

Indian Foreign Policy and China

Harsh V Pant

Abstract

Indian foreign policy seems to have been unable to forge a coherent response towards China despite the fact that it is India's nearest rival for geo-political influence. This article argues that this is rooted in domestic constraints that have made it difficult for India to carve out a coherent foreign policy vis-à-vis China. While China has displayed significant consistency in its dealings with India, the latter seems satisfied in muddling along and anxious to keep China pleased. This lack of a guiding strategic framework in India's China policy can have grave implications for India's national security interests as well as for its emergence as a global player in future.

The global political architecture is undergoing a transformation with power increasingly shifting from the West to the East, according to most political observers.¹ The two most populous nations, China and India, are on their way to becoming economic powerhouses and are shedding their reticence in asserting their global profiles. Japan is gradually raising its military profile and the Southeast Asian economies are back in business after the setbacks of the 1997 financial crisis. Whether it is such hopeful prospects or the challenges ahead in the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, and Kashmir, it is clear that this new century will, in all likelihood, be an Asian century.

The future of this Asian century will to a large extent depend upon the relationship between the two regional giants, China and India. According to the United States National Intelligence Council Report titled "Mapping the Global Future," by 2020, the international community will have to confront the military, political and economic dimensions of the rise of China and India. This report likened the emergence of China and India in the early 21st century to the rise of Germany in the 19th and America in the 20th, with impacts potentially as dramatic.² The import of their bilateral relationship is not lost on China and India. In one of his meetings with the

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Indian Prime Minister, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao is reported to have remarked: "When we shake hands, the whole world will be watching."³ As of today, however, the trajectory of the India-China relationship remains as complex as ever and difficult to decipher despite positive developments in the last few years.

The puzzle that this article attempts to explore is the lack of a coherent Indian foreign policy approach vis-à-vis China despite the fact that China is India's nearest rival for geo-political influence. According to standard *realist* theoretical paradigm in international relations, states respond to their structural conditions and do their utmost to tackle the most prominent challenges to their security. Yet, Indian foreign policy seems to have been unable to forge a coherent response towards a rising China that affects its security interests in many ways.

This article is not an attempt to explicate India-China relations in detail.⁴ Rather it is an attempt to examine the reasons for the lack of a long-term strategic vision in India's China policy. This article argues that this lack of a strategic approach has to do with domestic political constraints that have made it difficult for India to carve out a coherent foreign policy vis-à-vis China. While China has displayed a remarkable consistency in its dealings with India, India seems satisfied in muddling along from one high-level visit to another and anxious to keep China pleased. The absence of a guiding strategic framework in India's China policy can have grave implications for India's national security interests as well as for its emergence as a global player.

Cooperation or Conflict?

While realising fully well that it would take decades to seriously compete with the US for global hegemony, China has focused its strategic energies on Asia. Its foreign policy is aimed at enhancing its economic and military prowess to achieve regional hegemony in Asia. China's recent emphasis on projecting its rise as peaceful is aimed at allaying the concerns of its neighbours lest they try to counterbalance its growing influence.⁵ China's readiness to negotiate with other regional states and to be an economically "responsible" power is also a signal to other states that there are greater benefits in allying with China rather than opposing its rise in any manner. China realises that it has thrived because it devoted itself to economic development while letting the US police the region and the world. Even as

it decries American hegemony, its leaders envision *Pax Americana* extending well into the 21st century, at least until China becomes a middle-class society and, if present trends continue, the world's largest economy.

However, while declaring that it will be focusing on internal socio-economic development for the next few decades, China has actively pursued policies to prevent the rise of other regional powers, or at least to limit their development relative to itself. In case of India, this manifests itself in its cultivation of Pakistan as a close ally. From supplying nuclear and missile technologies to building its military infrastructure, China has done all it can to help Pakistan be an effective counterweight to India. And this policy has largely succeeded. While India no longer seems to enjoy its earlier conventional superiority vis-à-vis Pakistan⁶, possession of nuclear weapons by both nations ensures that any step that India takes to strengthen its nuclear weapons profile is viewed by the international community as highly destabilising in the context of the fear of South Asia becoming a "nuclear flashpoint". China has thereby been successful in emerging as a "responsible" global player, despite its questionable nuclear and missile proliferation record, while the international community rails at India for making the world much more dangerous.

China's attempts to increase its influence in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, its territorial claims on parts of India such as Arunachal Pradesh, its lack of support for India's membership to the United Nations Security Council and other regional and global organisations, all point towards China's attempts at preventing the rise of India as a regional and global player. It is this strategy that China has consistently pursued. In fact, this strategy has been so successful that some observers feel India is off China's diplomatic radar.⁷ This perception apparently is undergoing a revision as other major powers, especially the US, start courting India. The US is already looking at India as an important ally and the recently signed Indo-US civilian nuclear cooperation agreement is a testament to the growing strength of US-India ties. It is instructive that after US declared its ambition of helping India achieve the status of world power, China reacted swiftly and since then has been referring to India as a global power as opposed to a regional one, a formulation that China preferred before.

In contrast to China's well-laid out policy vis-à-vis India, India has from time to time oscillated from going ballistic over China to a sort of acquiescence. There appears to be no coherent long-term strategy vis-à-

vis its most important neighbour. This is despite the fact that a growing volume of literature analysing Sino-Indian relations points toward the inevitability of a competitive rivalry between the two nations, which should alert Indian decision-makers of the need for a strategic approach vis-à-vis China.

In one of the most detailed studies of Sino-Indian relations in a historical perspective, John Garver makes a convincing case that India-China relations have, over the years, been shaped by a deep and enduring geo-political rivalry.⁸ According to Garver, the rivalry is rooted in the “decades-long, multi-layered, and frequently sharp conflict over the two states’ relations with the lands and peoples lying around and between them.”⁹ Ashley Tellis takes this *structuralist* approach further and argues that China and India as rising powers in Asia remain natural competitors, competing to increase their influence not only in South Asia but also outside South Asia proper. Tellis goes on to argue that India-China competition is not likely to mutate into malignant rivalry in the near-term but if Indian and Chinese economic and military capabilities continue to grow at the current pace, there is a likelihood of this relationship turning into a dyadic rivalry.¹⁰

This conclusion is supported by Sumit Ganguly who also contends that any dramatic improvement in Sino-Indian ties is unlikely and the relations between the two will remain competitive.¹¹ Mark Frazier agrees but argues that precisely because so many sources of dispute exist between China and India, both sides have come to recognise the need to prevent tensions from leading to an overt rivalry. Therefore, according to Frazier, a quiet competition is the most likely possibility.¹² Many in India have also reached similar conclusions.¹³ While there are differences on the exact nature that Sino-Indian competition might take in the future, there seems to be a broad consensus that a host of factors point towards a competitive Sino-Indian relationship. The underlying thrust of the above arguments is that whether India likes it or not, the inherent competition for regional influence will always underpin the realities of the relationship and therefore, India needs to shape its foreign policy accordingly. But the Indian policy seems one of overemphasising the promising future potentials in the relationship and de-emphasising troublesome past and present realities. It might then seem puzzling that a nation, such as India, that hopes to be a major global player is so insouciant about its closest competitor.

Constraints

There are a number of constraints that impede the development of a clear-eyed China policy in India. Some of these constraints reflect on the larger Indian foreign policy making while the others are China-specific.

Strategic Culture

Scholars of international politics have increasingly focused on culture as an important variable determining state behaviour in the international realm. Culture can refer both to a set of evaluative standards, such as norms or values, and to cognitive standards, such as rules or models defining what entities and actors exist in a system and how they operate and inter-relate.¹⁴ It has been argued that the cultural environment affects not only the incentives for different kinds of state behaviour but also how states perceive themselves, or what is called state identity.¹⁵ Cultural elements of a state's domestic environment, thereby, become an important factor shaping the way national security interests are perceived by elites and the security policies of states.

While critics have argued that culture does not matter in global politics and foreign policy and cultural effects can be reduced to epiphenomena of the distribution of power and capabilities, culture is clearly one of the variables shaping a state's foreign policy even if there are reasons to be cautious about its use in explaining political outcomes.

Alastair Ian Johnston argues that China has historically exhibited a relatively consistent hard realpolitik strategic culture that has persisted across different time periods and continues to persist even in its present context when, according to him, China faces a threat environment that is most benign in several decades. China's strategic behaviour exhibits a preference for offensive uses of force, mediated by a keen sensitivity to relative capabilities and Chinese decision-makers seem to have internalised this strategic culture.¹⁶ Johnston also notes that Chinese decision-makers tend to see territorial disputes as high-value conflicts, due in part to a historical sensitivity to threats to the territorial integrity of the state.¹⁷ This is of direct consequence for the future of India-China relations. This strategic culture provides Chinese decision-makers a set of clear principles as well as a long-term orientation in designing foreign policy.

Andrew Scobell argues that China's foreign policy and its tendency to use military force are influenced not only by elite understandings of China's own strategic tradition but also by their understanding of the strategic cultures of other states.¹⁸ In this respect, it is important to recognise that Chinese strategists continue to consider India as a militaristic, unstable, and threatening power, with an ambition of separating Tibet from China. In their view, India seeks to dominate its neighbours and foment conflict between China and other nations.¹⁹ This puts India in the category of Chinese rivals along with the US and Japan— states that, according to Chinese strategic elites, have menacing designs on China's sovereignty and security.

In contrast, India's ability to think strategically on issues of national security is at best questionable. George Tanham, in his landmark study on Indian strategic thought, points out that Indian elites have shown little evidence of having thought coherently and systematically about national strategy. He argues that this lack of long-term planning and strategy owes largely to India's historical and cultural developmental patterns. These include the Hindu view of life as largely unknowable, thereby being outside man's control and the Hindu concept of time as eternal, thereby discouraging planning. As a consequence, Tanham argues that India has been on the strategic defensive throughout its history, reluctant to assert itself except within the subcontinent.²⁰

India's former Minister for External Affairs, Jaswant Singh also examined the evolution of strategic culture in Indian society and in its political decision-making class, with a particular reference to the post-independence period. He finds Indian political elites lack the ability to think strategically about foreign policy and defence issues but he trains his guns on India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, pointing to his "idealistic romanticism" and his unwillingness to institutionalise strategic thinking, policy formulation and implementation.²¹

It is ironical, however, that even when Jaswant Singh was the External Affairs Minister, there is little evidence that anything of substance really changed in so far as India's China policy is concerned. For all the blame that Singh lays at Nehru's doorsteps, even Singh and his Bharatiya Janata Party-led government did not move towards the institutionalisation of strategic thinking, policy formulation, and implementation. Perhaps, the

Indian strategic culture became too powerful a constraint for him to overcome.

Lack of Institutionalisation

A major consequence of the lack of a strategic culture is the perceptible absence of institutionalisation of foreign policy making in India. Indian democracy is sustained by a range of institutions — from the more formal ones such as the executive, legislative, and the judiciary, to the less formal in the broader civil-society. It is these institutions that in large measure have allowed Indian democracy to thrive and flourish for nearly 60 years despite a number of constraints that have led to the failure of democracy in many other societies. However, in the realm of foreign policy, it is the lack of institutionalisation that has allowed a drift to set in and the absence of a long-term orientation. Some have laid the blame on Nehru for his unwillingness to construct a strategic planning architecture because he single-handedly shaped Indian foreign policy during the formative years of the democracy.²² Yet it is evident that even his successors failed to pursue institutionalisation in a consistent manner.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power in 1999 promising that it would establish a National Security Council (NSC) to analyse military, economic, and political threats to the nation and to advise the government on meeting these challenges effectively.²³ While it did set up the NSC in the late 1990s and defined its role in policy formulation, it neglected the institutionalisation of the NSC and the building up of its capabilities to play the role assigned to it, thereby failing to underpin national security policymaking with structural and systematic institutional arrangements. Moreover, as has been pointed out, the way the NSC is structured makes long-term planning impossible, thereby negating the very purpose of its formation and its effectiveness remains hostage to the weight of the National Security Advisor (NSA) in national politics.²⁴ The NSA has become the most powerful authority on national security and sidelined the institution of the NSC. Personality once again has prevailed over the institution. At times important national security decisions were taken in an ad hoc manner without utilising the Cabinet Committee on Security and the Strategic Policy Group (comprising key secretaries, service chiefs, and heads of intelligence agencies).

While the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance came to power in 2004 promising that it will make the NSC a professional and effective institution and blamed the NDA for making only cosmetic changes in the institutional arrangements,²⁵ it has so far failed to make it work in an optimal manner whereby the NSC anticipates national security threats, coordinates the management of national security, and engenders long-term planning by generating new and bold ideas. An effective foreign policy institutional framework would not only identify the challenges but it would also develop a coherent strategy to deal with it, organise and motivate the bureaucracy and persuade and inform the public. The NSC, by itself, is not a panacea as witnessed in the inability of the NSC in the US to successfully mediate in bureaucratic wars and effectively coordinate policy. But the lack of an effective NSC in India is reflective of India's ad hoc decision-making process in the realm of foreign policy. The fundamental problem, perhaps, is that those holding the levers of power succumb to the temptation of controlling institutions and awarding loyalists with assignments, sidelining competence. India cannot emerge as a global power or even a regional one unless it designs appropriate institutions to manage its national assets concomitant to India's vision of itself as a major player in the international system.

In the specific case of India's China policy, this lack of effective institutionalisation of policy-making has made it difficult for India to assess the implications of a rising China in its neighbourhood. In the absence of an effective strategic planning architecture, India's China debate has remained just that, a debate, with no attempt at the highest echelons of foreign policy-making to evolve a coherent strategy towards China.

India's China Debate

The Indian political establishment is fond of arguing that there is a distinct continuity that defines Indian foreign policy. One can relate this easily to the standard structural-realist theory of international politics, according to which states fashion their foreign policies in response to the systemic constraints imposed by the international system, and domestic politics is not an important variable in this process.²⁶ In a certain sense, this holds true for Indian foreign policy in general. There have been relatively few dramatic shifts in Indian foreign policy over the years and these shifts have been engendered by larger systemic forces, such as the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet Union.

In so far as India's China policy is concerned, there is visible continuity in the official position of India. There is a consensus across Indian political spectrum for improving bilateral ties with China and for resolving Sino-Indian differences through dialogue.²⁷ However, this official policy hides a broader debate in India about how to deal with China. It has been pointed out that there are three broad views in India on how to deal with China and they have been classified as the pragmatists, the hyperrealists, and the appeasers.²⁸ The pragmatists view China as a long-term threat and as a competitor but argue that this competition can be managed by engaging China economically and balancing against China by emerging as a major power in the international system. The hyperrealists view China as a clear and present danger and would like India to contain China by forging alliances around China's periphery and by strengthening its military capabilities. The appeasers view China as a friendly and benevolent neighbour and would like India to engage it whole-heartedly since China, in their opinion, is not a threat to India in any way.

Along similar lines, Steven Hoffman has also delineated Indian perceptual positions on China.²⁹ He has outlined three ideal types which he classifies as the Mainstream position, China-Is-Not-Hostile position, and China-Is-Hostile position. These ideal types closely correlate with the pragmatists, the appeasers, and the hyperrealists of the above-mentioned typology. The Mainstream Indian perspective on China, according to Hoffman, views China as a potential threat to Indian security threats but hopes that effective Indian diplomacy can avert any major problems in the future. The China-Is-Not-Hostile perspective holds that China is a rational and peace-loving state that does not have malevolent intentions vis-à-vis India. In marked contrast, the China-Is-Hostile position views China as a short and long-term strategic rival of India and calls for Indian diplomatic assertiveness vis-à-vis China.

The common perception in the early years of independent India was that India had lost its great power status due to internal strife and discord, coupled with a stagnating economy which did not keep pace with the technological advancements of its competitors. It was assumed that the global balance maintained by the superpowers through the Cold War could be used to contain external dangers and thus military preparedness could wait. This belief was shattered by the 1962 border conflict with China. The India-Pakistan war of 1965 revealed the extent of Sino-Pakistan collusion and the unwillingness of the superpowers to pull India's chestnuts

out of the fire. Subsequent enhanced reliance on a single superpower limited India's choices till a paradigm shift took place with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This experience also conditions the domestic debate in India: The Communists caution against an alliance with any power which limits India's ability to foster mutual trust and forge amicable relations with its neighbours while the Congress has drawn attention to the emergence of a global market and a globalising polity that makes a policy of universal global engagement most appropriate. The debate is clothed in clichés easily understood by their respective constituencies.

This debate has been going on for quite some time. Though the multiplicity of views reflects Indian democracy at its best, in many ways it also impedes the formulation of a long-term strategy. The consequence is that the Indian government, realising that there are a plethora of views on China, has taken the path of least resistance, a policy that keeps most groups satisfied, if not happy, even though it is a policy only in name.

Power Matters

The success and failure of a nation's foreign policy is largely a function of its power and the manner in which that power is wielded. Power and its pursuit lie at the heart of inter-state relations. A state's power in the international system can be defined as a function of the material capabilities that it possesses.³⁰ Despite all the talk of India as a rising power, on all indicators of power, economic and military, India remains behind China in terms of capabilities. While India's economic and military capabilities have no doubt increased substantially in recent times, with its GDP being fourth in the world in purchasing power parity and its military the third largest in the world, China's capabilities have continued to remain ahead of India's.³¹ More importantly, India is yet to master the ability "to integrate the creation, deployment and use of military instruments in support of national objectives."³² Military power, more often than not, affects the success with which other instruments of statecraft are employed. As has been observed by Robert Art, military power always lurks in the background of inter-state relations, even when nations are at peace with each other.³³ It affects the influence that states exert over one another, thereby shaping political outcomes. In stark contrast to India, China has shown a willingness to use force quite readily in pursuit of its national goals while always insisting that it is defensive in nature. Chinese leaders tend to rationalise even their offensive military operations as purely defensive and measures

of last resort (this logic has also been applied to the 1962 Sino-India war), to an extent where defence can even include a pre-emptive strike.³⁴

Indian foreign policy's failure to achieve its objectives vis-à-vis China has a lot to do with India's as yet underdeveloped power capabilities. China's rising power and the effectiveness with which it has wielded it has allowed it to achieve most of its strategic objectives vis-à-vis India. In fact, one of the reasons why China does not consider India to be its rival is because of its low opinion of Indian capabilities.³⁵ Power matters and in international politics, weakness begets failure while strength begets strategic clout. Unless India achieves higher rates of economic growth and modernises its military, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and learns to use its military instruments in pursuit of national objectives, its foreign policy will struggle to achieve the results it desires.

Outcome: Does it Serve Indian Interests?

As a consequence of various constraints that have impeded that evolution of a long-term China policy in India, Indian foreign policy remains mired in confusion. Leaving aside the question of the ability of the Indian elites to think strategically on national security, in the case of India's China policy, one is not even sure if the Indian political and foreign policy establishment understands the basic forces that shape and configure global politics. India's inability, or rather unwillingness, to see the world *as it is* instead of *as it should be*, has become the major bane of foreign policy.

India's lack of direction in its China policy is clearly revealed by the manner in which it has dealt with China in the past few years. While Sino-Indian bilateral relations have apparently improved, it is not clear if India has any idea as to what ends it wants to harness this improvement and what its strategic objectives with respect to China are. This has resulted in policy flip-flops that have undermined India's regional and global diplomatic stature.

Former Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes described China as India's "potential enemy number one" and former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee explained to the world powers that Indian nuclear tests were a response to the threat posed by Chinese nuclear weapons and Sino-Pakistan nuclear and missile collaboration. But some five years later, China became a "good neighbour" for the same Indian government when Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Beijing. What brought about this remarkable

transformation, of course, remains unclear till date. The Manmohan Singh government came to the office declaring that it wants to have friendly relations with China, which, of course, is a reasonable foreign policy objective. But without a clear articulation of India's national security objectives, such declarations remain just pious rhetoric that has never been in short supply in India-China relations. Pursuit of friendly relations with China seems to have become an end in itself when it should be a means towards achieving India's larger strategic objective of emerging as a major regional and global player. Diplomacy without an overarching conceptual framework of foreign policy often becomes a technical exercise in splitting differences, thus acquiring shades of what many might consider appeasement.

India's China policy is in many ways symptomatic of a larger misunderstanding in the Indian political establishment with regard to what the nation's foreign policy should be. For the left-liberal strand, foreign policy is merely an extension of domestic policy. As such since India is a secular, democratic, and peace-loving nation, India's pursuit of its relations with other states should merely be a reflection of these virtues. This has shaped much of the moral rhetoric in foreign affairs in India for the better part of the last 50 years and still continues to shape the understanding of global affairs within the major political formations on the left of the Indian political spectrum. The Indian discourse on foreign policy, in the words of one of the most astute observers of Indian foreign policy, "has remained frozen in a rhetorical trap, reminiscent of our class X essays in the earnest, third-worldist, allegedly non-aligned seventies."³⁶ A vivid example of this attitude is the rather extreme positions on national security taken by the Communist Parties consistently. While emphasising their fraternal ties with China's ruling Communist Party time and again, they have called for an end to all military cooperation with the US and Israel, asking the Indian government to return to a policy of genuine non-alignment. Their complete silence on Chinese activities adversely affecting Indian national security interests even as they continue to denounce the US as a global imperialist has befuddled many.³⁷

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has also articulated a vision of Indian foreign policy, according to which foreign policy exists to push pragmatic economic goals, especially as India integrates more and more with the global economy, and also to build a world of open inclusive nations. This understanding of Indian foreign policy unambiguously identifies India

with other liberal democracies of the world. The Prime Minister also suggested that the global environment has never been more conducive for India's economic development than it is today and the world wants to help India to achieve its full potential. He argued that India should engage other great powers such as the US and China to the fullest and neither should be treated as an adversary.³⁸ While there is much to commend in this articulation of Indian foreign policy agenda, particularly the exhortation that India should rise and take full advantage of the opportunities presented by the changing global economic milieu, it is rather naïve in its assertion that foreign policy is nothing more than an outcome of economic policy and that international politics is nothing but a sum total of global trade and economic cooperation.

It is in fact an offshoot of the liberal fallacy that assumes that only if nations were to trade more with each other, the world would become more prosperous and peaceful. In the case of Sino-Indian relations, many have argued that once economics becomes the driving factor, it will usher in a 'paradigm shift' in Sino-Indian bilateral relations.³⁹ The understanding here being that in the short-term there is no threat to Indian interests from China and it is only a *potential* long-term threat or challenge to vital Indian interests. There is also the attendant belief that by embedding India-China relations into an expanding structure of economics ties future problems can be averted. In many ways, this has become the dominant narrative of Sino-Indian relations in recent years.

K. Subrahmanyam has argued that China's desire for increasing its bilateral trade with India and collaboration in sectors such as information technology can be effectively leveraged by India in shaping China's attitudes vis-à-vis India.⁴⁰ In a recent study, Jairam Ramesh, an influential member of the ruling Congress Party, has come up with the concept of "Chindia" that denotes synergy between the two Asian giants. He views closer economic cooperation between China and India as the best way to build trust and friendship, leading to a long-lasting peace between the two states.⁴¹ The problem with these assumptions is that not only is there little empirical evidence to prove that more trade leads to peace and tranquillity, but also that while politics and economics are certainly inter-related, the international economic system rests upon the international political order and not vice-versa. Indian foreign policy cannot be conducted on the naïve assumption that greater economic integration with the world would somehow solve all its foreign policy problems.

At the other end of the political spectrum, the Indian right, because of its preoccupation with establishing a “Hindu” nation and minority bashing, has extended its narrow sectarian view to foreign policy. The consequence has been its obsession with Pakistan as evil incarnate in its foreign policy agenda and its inclination to view the world in black and white, friends and enemies, evil and noble. While undoubtedly pursuing pragmatic economic and foreign policies when in power, the Indian right, as represented by the BJP, seems to be under tremendous pressure to revert back to its extremist views, now that it is out of power. Where India’s multiculturalism and pluralism should be leveraged as India’s strengths in negotiating with an increasingly polarised outside world, the Indian right, with its resistance to India’s plural heritage, has been more interested in turning India into a mirror image of Pakistan.

Then there is the great Indian bureaucracy which suffers from the same myopia that Henry Kissinger long back diagnosed for the US foreign service— that it views its role as merely a solver of concrete issues as they come about and a negotiating instrument rather than one of shaping events and conceptualising strategy.

Shaped by these forces, Indian foreign policy has merely been one of responding to events around it rather than anticipating them and evolving coherent long-term strategies to deal with them in the best interests of the country. A nation’s foreign policy, to be effective, should ultimately rest on philosophical assumptions as to the nature of world order and the relationship of order to progress and national interest. In the absence of such a conceptual framework, incoherence would loom large as the diplomatic back and forth would become an end in itself and rather than shaping events, the state would end up reacting to developments around it as in the case of Indian foreign policy. The greatest casualty of this larger foreign policy malaise has been India’s China policy. From *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai*⁴² to potential enemy number one to great friend, India just does not know how to deal with its neighbourhood dragon that has played its cards so skilfully vis-à-vis India. It can be argued that successive Indian governments have, in fact, been following a coherent policy towards China, i.e., cooperation with China to build Indian capability till such time when India is able to challenge China’s primacy openly. If indeed this is the guiding framework, then India is in for a rude shock, as the current Chinese policy towards India will essentially preclude India’s emergence as a global or even regional power of any reckoning.

There is nothing really sinister about China's attempts to expand its own influence and curtail India's. China is a rising power and as such will do its utmost to prevent the rise of other power centres around its periphery. This is not very different from the stated US policy of preventing the rise of other powers that might threaten its position as a global hegemon. Just as the US is working towards achieving its strategic objective, China is pursuing its own strategic agenda. In many ways, it is natural for China to view India as a potential rival: for foreign capital, export markets, political influence, and aspirations for regional leadership.

There is also nothing extraordinarily benign in China's attempts to improve its bilateral relations with India in recent times. After limiting India's influence in various ways, China would not like to see India coming close to the US in order to contain China. In this geopolitical chessboard, while both the US and China are using India towards their own strategic ends, India has ended up primarily reacting to the actions of others. And the primary reason for this is the failure to recognise the forces that drive international politics in general and come up with a coherent strategy towards China, in particular.

With the US largely preoccupied with its war on terror and Iraq, China has increasingly asserted its pre-eminence in Asia. It has started to act like a traditional great power, pursuing its regional interests in a proactive manner and transforming its diplomatic relations with smaller neighbours. According to informed observers, this points to a well-conceived grand strategy at play – a strategy that would make it possible for China “to continue its economic growth, technological modernisation, and military build-up without provoking other countries to a costly rivalry.”⁴³

However, notwithstanding China's attempts at reassuring its neighbours, China's growing power and muscle flexing as in the Taiwan Straits has led other regional powers to re-evaluate their strategic options. Japan has recently sought to broaden the scope of its security ties with the US and for the first time has explicitly discussed joint US-Japanese cooperation in the event of a crisis in the Taiwan Straits.⁴⁴ In the face of a rising China that offers new opportunities, some in Australia have demanded that the government review its 50-year-old treaty with the US.⁴⁵ China's rise has also engendered a cautious wariness in Russia, despite Moscow's improving ties with Beijing. There is nothing surprising in China wielding its increasing economic and military clout in the region to gradually

extend its influence and most other regional powers seem to have realised this. The only exception seems to be India, which seemingly believes that only if the two nations would trade more, all problems in their bilateral relationship would take care of themselves.

It is the structure of global politics that by definition makes Sino-Indian competition inevitable. There are two options for India – either play the game of global politics by the rules laid down by its structure or resign itself to a secondary status in the global hierarchy. Given that Indian decision-makers are already talking of India as a global player in the making, they cannot but take the rules of the game that is global politics, seriously. Of course, a Sino-Indian competition that can be diplomatically managed would be in everyone's interest. But historically, rising powers have tried to reshape their strategic environment to reflect new realities of power and this has provoked conflicts. Many in India share the idea that only if India provokes China would China threaten India. This might seem comforting as it gives India a false sense of control over the unfolding of events. But China could be provoked by its own strategic environment if that is not seen to be commensurate with its rising prowess and expectations, regardless of India's actions. India's weakness, in that case, would do more harm than good.

The best that India can do is to first put its own house in order. India needs to develop its economic and military might without in any way being apologetic about it. It needs to clearly articulate its national interests and engage China on a host of issues, from the border problem to the alleged dumping of cheap Chinese goods in the Indian market. India needs to recognise that appeasing China is neither desirable nor necessary even as a direct confrontation with China is not something India can afford, at least in the near future. A stable foundation for the future of India-China relations cannot be laid by feigning total ignorance of Chinese activities that have adversely affected Indian national interests in the past. In all likelihood, Chinese attitudes towards India will change radically in India's favour as the US strategy of strengthening India as a balancer in the Asian balance of power gathers momentum. This should present India a strategic opportunity to recalibrate its China policy and leverage its relationship with one power vis-à-vis the other.

Conclusion

India is a rising power in Asia and it needs to demand its rightful place in the inter-state hierarchy. But it will garner that respect only if it starts behaving in a manner appropriate to a major Asian power. India and China are the two major powers in Asia with global aspirations and some significant conflicting interests. As a result, some amount of friction in their bilateral relationship is inevitable. The geopolitical reality of Asia makes sure that it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for *Hindi-Chini* to be *bhai-bhai* (brothers) in the foreseeable future. If India and China continue to rise in the next few years, a security competition between the two regional giants will be all but inevitable. If India is serious about its desire to emerge as a major global power, then it will have to tackle the challenge of China's rise. A rising China will not tolerate a rising India as its peer competitor. Even if a rising India does not have any intention of becoming a regional hegemon, China will try its best to constrain India as it has already done to a large extent. And it is that containment that India has to guard against. China's intentions vis-à-vis India may seem entirely peaceful at the moment but that is largely irrelevant in the strategic scheme of things. India cannot have a foreign policy shaped by the assumed kindness of its neighbours. A nation's foreign policy requires the ability of its leaders to think in the long term. India cannot and should not wear rose-tinted glasses on Sino-Indian relations just because things seem to be going smoothly at present.⁴⁶

This reality should be accepted by the Indian policy-makers, rather than wished away. India should make a serious attempt to manage the frictions by expanding the zone of cooperation with China even as it tries to steadfastly pursue its national interests. It needs to display the confidence to craft a foreign policy that best serves its national security interests without always looking over the shoulders to make sure that China is not displeased. Again, India can learn a lot by examining how China has managed its relationship with the US in the last two decades.

While India certainly needs to engage China in an effort to reconcile security and political perspectives, it is naïve to assert, as many do, that India should first be sensitive to China's concerns, real or imaginary, before defining its foreign policy goals and strategic agenda. Indian foreign policy agenda should be driven by only India's national security imperatives. India needs to be more pro-active, consistent, and realistic when engaging China. China is not a malevolent, sinister international entity out there to demolish

India but a state which is simply pursuing its own strategic interests in a hard-headed fashion on its way to its status of a great power. It is time for India to realise that India's great power aspirations cannot be realised without a similar cold-blooded realistic assessment of its own strategic interests in an anarchic international system where there are no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests.

But for this to happen, the Government of India will have to formulate a clear China policy and, more importantly, a broader national security strategy. Ad-hocism just won't do. This needs to be the top priority of the government if it wants India to emerge as a global power of any reckoning. India should recognise that a merely tactical foreign policy approach without the backing of a sound strategy will lead to nowhere.

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Harsh V Pant is Fellow at the Department of Defence Studies,
King's College, London.