

**Symposium**  
**on**  
**“Next Steps for India’s Growth & Development”**  
**at**  
**Harvard Kennedy School**  
**December 6, 2019**  
**India As A Leading Power**

**Remarks by Sandeep Chakravorty, Consul General**

The University of Chicago historian William McNeil has described the nature of power and its relationship with notions of fairness and ethics in the following words: “It seems unlikely that recent and prospective enlargement of human capacities to organise and exert power will be permanently arrested by scruples against its use. **Power in short ingests weaker centres of power or stimulates its rival centres of power to strengthen themselves.**

This fact has dominated the whole history of mankind. This represents the realist school of international relations where any ethical anchor is dispensable but does reflect

current geopolitical reality substantially. In aspiring to be a leading power India too is placing its bet on sinews of power, current and prospective.

In India's case the likelihood of being 'ingested' by a more powerful entity can be rejected. The question is whether India can be or is stimulated to emerge as a center of power.

McNeil has described how such a transference of power may take place from an established to an aspiring one: "No population can overtake or surpass the rest of the world without using the most efficient and powerful instruments known anywhere on earth, and by definition such instruments are located at the world centres of wealth and power- wherever they may be. Thus any geographical displacement of world leadership must be prefaced by successful borrowing from previously established centres of the highest prevailing skills. We have several examples of this from history. The Roman empire borrowed heavily from the Greek civilization and

culture in its march towards pre-eminence. During the pursuit of dominance the Arabs borrowed heavily from the Indians, Chinese, Central Asians and Persians, particularly in mathematics, astronomy and medical science. The numerals that are commonly known as Arabic numerals are in fact of Indian origin.

In more contemporary times we have seen US building its strengths on the basis of skills and technology originating in Europe. The Meiji restoration of Japan is yet another example.

But the most recent example is a spectacular one, i.e. of China. In its 4 decades of opening up it has soaked in Western knowledge and technology not unlike a giant sponge. During this time it has been a student and a good apprentice. It has bided its time.

In McNeil's terms, a geographical displacement of power from the trans-Atlantic to the trans-Pacific is happening with China at the centre of power. The most

obvious and consequential manifestation of the shift in power from the West to the East is the geopolitical competition between the United States and its challenger China. While the US remains the predominant power China is obviously not satisfied with the status quo and intends to displace the US from its preeminent position.

Let us try to understand how the displacement of power happens:

- 1) Countries borrow knowledge systems and advanced technologies from apex centers and adopt them;
- 2) this is followed by a phase of assimilation, mastering and internalizing of borrowed technologies and knowledge systems;
- 3) the emerging center of power is able to generate new knowledge and technologies in a relatively autonomous manner.

This is when the displacement of power becomes a reality and contestation between the established center of

power and the emerging or emergent center of power begins to become acute.

China is probably in the second phase going to the third phase. In some areas it may well be in the third phase such as AI or quantum computing among others.

Where is India? In my personal view, I think India is mostly in the first phase while we have our centers of excellence in the second phase be it in our space programme, computing, nuclear technology among others. Our aspiration is to graduate comprehensively to the second phase and have our presence felt in the third phase.

Geopolitical factors favour the emergence of India as a leading center of power, co-existing, collaborating and competing with other major powers. India's Indo-Pacific vision exemplifies its ambition of being a "leading power". At the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the "destiny of the world will be deeply

influenced by the course of developments in the Indo-Pacific region". Sheer numbers alone elevate the importance of the Indo-Pacific and its influence across the world. It is now home to more than 65% of the world's population who collectively produce more than 60% of global GDP. Over half the world's trade passes through this region, and it hosts the fastest-growing armada of naval fleets along with seven nuclear powers. This region will also have a disproportionately high contribution to global growth in the decades ahead and will therefore script the new terms of trade, financial flows and investments, growth, humanitarian assistance, peace and security.

China, which was the first mover, now finds itself having to deal with pushback of several kinds to its own expansive plans. There is little doubt that new pathways to a new order needs to be discovered soon.

India accepts this reality, and is willing to embrace greater responsibility in anchoring a "rules-based

democratic order" in the region. India's geostrategic vision for the Indo-Pacific is unique. We are against pitting against any country or participate in zero-sum competitions "between free and repressive visions of world order". We also do not accept propositions which creates perverse dependencies through economic statecraft and military coercion in a manner better suited to the Cold War era.

Instead, India is positioning itself to take a different path - one that does not see the world in binaries, bifurcated between partners and allies on one side, and competitors and adversaries on the other. India offers an opportunity for engagement and dialogue to all states, big and small, democratic and authoritarian, advanced or developing.

The new vision moves away from conceptions of non-alignment or strategic autonomy, tools of foreign policy that may have outlived their corresponding geopolitical utility. When Prime Minister Modi stated that

"the Indo-Pacific region is not a limited club of members", he signalled India's intention to lead a new configuration of states, guided by communities that yearn for development, markets that require connectivity and nations that seek security. Despite its aversion of alliances, India is a keen player in the evolving security architecture in Asia. The new American focus on Indo-Pacific has brought India at the center.

To put in place a vision that shapes the region and attracts others, India needs to script its own expectations from four key relationships i.e. with China, US, India's Neighbors and the Global Institutional Networks .

The Asian story cannot be scripted by China alone, whether it is on infrastructure connectivity or managing security disputes. The economic prosperity of the region will be implicated by the strength of the India-China partnership. It is in this context that the engagements with

China embodying the Wuhan and the Mamallapuram spirit need to be seen .

The US is a key partner and will be instrumental in making India a \$ 5 tn economy. There is enormous ballast, momentum and dynamism in this relationship and this will be the key to India's emergence as a leading power. I will not get into details of the transformation that has taken place in our relationship in the last two decades. Suffice to say it is a mature relationship bringing benefits to the people of both countries.

India is actively engaging with its neighbours and except for Pakistan, India is now scripting new chapters in cooperation with all of them. A good example is the transformation in India-Bangladesh ties, of which I speak from personal experience.

Our multilateral engagement is also vigorous with the global institutional framework. So while we will be patient for getting a permanent seat at the UN Security Council,

our participation in other forums be it G-20, BRICS, SCO or IBSA is active and purposeful. A particularly appealing product of our multilateral engagement is India's leadership in the Paris Climate Change Accord and the setting up of the International Solar Alliance.

The world has a stake in India fulfilling its immense potential. This needs to be critically leveraged to encourage a critical mass of capital and technology to flow into India to accelerate the Indian growth. As a vibrant and pluralist democracy, India shares political values of its more powerful partners and this is an advantage. The cosmopolitan temperament of India's people and their ability to handle immense diversity and adversity are unparalleled civilizational assets in dealing with a globalizing world.

We are at a rare moment, at a specific juncture in history, when I feel the conditions are propitious for India to emerge as a leading power.

India has already been a leading power of sorts for quite a while. With our size, population, GDP in PPP terms and also in dollar terms, we have significant power projection capability in our immediate region, some nuclear capability, impressive space capability, an increasingly influential 35 million and more strong Diaspora, it can hardly be denied that India is not a leading power. But more has to be done, particularly in improving the lives of our people and providing services for the global good and to the global commons. But transformation of India is on and we have to work on this assiduously.

Let us see what could be *inter alia* the factors in the transformation of India:

- Ruling political dispensation enjoys unprecedented political capital.
- Strong, charismatic, focussed leadership. Absence of dissidence which used to plague previous governments.

- **Ambitious goal setting:** making India a \$5 tn economy in the next five years, 100 million toilets by 2019, drinking water to all homes in next 5 years, all homes electrified by 2019.
- **Economy:** India is a \$ 3tn economy and about to become the 3rd largest economy in the next 5 years.
- There is a willingness to make difficult choices- demonetization, GST, IBC, corporate tax reduction, ambitious social sector spending, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Universal Health Care for 500 mn Indians under the Ayushman Bharat program, Housing For All, Electricity for All, Connecting All villages, Financial Inclusion as part of the Jan Dhan Program among others.
- India's Finance Minister recently said in New York that the huge mandate given to the Government provided the basis to the government to make deep and far reaching economic reforms. A bold step was

taken in terms of reducing corporate taxation to 15% for new companies which is the lowest in the world.

- Frontal attack on corruption in high places, reduction in mega scams.
- **Demographic Dividend:** in 2020, the average age in India will be 29 years old (compared to 37 in China) -
- Making India a compliant society - making India an honest country.
- Cleaning up the banks, balance sheets, saying no to crony capitalism.
- A problem solving approach of the Government.  
Bringing closure to issues, Ayodhya verdict, changing the narrative and trying out a new development oriented approach in Kashmir
- **Military:** Strong military, third largest in manpower, strong in defence acquisitions, creating relationships with major powers such as the US. Has power projection capabilities in HADR roles. The 2004 Tsunami was a good example.

- **Technology:** India has been a target of technology denial regimes such as NSG, MTCR, Australia Group and Wassenaar Arrangements. We have now become signatory to all except NSG. India is now in a more comfortable position with respect to accessing technologies. Greater IPR protection also available.
- **Domestic Technology and Innovation** is being given impetus. There are several pioneering initiatives in place and India's world ranking in innovation is rising.
- **Soft Power:** India has unparalleled soft power attributes. Whether it is Yoga, Indian Cinema, Music, Cuisine. It generates tremendous goodwill and support for India all over the world. In Soft Power I daresay we have a big advantage over several world powers. Our challenge of course is our ability or inability to monetize it to the advantage of our peoples as efforts are sporadic and insufficient.

The scenario that will emerge as this transformation is underway is illuminating. In economic power there are or will be only two countries ahead of us i.e. US and China and there are much ahead so we are not in competition. In fact with the US our aspiration is to work closely with the US to achieve our ambitions as there are remarkable coincidence of values and views on how we see the world. Russia, and Japan are witnessing demographic decline and Europe, too, is a fast ageing continent. Africa, the LAC , ASEAN and are competition but may lack India's depth of strength in terms of economy, market size, demography, technological and innovation prowess.

-----

In the ultimate analysis it is how the country concerned grows strong internally and is thus enabled to project its strength externally that matters. How this happens and how it is done has to be discussed *ad nauseum* everywhere. It is like being on a cycle. We need to keep pedalling for not stalling and falling down. There is

no leading from behind. Even so, it is merely the beginning of a decadal journey, which will see India shoulder the expectations that befit the world's largest democratic economy.

## **Conclusion**

After independence India had the choice to be satisfied with economic progress and leave its security questions to be addressed by other major powers. Countries like Australia, Canada and Japan followed this model. India could not accept this for the simple reason that its economic, political and security interests are a function of its unique history, geography, polity and society. India's ambitions of shaping the international order to its own advantage are driven by the desire to transform India into a modern country and abolish poverty, hunger and illiteracy. The strategic elite sees foreign policy primarily in light of domestic priorities.

India, as a rising power, has a different set of interests, capabilities and strategic culture from other major powers. Former National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon summarizes the Indian way of conducting foreign policy “as a combination of strategic boldness in conception and tactical caution in implementation, by a fundamentally realistic approach masked by normative rhetoric, by comfort in a plural and diverse world and by a consciousness of India’s destiny as a great power”. Till the time India becomes a great power, the world will see an India focused on increasing its power as well as taking more responsibilities globally.

&&&&&