



BRAHMA CHELLANEY

Professor of Strategic Studies at the New Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research

Whether it is the “incredible India” that the current Indian tourism ad campaign proclaims or a “credulous India” that refuses to learn from history is no easy question. But whether India is a world power in the making or just a large subcontinental state with global-power pretensions is an issue that ought to be examined in the context of both history and the ongoing shifts in economic and political power in the world.

In 1820, at the advent of the industrial revolution, according to an Asian Development Bank study, Asia’s share of the world’s economy totaled 60 percent. China and India alone made up nearly half of the global GDP. Asia as a whole then went into sharp decline over the next 125 years. Today, it already accounts for 40 percent of global production — a figure that could, according to some projections, rise to 60 percent by 2050, when three of the world’s four largest economies (China, India, the U.S. and Japan) would be Asian. So, Asia is seeking to regain the preeminence it held for most of 2,000 years before the industrial revolution allowed the West to vault ahead.

The ongoing power shifts are primarily linked to Asia’s phenomenal economic rise, the speed and scale of which has no parallel in world history. Today, the world is not yet multipolar. But it is no longer unipolar, as it had been from the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse to at least the end of the 1990s. What we have is a world in transition. This may appear to some as a nonpolar world. But with the emergence of new players in the geopolitical marketplace, it is only a matter of time before multipolarity begins to characterize the international order.

The shifts in economic and political power foretell a much different world — a world characterized by a greater distribution of power, but also by new uncertainties. As history testifies, tectonic shifts in power are rarely quiet. Such shifts usually create volatility in the international system, even if such instability is short-lived. The new international divisiveness may reflect such a reality. Indeed, with the revolution in technology over the past 25 years, we live in a world of rapid change. But unlike in past history, the qualitative reordering of power now underway is due not to battlefield victories or military realignments but to a peaceful factor unique to the modern world: rapid economic growth.

While we know the world is in transition, we still do not know what the new order will look like. The impasse or lack of movement on key international issues, therefore, should not come as a surprise. These issues include climate change, financial volatility, nuclear disarmament, international terrorism, global pandemics, and the Doha round of world trade talks. The most pressing challenges today are international in nature and thus demand international responses or solutions. Yet the existing international institutions are proving inadequate to deal with such global challenges, in part because such institutions no longer reflect the prevailing power structure.

Against this background, what role can India play in the emerging global order, at a time when a key challenge is to improve global geopolitics by building a cooperative approach that transcends institutions whose structure is rooted in a world that no longer exists? We had mistakenly believed for long that greater economic interdependence by itself would improve geopolitics. In today’s market-driven world, trade is not usually constrained by political differences. Better politics thus is as important as better economics. As history testifies, flourishing economic ties do not guarantee moderation and restraint in the absence of progress to resolve political problems.

India’s growing geopolitical weight, high GDP growth rate, and abundant market opportunities have helped increase its international profile. It is widely perceived to be a key “swing state.” As a “swing” geopolitical factor, India has the potential to play a constructive role by promoting collaborative international approaches. It is obvious that new thinking and approaches are needed to bridge the emerging global fault lines and build great international cooperation and consensus on the larger geopolitical issues.

India has three strengths and three weaknesses relevant to a discussion of its role on the world stage. Let me spell out the strengths first.

1. Among its strengths is the fact that India has a long, historical record of being a great power and of playing a mainstream, cooperative role in international relations.

With its wealth of philosophy and a culture emphasizing compromise, conciliation, and creativity, India views the world as a stage not for civilizational wars but for building bridges and meeting common challenges. Over the centuries, Indian civilization has thrived on synthesis. This ability to synthesize is one of the great strengths that India needs to employ internationally.

2. Another of its strengths is that India symbolizes unity in diversity. India is the most diverse country in the country. With a sixth of humanity living within its borders, India is more linguistically, ethnically and religiously diverse than even the whole of Europe. India is where old traditions go hand-in-hand with post-modernity.

India has shown that unlike the traditionally homogenous societies of East Asia, a nation-state can manage diversity — and thrive on it.

3. A third strength is that India is the world's largest democracy. Democracy remains India's greatest asset. India is the only real democracy in the vast contiguous arc between Israel and Indonesia.

India will continue to pride itself as a model of a non-Western democracy. While the concepts of democracy, human rights and the rule of law are normally associated with the West, India can claim ancient traditions bestowing respect to such values. In this respect, the 1998 Nobel economics laureate, Amartya Sen, has cited the example of Emperor Ashoka in India, "who during the 3rd century B.C. covered the country with inscriptions on stone tablets about good behavior and wise governance, including a demand for basic freedoms for all — indeed he did not exclude women and slaves as Aristotle did."

India's weaknesses are also conspicuous.

1. India's most-glaring weaknesses — one that weighs it down regionally — is that its neighborhood is so chronically troubled that India confronts what has been described as a "tyranny of geography". As a result, it faces serious external threats from virtually all directions.

It is wedged in an arc of failing or authoritarian states that seek, in different ways, to undermine as a secular, multiethnic, pluralistic democracy.

To India's west lies "an arc of crises from Jordan to Pakistan" — to use the title of one of the workshops at this World Policy Conference. To its east are the problem states of Burma and Bangladesh. And its north is an increasingly assertive China, which became India's neighbor not due to geography but due to guns — by forcibly occupying Tibet in 1950-51.

As a result, India faces what my friend Stanley Weiss labels the "paradox of proximity." It has strategic partnerships with states distant — from the United States and the European Union, to Russia and Japan. But it faces existential threats from states proximate to it. South Asia accounts for just two percent of India's external trade.

Yet, as is apparent, India cannot become a world power (as opposed to being a world player), without freeing itself from such regional shackles. It can neither insulate itself from the troubles across its borders nor realize its full potential without playing the lead role to build cooperation and security in the region.

2. Given its troubled neighborhood and the ensuing spillover effects, it is hardly a surprise that another major weakness of India is its internal security.

In fact, nowhere is India's frailty more apparent than on internal security, which historically has been its Achilles heel. With one of the world's highest rates of terrorism, India today is battling underground extremists on multiple fronts: Pakistan-aided Islamists in Kashmir and elsewhere; Maoists rebels in a north-south corridor stretching from Nepal to its southeastern coastline; and separatists in the restive northeast region wedged between Burma, Bangladesh and China-annexed Tibet.



The biggest threat India confronts, of course, is from Pakistan-based jihadist groups that are carrying out daring assaults deep across the border. The terrorist bombings in several Indian cities in recent years have all been linked by investigators to Pakistani militant groups. These are the groups that U.S. National Intelligence Director John Negroponte told the Senate Intelligence Committee in 2006 “represent a persistent threat to regional stability and U.S. interests in South Asia and the Near-East.”

With a neighborhood more combustible than ever, India’s internal security is coming under growing pressure from external developments. But just as India has been battered by growing terrorism because of its location next to the global epicenter of terror, it could bear the brunt from its geographical proximity to an overly ambitious China.

3. A third national weakness is India’s splintered polity. For nearly two decades, coalition federal governments comprising multiple parties have become the national norm.

India and Japan are Asia’s most-established democracies and yet both confront political turbulence. But the political logjam in India is more acute than in Japan.

Worse, Indian democracy tends to function by the rule of parochial politics — in fact, by the lowest common denominator. Putting a forward-looking national agenda ahead of parochial short-term politics, therefore, is not easy.

Furthermore, partly due to its historical experiences, the Indian state is intrinsically cautious and shy rather than proactive. Today, however, India confronts a triple deficit in the key areas of national power — a leadership deficit, a strategic foresight deficit, and an idea deficit on how to make the country a world power. Old, tired, risk-averse leadership can hardly propel any country to greatness. But the leadership deficit extends far beyond India to a number of other important players in the world.

To conclude, India has important advantages that it could exploit to be the bridge between the East and the West. Despite its booming economy and rising international profile, it needs to address the strategic and institutional challenges it faces.

India’s future geopolitical direction, however, is clearly set. In the coming years, India will increasingly be aligned with the West economically. But, strategically, it can avail of multiple options, even as it moves from the nonalignment of its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to a contemporary, globalized practicality.

In keeping with this long-standing preference for policy independence, India is likely to retain the option to forge different partnerships with varied players to pursue a variety of interests in diverse settings. That means that from being nonaligned, it is likely to become multialigned, while tilting more towards the West even as it preserves the core element of nonalignment — strategic autonomy. In other words, India is likely to continue to chart its own course and make its own major decisions. A multialigned India pursuing omnidirectional cooperation for mutual benefit with key players will be better positioned to advance its interests and promote cooperative international approaches in the changed world.

Through forward thinking and clarity of foreign-policy goals, India can truly play the role of a bridge between the East and the West.