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India: a regional and/or a world power

Three main questions were discussed during the workshop:

The historical perspective :

Two very different assessments were provided by our Indian experts:

For Brahma Chellaney, India has a long historical record of being a great power. If India has never made any civilisation wars, it has been very successful in synthesising the various influences that it received and in finding compromise between contrasting aspirations. India has been able to build its own democracy mixing unity and diversity. This democratic experience can be related to the ancient history of India, like the reign of Emperor Asoka. As such, India should find its rightful place amongst the others world powers.

On the contrary, for Shankar Bajpai, all along its history, India was an object of power. It has never exercised power outside its territory. In a way, the external policy of Nehru was a heritage of this inability to project Indian power abroad: pacifism, moralism, and inexperience were the main traits of this policy. It led to small budgets on defence, a propensity to lecture others countries and a quite naïve way of interpreting the policies of its competitors, especially China. This kind of policies led to the defeat of 1962, from the hands of China. It is not sure that India has fully taken in account the lessons of this defeat: It has still to understand that the aim of a foreign policy is to project values and to protect interests.

In spite of these differences, there was a large agreement between the speakers on three points:

-The balance of powers in the world is shifting from the developed world (the North) to emerging countries in particular in Asia. Brahma Chellaney reminds us that, in 1820, Asia contributed to 60% of the world GDP. Today, the share of Asia and China together is 50%.

-India is to-day a global power, a concept which is a better description of the situation of India than world power.

-Economic success is the key driver of the new perception of India, a new perception not only from the other powers, but also, and maybe more importantly, from itself. India is a nation confident in its future.

India and its neighbours.

- For Brahma Chellaney, India is a victim of « the tyranny of geography ». India is surrendered by failing states, “an arc of failing states”. North of India, you have Tibet who was forcefully occupied by China. The occupation was conceded by Nehru, but also by M. Vajpayee, then minister of foreign affairs, when he went to China in 1979. You have also Nepal, now a state controlled by a Maoist party. There is no reason to believe that this new government will be friendly to India. On the East, you have Bangladesh and Burma. The relationship with Bangladesh is very difficult with a lot of security issues (naxalites, terrorist infiltration, uncontrolled immigration). With Burma, it is only very recently that India recognised that this country was sliding under a Chinese influence and devised a policy to react. On the West, Pakistan is running the risk of becoming a failed state. The present President of Pakistan, Mr. Zardari, seems to be willing to improve Pakistan’ relations with India. But what is his margin of manoeuvre? South, you have Sri Lanka, in the middle of a civil war, which has some consequences for India, even if this Indian government is doing its best not to interfere, because of the disastrous outcome of its intervention between 1987 and 1989.

- All the speakers agree on this analysis. But there was a discussion on the causes and consequences of this situation.

For Brahma Chellaney, the main reason of these failures is the weakness of India, unable to successfully impose its interest. For the other speakers, the situation is more complex. Sometimes India was not enough forceful, but sometimes it was too forceful. In this context, the question of Kashmir was raised. The failure of India to win the hearts and the minds of the people of the Valley is patent but not everyone agrees on the causes of this failure.

The consequences of this situation are debatable. For M. Bajpai, they should not be exaggerated. It is a fact of life which will not impede dramatically the foreign policy of India. But it is often argued that India cannot expect to be considered as a world power if it is unable to be the undisputed leader of South Asia.

Challenges facing India:

-Internal policy: Brahma Chellaney has a very negative view of the present political class in India. It is a very fragmented establishment with a lot of new political parties based on personnel allegiance, on castes and on ethnicity. It is also a political class led by old age leaders like Advani 81 years' old or Manmohan Singh, 76. The possibility of a success of the "third way" in the next legislative election which must be held before May 2009 was briefly discussed. The "third way" will regroup around Mrs Mayawati, chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, the parties of the left and the secular parties presently not allied with the Congress. Some of the speakers believed that was a real alternative, others were more doubtful and forecasted the victory of the alliance led by the BJP.

-External policy: All speakers agree that India will move from being a non-aligned country to a "multialigned" country. India could become the bridge between the USA and the traditional non aligned countries but India will not become an exclusive ally of the USA. In spite of nuances in the position of political parties, there is a large agreement on the preservation of the fully independent status of India. For Jean-Luc Racine, India is now a "post-post colonial country". It has overcome the traumas of its colonial past and the limitations of the Nehruvian paradigm. It believes that globalisation is a real opportunity which should be seized with pragmatism.

-Economic policy: India should be able to go through the present financial crisis without too many damages. It has ample foreign exchange reserves, most of its banking sector is still under state control and its external trade is still a relatively small percentage of its GDP. On a longer term, its growing saving rate, its demographic advantage should ensure a continuation of its growth, maybe at a slower path. Much will depend of the capacity to reform of the next government