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## A Vision for India's Foreign Policy

By: Sanjeet Kashyap

*The October 2021 think tank report, 'India's Path to Power' can be seen as a grand strategic document; it offers a comprehensive, ecological approach to foreign policy as well as a clear identification of India's capabilities and challenges.*

The post-Cold War unipolar order is in flux now, beset by a host of factors including the onset of the global financial crisis of 2008; political backlash against globalisation in the West; a resurgence in populist nationalism around the globe; the US-China strategic rivalry and the Covid shock. The old rules of the game are no longer suitable for dealing with the changing reality.

In India democracy is also undergoing a churn as the liberal democratic system is under pressure with Hindu majoritarian consolidation ushering in the [fourth party system](#).

Navigating these shifts needs new ideas and a coherent vision which is what a policy document, [India's Path to Power: Strategy in a World Adrift](#), published in October 2021, aims to deliver. Under the auspices of the Centre of Policy Research and the Takshashila Institution, a cohort of leading Indian strategic and economic policy experts have come together to produce the report focused on enhancing India's standing in pursuit of national interest. The precursor to this initiative, the report titled [NAM 2.0](#), published in 2012, generated [intense debate](#) and [critiques](#). This article will engage with three important ideas raised in the 2021 CPR/Takshashila report.

### Diffused bipolarity or shift to multipolarity?

The report argues that with the relative decline of the US, the Asianisation of the global economy, and the increased influence of non-state actors, power is less concentrated today in international politics. While the structural rivalry between the US and China would be the primary factor driving global politics, the world order is unlikely to be bipolar as during the Cold War. Instead, economic interdependence in a globalised world renders the Cold War analogy inaccurate. The Cold War analogy is further dismissed on the ground that the role, interests, and concerns of other great powers are not going to be subordinated to the strategic competition between two superpowers. The world order, the report argues, is in a transient phase, no longer unipolar but not quite yet multipolar as well.

It is true that the character of power has shifted in the 21st century, brought in no less measure due to profound economic and technological change. But this has also generated vulnerabilities for states and corporations. The use by a state of economic tools to meet strategic goals by a state is enabled by the asymmetric nature of economic interdependence (Farrell and Newman 2019). A recent example of the weaponisation of economic interdependence would be the SWIFT sanctions imposed by the US and its allies against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. Further, the digitisation of the economy as well as key strategic assets have also reconfigured the sinews of power by rendering asymmetric cyberattacks a highly effective tool that non-state actors can leverage as well.

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However, while the ways in which power can be wielded by states have been transformed, this doesn't exactly tell us anything meaningful about the nature of the international system in itself. In the International Relations literature, the concept of polarity is concerned with states, which still happen to be the dominant actors in international politics. In measuring power, scholars deploy the 'power as capability' approach (Mearsheimer 2001, 57-60), involving the size of the economy, population, military weapons, technological prowess, etc. As Øystein Tunsjø has shown, the relative power gap between the US and China, measured in terms of GDP and GDP per capita, is narrower than the gap between the US and Soviet Union in 1950. Moreover, the power gap between China and the third-ranking power today is substantially larger than was the case during the Cold War (Tunsjø 2018, 107). If the post-1945 international order could be characterised as a bipolar one based on the system-wide distribution of material capabilities, there is no reason not to see the current system too as a bipolar one.

The CPR/ Takshashila report's assertion that the world order isn't bipolar today because other powers' roles, interests, and concerns are not subordinated to the superpower competition is based on a problematic reading of both the concept of polarity and Cold War history. The concept of polarity takes power as capability approach in measuring power. In deploying this approach, IR theorists are

clear that even superpowers would not achieve all the desired outcomes solely based on power preponderance. Further, as Cold War historian Lorenz Lüthi (2020) has argued, middle powers and other states wielded substantial agency during the previous bipolar order, sometimes even playing one superpower off the other. As such, polarity is not about a neat translation of capabilities into outcomes in international politics. Rather, it provides a rough guide to the applicability of power in the everyday conduct of international politics.

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This discussion on the nature of polarity should not be seen as an exercise in academic nitpicking. Since great powers tend to wield disproportionate influence in the international system, polarity—defined in terms of the number of great powers existing at a given point—acts as a constraining structural context in which states, including rising powers like India, make their foreign policy decisions. Noticeably, the structure does not have a *determining* influence on the state’s foreign policy, rather it imposes a *constraining* check on the set of policy choices that a state can exercise prudently (Rajagopalan and Sahni 2008, 13). For example, India’s policy of non-alignment during the Cold War made sense in the context of the bipolar international system. A unipolar system, in contrast, would limit India’s choices and given the difficulty of balancing against the sole superpower, it would make sense to either bandwagon or hedge.

### Hindu majoritarianism and India’s great power aspirations

In the left-liberal intelligentsia’s narrative on the Hindutva’s cementing of political domination in India, the demise of liberal democracy, emergence of a fractious social fabric, and turn to crony capitalism feature prominently.

Scholar Rahul Sagar has [provided](#) a realist critique of the exclusivist Hindu nationalist vision being detrimental to amassing national power. In India’s already low-trust society, the discriminatory impact of majoritarian impulse would make it more difficult to reap the benefits of economic cooperation. The ideology-driven social boycott and ghettoisation of the minority community not only worsens the economic situation, but also foments alienation among the oppressed. Even if India manages to grow steadily under an increasingly autocratic regime, the state will have to face the opportunity cost of deploying resources against domestic extremism, stemming from Hindutvawadis and alienated minorities reacting responsively.

The CPR/Takshashila report stands out on this count by explicitly identifying the majoritarianism vision and autocratic exercise of power as a challenge to India’s rise. It makes a case for India’s path to great power status to be anchored in a liberal democratic tradition and pluralist values. In doing so, India would avoid being a mirror image of China and could ease its transition to great power status by posing itself as a responsible alternative.

In the international domain, the reputation premium on human rights and liberal democratic credentials means that there might be real economic and strategic costs of India’s majoritarian turn. The history of the Cold War-era great power politics can provide a clue here. As part of the cultural Cold War, the Soviet critique of racial discrimination in the US unsettled policymakers and spurred, in no less measure, the provision of civil rights (Dudziak 2011). The success of the Helsinki Accords in the 1970s in allowing breathing space for human rights movements behind the Iron Curtain contributed to the later downfall of communism. More recently, as Michael Schuman has [pointed](#) out, in the age of economic interdependence, China’s human rights violations have severe economic costs as western companies and consumers turn away from wares of repression.

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The CPR/ Takshashila report argues that India would do well to present itself as an alternative to China by not succumbing to autocratic temptations. Doing so would be in India’s strategic interest as well because the Sino-US competition is being [framed](#) as a [contest](#) between democracy and authoritarianism. An increasingly majoritarian and illiberal India would make it difficult for the advocates of the India Story to bat for it in Western capitals.

### Grand strategic vision or pragmatic patchwork?

Animated by the sense of being an exceptionalist power (Sullivan 2014), the conduct of Indian diplomacy in the post-Independence years tried a balancing act between a lofty vision and constraints imposed by limited capabilities. A [section](#) of the commentariat

believes that India lacks a grand strategic tradition of using its power to pursue ambitious goals in a predetermined and overarching fashion. Meanwhile, in the West, there is an ongoing [debate](#) on the very relevance of grand strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Proponents of a grand strategic approach to conducting foreign policy see it as a coherent guidebook—defining parameters for policymakers in line with the available means at disposal—to navigate the vagaries of global politics.

On the other hand, detractors argue that a host of factors—the diffused nature of power in the globalised and digitised world; rapid changes brought by technological innovation; and the hubristic tendency of bureaucrats and policymakers —would mean a fixed and overarching grand strategic vision no longer makes sense (Drezner, Krebs, and Schweller 2020). Concomitantly, a pragmatic, issue-based approach to challenges and opportunities in the international arena would better serve national interests. In response, [proponents](#) of the grand strategic approach argue that the complexity of geopolitical and security challenges requires policymakers to plan in advance while also baking in flexibility into the doctrine to deal with contingency.

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In the Indian context, the preference for an ad hoc issue-based alignment [\[A1\]](#) approach to foreign policy can be observed frequently in strategic experts’ pronouncements. Yet, it is my contention that the *India’s Path to Power* could be seen as a grand strategic document, with its comprehensive, ecological approach to foreign policy as well as a clear identification of India’s capabilities and challenges. For instance, the document provides recommendations on prudently using available resources to meet the China challenge and amassing more power by way of economic reforms. Further, in identifying red lines the violation of which by adversaries would entail the use of force by the Indian state, the document seems to avoid overextension and lays out a moderate agenda. Hence, it could reasonably be argued that this policy document is a grand strategic vision for India.

Further, based on the running themes in the report, I would argue it could loosely be located in the Indian neoliberal grand strategic tradition, as conceptualised by Kanti Bajpai. In his essay on different Indian grand strategic traditions, the Indian neoliberals are characterised by their focus on mutual gains among states, the importance of economic power, the mitigating impact of complex interdependence on international conflicts, and a preference for free trade (Bajpai 2014: 118-119). In line with Bajpai’s schema, the neoliberal elements discernible in the document include an internationalist outlook; support to a rule-based order including multistakeholder internet governance; recognition of the benefits of economic globalisation; and a commitment to trade openness.

In parallel with the American liberal internationalist vision that supports democracy promotion and free trade regime, the CPR/Takshashila report sees a plural society and liberal democratic polity as crucial to both India’s image in international forums and its identity as a responsible rising power. In so far as India’s liberal democratic credentials are seen as a leveraging tool in international fora by these thinkers, it reflects a liberal internationalist mindset at work. However, in its advocacy of selective decoupling in sensitive economic sectors and cyberspace, the report veers away from liberal IR theorists’ commitment to economic interdependence. In light of the pressing China challenge, though, such an approach is understandable.

## Conclusions

Since the CPR/Takshashila report’s publication last year, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has both reinforced the leitmotif of a fluxed world order and underlined the challenge for India of navigating troubled waters. India’s refrain from openly condemning Russia has drawn flak from the disappointed western commentariat. A [slew](#) of commentators have [attributed](#) India’s uncomfortable stance to its [dependency](#) on Russian weapons, which has a [constraining](#) impact on strategic autonomy.

For now, Vladimir Putin’s adventurism has shifted the global attention to the European theatre and the unprecedented economic sanctions unleashed by the West has irked the Global South. But, in the medium to long run, China remains the most formidable challenge for India and India would do well to [diversify](#) its weapon procurement. Further, for India, the rationale for continued robust ties with Russia stands on increasingly shaky grounds in two respects. First, Indian policymakers’ desire for a multipolar order with Russia as a pole faces a setback, as Russia’s economy, army, and defensive industrial base stand devastated in the Ukraine misadventure. Second, the Indian hope of using the Russian leverage over China in its favour during crises is a gambit that might not work, if a weakened Russia’s dependence on China leads to asymmetrical dominance of China in Sino-Russian ties.

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