great powers.

A multipolar world with only three or four poles will exacerbate the enormous power differential between India and the top two states. Intense balancing pressures from both Washington and Beijing will narrow New Delhi's manoeuvrability and force it to choose sides. The proponents of closer US-India alignment have been critical of India's policy to promote multipolarity, without realising that a multipolar world would actually push India closer to the US.

A Cusp Power

On the balance, the costs of great power status outweigh the benefits for India. Thankfully, there are at least two alternative paths open to it.

One, India may position itself as what may be called as "cusp power", a nation with latent potential to become a pole but reluctant to translate that potential into actual power. This is not to advocate a policy of submission and appeasement. India may defend its interests assertively. But it means that India will not let its security interests needlessly stretch and will not permanently lock itself in a balance of power competition. It will not lose sight of the fact that differences and disputes with great powers do not make a conflict inevitable.

> …[India's] actions show that it is still hesitant to pursue great power status full bore. India's defence expenditure to GDP ratio today is the lowest it has been since Independence.

Washington and Beijing may try to win New Delhi over to their side or probe its resolve but in the long run, strategic logic would dictate that they try to ensure that India remains at the cusp rather than pursue pole status and upset the global balance. They will have to exercise a policy of self-restraint, lest they push it into the arms of their rival. New Delhi would not only gain greater manoeuvring room but also the ability to reap benefits of cooperation with both sides.

Interestingly, this strategy is not all that different from the current Indian foreign policy. Even though New Delhi's desire for a pole position has begun to intensify, the actual policy is yet to catch up.

Its actions show that it is still hesitant to pursue great power status full bore. India's defence-expenditure-to-GDP ratio today is the lowest it has been since Independence. During the Cold War, it hovered between 3% and 3.5%. In the 1990s and 2000s, it hovered around 2.75%. Since 2010, the average defence-expenditure-to-GDP ratio has been 2.5%.

New Delhi restrained itself from excessive escalation during the post-Galwan crisis with China and remained open to rapprochement with Beijing. Similarly, it has been circumspect in dealings with the US during the current deadlock, despite ample provocation from Trump. Such a non-combative approach is a signal that it is not interested in picking fights, but looking for international cooperation.

The drawback of this strategy is that it assumes rational behaviour on the part of other great powers. They may doubt India's intentions and see threats where there are none. Or their perspective may change if a legitimate geopolitical crisis spirals out of control. The strategy only works until the other great powers let it. If they push it India too far, eventually it would have to join the great power competition.

Moving against Polarity

A bolder alternative strategy would be to resist polarity altogether. It is important to remember that the question of polarity has come to the forefront because of the developing Sino-US rivalry, which is the greatest destabilising factor in today's geopolitics.

At its core, the rivalry is bilateral, stemming from American anxiety to protect its global primacy from China's rise. Yet its ripple effects carry negative consequences for most of the world in terms of heightened tensions, economic disruptions, weakening international cooperation, and pressure to choose sides. Most countries would be better off containing the rivalry and engaging with both nations.

> New Delhi's geopolitical and economic strategy today hinges on exploiting the Sino-US rivalry rather than containing it.

Containing and provincialising the Sino-US rivalry would require a collective effort. India can provide leadership in rallying the world. This may sound strikingly similar to the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), bound to immediately turn off many who view it as an archaic, failed ideological project.

However, the movement's underlying logic was sound. NAM members-mostly recently decolonised states from the Global South-were confronting a host of challenges related to nation-building, economic development, and security. They had far more pressing concerns than the Soviet-American power competition.

Current conditions allow for better odds of the containment of bipolarity than the Cold War era. The global economy is much more deeply integrated and consequently the countries are incentivised not to choose sides. The current rivalry is not an ideological fight and so lacks the normative legitimacy of the Cold War.

Further, the global South countries are more powerful and sophisticated today than they were in the 1950s and 1960s. It is harder to coerce or seduce them. Finally, by the time the global South countries decolonised and entered the international system, the Cold War was already the status quo. So, it was easier to accept. The current Sino-US rivalry is actually disrupting the status quo and trying to change it into a completely new order. Consequently, it evokes deeper resistance.

New Delhi's geopolitical and economic strategy today hinges on exploiting the Sino-US rivalry rather than containing it. However, as the recent India-US contretemps over tariffs have demonstrated, India's current strategy is not as reliable and sustainable as it first appeared.

As the rivalry intensifies and stretches out, it would will constrain India's strategic autonomy and limit its choices. Leading a global project to manage the polarisation is a risky gambit that would come at considerable short-term sacrifices for India. Nevertheless, in the long run, it will not only expand options for India but for the rest of the world as well, including the US and China.

Just because India can become a great power, it does not mean that it should. It has choices. Some choices will curtail its freedom down the road and others will expand it.

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