
INDO-US STRATEGIC TIES AND INDIA'S PRE-EMINENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

India is the leading power in South Asia with the huge territory, population, military power, economic resources and a higher level of economic and industrial development. India has since its independence sought to play a leading role in global politics and to become a hegemon in South Asia. Its involvement in the internal affairs of its smaller neighbours including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives have been a manifestation of Indian ambitions to play the role of a policeman in the region. However, India's hegemonic claims in the region somehow lack legitimacy but the global hegemon, i.e. the US is on its side apparently. US verbal and practical support to New Delhi in the last two decades is the source of strengthening Indian aspirations to play the role of hegemon in South Asia. This paper analyzes how US support has influenced Indian ambitions to become a regional hegemon in the post-Cold War era.

Key Words: India, US, strategic, partnership, hegemony, pre-eminence, South Asia, China.

INTRODUCTION

India is a leading state in South Asia with a considerably huge population, territory, and military might. India has always been preoccupied with a strong desire to establish its predominance in South Asia and since the independence from British in 1947, the main objective of Indian foreign policy is to realize the goal of becoming a regional hegemon whose legitimacy would be accepted by the other states in the region. Indian policymakers and leaders take the country's geographic proximity with all the nations in the region as an opportunity to turn the desire to dominate into a reality. India has an advantaged position in South Asia as it shares borders with all South Asia countries. It also possesses the 72 percent of the land in the region. Population wise India is the biggest nation and its economic output in the region is 75 percent. The more tangible calculation of power in terms of military capabilities also makes India the strongest and mighty state in the region (Ahmad, 2013, pp.41-4). India's military and naval forces are continuously expanding the budget and muscles in the region as well. Hence, India considers itself as a legitimate major regional force in South Asia. Indian partnership with global powers such as the erstwhile Soviet Union during the cold war and the United States of American (USA) in the post-cold war era has a strong bearing on Indian behaviour.

India's hegemonic claims in the region somehow lack legitimacy but the global hegemon, i.e. the US is on its side apparently. US verbal and practical support to New Delhi in the last two decades is the source of strengthening Indian aspirations to play the role of hegemon in South Asia. This paper analyzes how US support has influenced Indian ambitions to become a regional hegemon in the post-cold war era.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study borrows from the neorealist school of thought that primarily focuses on system structure instead of giving primacy to the unit level analysis. The structure manipulates the unit by putting restrictions on choices available to the units at domestic level is the core principle in neorealist paradigm. It explains the recurring events in global affairs above states' internal political and economic aspirations, socio-cultural values and political ideologies (Waltz 1979, p. 69).

Though neorealist theorists emphasize system factor in global governance, they do not ignore the validity of strong state structures. The domestic power of the state is equally important as the internal system somehow is the depiction of the external environment in which the state operates. According to Waltz, "structural change begins in a system's unit, and then unit-level and structural causes interact" (Waltz 1993, pp.47-9). Simultaneously, states have to comply with the inevitabilities of the international system structure irrespective of whatever ideology they follow at home (Waltz 1979, pp.82-97).

Neorealists' focus is on developing and clarifying the concept of system's structure and how states (units) within the system are dependent on it and how their interactions are influenced by it despite having their unique or similar domestic attributes. The system of the structure determines the outcomes of different kinds of interactions among the units. For example, the interaction of medium or small size states is always influenced by the alignment or hostility of major power actors. States behave differently in a bipolar system and their behavior in a unipolar system would be more conscious and flexible to deal with the sole hegemon. Though it is true that international structure is the product of interactions between the states, in the end, it is the structure that forms and influences the units' behavior. Since the main concern and subject of neorealism is major powers with capabilities to force their will on medium and small size (in terms of tangible resources and the capability to translate those resources into competitive power) states, the structure as well then respond and changes when the number of major powers changes (unipolar, bipolar and multipolar).

Units' behaviour varies according to the number of big powers in the system as the chances of leverage changes. Unlike traditional realists, neorealists contend that international politics' complexities are only comprehensible if we can understand the influence and effects of structure in the unit-level analysis. Though neorealists give due importance to unit-level interaction, the outcomes and their impact on the structure but simultaneously they believe that interacting units and structural happenings are interdependent and we cannot draw the conclusion by monitoring and emphasizing unit level interactions alone. Structure influences the units as much as units' interactions contribute to structural changes in international politics. And structure is defined by the major powers in the system so more often system structure is able to enforce the outcomes of interactions of units. Hence, any explanation ignoring structure and focusing on units alone would not be considered accurate and sufficient to explain the international politics. The theory which concentrates on structural and unit-level analysis can only evaluate the changing dynamics of world politics (Waltz, 1990).

States' ambitions and aspirations could have domestic grounds like stable political institutions, growing economy and strong military capabilities but how do they use these resources and capabilities in hand decides their status in the system. According to Waltz, the primary objective of all states in anarchic systems is to safeguard their national sovereignty and security. This shared objective motivates states to follow and adopt the practices and models at the domestic level, provided by the power holders in the system (Waltz 1990, pp.127-8). Neorealism, however, does make a distinction between challengers and status quo powers. When the status quo powers try to maintain equilibrium to counter the challengers' aspiration of changing the status quo or creating some leverage in their favour, (Väyrynen 1995) the chances of counterbalancing also increased. The challengers could come up with counterbalancing strategies by making some kind of alliances in order to ensure the safety of their interests in a particular region. Applying this theory on broader Asia, where the US primacy in the region has been challenged by China and Russia in an attempt to counterbalance the sole superpower (Nadkarni 2010, pp.15-21), the study focuses on growing Indo-US partnership and its implications for South Asia.

In this scenario, if there is any significant transformation happening in the US-India relations, it is not the one based on liberal assumptions and core values of an international system based on legal rights, constitutionalism and the global application of western concept of human rights. Realists believe that it is the result of a structural transformation from unipolarity to multipolarity and it would be a repetition of the balance of power struggle among the power holders, where maximization of power and authority is the only goal and the existing power tries to maintain its hold for as long as possible utilizing all means available including strategic partnership with like-minded allies (Schweller & Pu 2011, p.42). Indo-US relations in this scenario have a very significant role in regional as well as in world politics (Singh 1983, p.102). The global preeminence of the US and the assumed regional (South Asia specifically) preeminence of India (Singh, 1983) have the collision of interests but the immediate common interest has a far bigger impact on their relations than long term clash of interests (Banerjee-Guha 2011, p.224). The strategic partnership between the US and India serves the objectives of both countries as it helps the materialization of the ambitious Indian goals of acquiring global role for it while the US wants India to practice managerial duties in the region to counter rising China (Singh 1983, p.1024).

Measuring Hegemony

The available power measurement tools including the Gross National Product, military capabilities, demographics (population strength, resources, and geographic location) can define the strength or potentials of a country to what extent it can hold and exercise power. And by this criterion all countries possessing the above-mentioned attributes could be major powers. India, Nigeria, South Africa, China, Brazil, Russia, Turkey, and some other countries do fit in this explanation of regional power holders (Nolte 2010, pp.881-3).

Another very crucial criterion to judge a country's claim to be a major regional power or hegemon is, how much country contributes to the region's growth and orders. And it can be positive or negative, for instance, influence to change the course of regional politics, peace, and stability, foreign policy priorities of the other regional countries, etc. Such power maneuvers do matter in defining the role of a country in regional as well as in international politics (Nolte 2010, pp.881-3).

Neorealism sees hegemony as a result of uneven distribution of power among states and power is defined in terms of resources and the ability to use the resources in hands efficiently to keep the hold over other states. It is understood as power relations between states and the analysis of any such power possession is based on how states use it effectively to pursue their interests (Waltz 1979). Hence, for the basic material understanding of the concept of a hegemon, it is imperative to have the estimation of its relatively superior economic and military might on the regional level or global impact of that power exercised at geographically limited area. In contrast to the global hegemon's relatively unchecked or less checked powers and authorities, regional powers (hegemon, major powers, power holders, predominant states would use interchangeably) do have to obey the system structure or the international environment while practicing their power. The demands of the international environment do change the regional dynamics, hence, limit the level of control or influence by the regional hegemon (Lake, 2009).

Apart from the material concept of hegemony, there are few other factors that determine whether a state is eligible to grab the status of major regional power or hegemonic role, such as, domestic stability, ideological influence, self-perceptions, contribution in regional dynamics of politics, and how regional and global stakeholders react to such claims. Cox's neo-Gramscian perspective has a different view of hegemony, different from the conventional theoretic understanding of hegemony which sees a hegemonic dominance based on mere economic and military capabilities and material resources to pursue power and monopoly. It emphasizes on a consensual acceptance of hegemony expressed in the form of admitting to and acceptance of the ideology of the hegemon by the smaller states. The presence of hegemony in the world order is possible if it is based on the combination and coherence of material power, certain norms, and a set of administrative institutions having the authority to administer the world order with a semblance of universality. So, Cox also considers hegemony a form of dominance but involves consensual order, hence, "dominance by a powerful state may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition of hegemony" (Cox 1981, p.139).

The status of preeminence is more about the relative power than the absolute power as the relative preponderance is more relevant in the case of regional interaction between states. Thus, (material) power exercising capabilities lead to the assumption that regional power has the responsibility to take care of its area of influence. In other words, power holders in a region automatically are granted or expected to play the role of the hegemon. The expectations from an acting hegemon include maintaining order and stability in the given geography also defines their sphere of influence that they have to protect from any internal or external rival (Prys 2010, pp.489-504).

INDIAN QUEST FOR REGIONAL DOMINANCE

The post-Cold War world has provided a huge space to regional powers to grow and exercise their power in their own peripheric circles, and with it the concerns of global and regional actors on to what extent they can exercise the power have also grown high.

India though from the very beginning was ambitiously pursuing the hegemonic goals but the intensity to pursue the leadership role in the region was different under different circumstances and leadership. Soon after the independence, Nehru's policies were more inclined towards an idealistic foreign policy, aimed at creating a soft image of the country. But at the same time, Nehru

was concerned to establish domination in South Asia and for that purpose, he adopted a no-compromise policy for domestic stability and integrity of the country. Nehru explained the hollowness of idealistic foreign policy and importance of pragmatic realist approach to follow in order to achieve the national interests, and stated:

Whatever policy we may lay down, the art of conducting foreign affairs of a country lies in finding out what is most advantageous to the country. We may talk about international goodwill and mean what we say. We may talk about peace and freedom and earnestly mean what we say. But in the ultimate analysis, Government functions for the good of a country it governs, and no Government dare [sic.] do anything which in the short or long run is manifestly to the disadvantage of the country (Prasad 1979, p.484).

Operation Polo to annex Princely state of Hyderabad and military occupation of the state of Jammu and Kashmir are the two examples of Nehru's approach of synthesizing idealism abroad and realism at home (Rana 1976, pp.22-30). Nehru's policy was an amalgam of idealism (globally) and realism (regionally) in order to project the country's soft image to the outside world and pursue its strategic interest in South Asia. India attempted to assume the role of a regional policeman or custodian of regional peace and security and pursued its own version of Monroe Doctrine, commonly known as India Doctrine (Naazer 2018-b, pp.73-7). Nehru era's foreign policy of maintaining a low-profile peaceful image of India came to an end under the leadership of Indra Gandhi. She pursued regional ambitions of predominance aggressively whether it was the military intervention in East Pakistan (Bangladesh now) or annexation of Sikkim (Mansingh 2015). Rajiv continued this policy as manifested from his decision of sending Indian troops to Sri Lanka in 1987 (Naazer 2018-b, pp.81-5).

Soon after independence, India started strengthening its strategic dominance in the region. It prioritized maintaining strategic autonomy as a major foreign policy goal and strived hard to limit the influence of major outside powers on South Asia. India also tried to promote its hegemonic goals through its foreign policy in the neighbouring states (Yadev 2011, p.95). Indian leadership tried to portray India as the torchbearer of the Third World countries against colonial masters and later by joining non-alignment movement during the peak of the Cold War to avoid to be part of any of the poles (the US or the Soviet Union) (Maass 1996, p.270). It was a great strategy apparently to win the financial and military aid from the major powers without getting aligned with them formally. India was able to receive military support from the Soviet Union in wake of major wars with Pakistan and China while financial aid was pouring in from the US and major European powers (Ayooob 1989/90, p.107). India was skeptical and annoyed over the US support to Pakistan during the Cold War on a strategic basis. New Delhi was seeing military aid to its old rival as a threat to its predominance and an effort to dismantle its strong holding in the region, one of the reasons India wanted to keep South Asia out of the Cold War rivalries. Throughout the Cold War, India had apprehension of saving its presumed pre-eminence, so it was trying to insulate the region from superpowers' rivalries. Indian apprehensions were based on its perception of South Asia as a strategic fault line directly connected to Indian defense and security.

India has the record of unilateral military campaigns in almost all of its neighboring states, Sikkim, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. India considers Bhutan as its protectorate

because Bhutan's economy and foreign policy are often been dictated by India (Bhutan was a protectorate of British India and New Delhi inherited this relationship in 1947 (Ahsan & Chakma 1993, pp.1043-5; Naazer 2018-b, pp.75-6).

Some of the custodianship gestures of India in neighboring states include, military help to Maldives' government in an attempted coup in 1987, the decision of sending military troops to Sri Lanka against Tamil rebels, the economic blockade of Nepal as a punishment for not promoting and supporting Indian strategic imperatives in the region. India's stubbornness to resolve the Kashmir dispute despite the United Nation Security Council's clear mandate in favour of plebiscite is another manifestation of India's high headedness and perception of superiority in the region. Interestingly despite having a clear detachment from colonial past, India prefers to implement colonial tactics in its relations with South Asian states. It is practicing the strategic containment of its neighbours by not letting them make or implement any defense mechanism that may harm Indian preeminence in the region and for that purpose India is always against any kind of bilateral strategic cooperation among South Asian states as well as among any external power's collaboration on geostrategically important matters (Khosla 1999, p.185).

The reason India has always been against the US defense cooperation with Pakistan or now China's engagements in different economic and maritime projects in South Asia. This kind of custodian behavior explains Indian ambitions to have the title of legitimate, uncontested hegemon of South Asia. China's rise and flexing of muscles towards South Asia have been considered a threat to Indian hegemony as well as to the security parameters of the state (Naazer, 2018-a, pp.33-5).

In retaliation to China's growing role in South Asia, India has increased its diplomatic and economic engagements with East Asian countries. India has been expanding its influence in the South China Sea as a part of its Look East Policy, despite the risk of China's possible strong reaction. The decision to involve itself in an already very complex area shows how determined India is in defending its maritime territory and maintaining its major role in the region.

Indian hegemonic ambitions in South Asia have led the country to increase its naval capabilities up to the mark to be able to play a significant role in the Indian Ocean. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, India concentrated on building up its blue water navy with the help of the Soviet Union in buying the first nuclear-powered submarine and bought a second aircraft carrier from Britain. The successful interventions in East Pakistan in 1971 boosted Indian morale to move forward and fast towards realizing its hegemonic dream. It was a great success for India after humiliating defeat from China in the 1962 War. India witnessed a remarkable development in naval capabilities in the 1980s and successfully established itself as one of the strongest naval forces in the world (Chubin 1980, pp.95-103). India's naval power capabilities, however, are still below the mark especially as compared to China and other major navies operating in the Indian Ocean, but continuous upgrading and purchases of new technologically advanced arms and naval ships are proof of Indian ambitions in the broader Asia. India's increasing ambitions in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea are concerning its maritime neighbors too, including Indonesia and Australia (Chubin 1980) as India wants to expand its hegemonic role from South Asia to entire Indian Ocean region (Naazer 2018-b, p.75).

India's past and current expression of keeping its managerial role in the region is self-evident from its political and military interference in almost all the neighboring states. For that purpose, India increases its military and naval capabilities by importing arms from its allies and friends like the US, Russia and Israel. India's considerable military capacity and the giant economy clearly affect the South Asian countries, for example, Pakistan is left with no choice but to maintain minimum military deterrence against Indian ambitions. It also hurts the collective peace and prosperity of the region as two big regional states are busy in arms race while ignoring the welfare of their people.

THE US SUPPORT TO INDIA IN ITS QUEST OF REGIONAL PREEMINENCE

India's hegemonic ambitions in the post-Cold War era have some international backing as well. The Soviet support for India throughout the Cold War was successfully replaced by the US. During the cold war, India was always wary of the US' military support to Pakistan disbursed primarily to contain the threat of the Soviet expansion in the region. India considered it a threat to its security and attempt to undermine its high ambitions in the region. A militarily strong Pakistan was and is a threat to Indian hegemonic aspiration in the region and the US support to Pakistan in this regard was going against Indian interests. But the situation after the end of the Cold War changed into the favour of India especially when New Delhi decided to adopt an open market economy by leaving the old socialist system. The sole superpower of the time welcomed the move and from the early 1990s, Indo-US ties started to improve drastically. Despite India's reluctance and refusal to abide international non-proliferation regimes, the Clinton administration clearly favored New Delhi against all odds. In Nayak's words, "In late 1997, the White House had decided to make India the lynchpin of its South Asia policy and to replace its nonproliferation focus which the Indians hated, with a multifaceted approach in which they were sure the Indians would welcome under any government" (2003, pp.188 & 203).

Apparently, the objective behind American warm-up towards India was the strategic concern of maintaining global primacy in the context of rising Chinese' influence across Asia. The changed global security scenario at the beginning of the twenty-first century added in the enhancing bilateral ties. The following US State Department's statement clearly manifests Indo-US relations' new strategy: "Its goal is to help India become a major world power in the 21st century. We understand fully the implications, including military implications, of that statement" (2005). This is interesting to note that the US officials conveyed the intentions of their government to New Delhi in a very clear way. It was a great encouragement for India that the global hegemon was on its back to help it acquire what she wanted and Washington itself "acknowledging that India is a country poised to take its place on the world stage" (Gupta 2005, p.17). Indian foreign policy's main objective has been changed from maintaining a non-aligned status (mostly during the Cold War) to secure the US support and back for its desired role in the region (South and Southeast Asia) and in the world (Sipress 2001).

India was not only successful in securing the US political support in the region but also won a ten-year civil nuclear defense partnership agreement. According to that agreement, the US would provide arms, military equipment and would assist India in technology transfer (Jangir, 2012) Prior to signing the Civil-Nuclear Defence treaty with the US, India was struggling winning international cooperation as it had not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and there were several

constraints in fully utilizing nuclear energy for civil and energy uses. On the other hand, the US was also in need of a trustworthy ally with similar values (pro-democracy and capitalism) who can be helpful in confronting global challenges. India was accepted as a responsible member of the elite nuclear club without signing NPT. India used this opportunity to gain more regional benefits, including cooperation on counterterrorism, more connected and improved intelligence sharing in a geostrategically significant region near to its geography like Afghanistan (which is important to India because of its proximity and enmity with Pakistan), Tibet and South China Sea (to counter Chinese influence in the region).

India enables itself to bargain over Kashmir dispute with the US. It has successfully convinced the US to adopt a changed stance on nuclear sensitivity of the dispute. Kashmir dispute is considered a very sensitive matter since both India and Pakistan acquired nuclear assets, any conflict over Kashmir has the potential to accelerate into a nuclear war. Indian officials assured the no first use of nuclear arms or provocation of nuclear war.

In 2001, during a bilateral, meet up on discussing defense partnership in New Delhi, India stated a definite agenda for bilateral strategic partnership which includes, recognition of India's strategic interests not only in South Asia but also in the extended neighbourhood from the Suez Canal to the Strait of Malacca (an area covering all significant energy resource holder states and routes). India wants the respect of its aspiration of autonomous role in the region (Mehta, 2001).

Indian agenda was accepted and adjusted by the George W. Bush administration before signing the long term defense partnership. The US' support to India in demarcating its area of interest in broader Asia also coincides with the US interests in the region. This recognition was a long due dream of India to be accepted as a major South Asian power. Though it was not mentioned clearly this huge favour was bestowed upon India to protect the common interest in the region which is mainly countering China. Military cooperation to ensure secure navigation through the Indian Ocean, which is the main route of the Persian Gulf Oil transportation is of mutual interest. In 2001, Bush administration's nominee to be the Secretary of State Colin Powell in his hearing before the committee on foreign relations said that "India has the potential to keep the peace in the vast Indian Ocean and its periphery" (2001, p.34).

India's regional dominance aspirations in the post 9/11 scenario serve the US interests in two ways: countering rising China and supporting the US' counterterrorism narrative in the region. India's increasing role in Afghanistan's rebuilding is another illustration of the US approval of New Delhi's strategy to promote its image as a responsible power in the region. Strategic support from the US has been seen among Indian and American strategists, analysts and leading political leaders as an opportunity to form an alliance on NATO pattern (Montague 2003). India and the US take this long-term partnership and strengthening of ties a major source of stability in the region from South Asia to South East Asia and even the Middle East. Though this assumption has not proven justified yet as the region is going through worse kind of turmoil since America imposed war on Iraq and Afghanistan. From an Indian perspective, cooperation with the US is fruitful in getting its status accepted in the region, while Washington has found a good manager in Asia to protect and safeguard its immediate interests in the region.

CONCLUSION

India's quest to dominate the region and maintain the hegemonic preeminence is questionable in many ways. Theoretically, the existent material capabilities like economic and military power in abundance do not necessarily guarantee hegemonic status to any regional or global power seeker, especially in a situation where client states or states who are supposed to be under the influence are not ready to accept the legitimacy and preeminence of the major power holder. Empirical evidence suggests that India's self-proclaimed authority in South Asia has been controversial especially in the post-cold war era, despite India's phenomenal economic growth and military development. China's rise and growing hold in South Asia provides a much-required balance of power in the region. China factor, though, does not diminish Indian influence in the region altogether as smaller neighbors of India still depend on it largely due to its crucial geographic location and proximity. Rising China is the factor behind the US' overwhelming support to India in diplomatic and geostrategic matters of importance. China's economic and strategic maneuvers in Asia and beyond making the US support Indian strategies to counterbalance China in the region.

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