

India's Role And The Rise Of Emerging Global Powers

The rise of India comes at a time of geopolitical churn and geoeconomic uncertainty. The headwinds of protectionism and shifting alliances pose challenges to our trajectory. New Delhi needs to chart an effective plan accordingly



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When Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney spoke of “middle powers” last winter in Davos, it triggered a debate about the churn in the global order. The old order, established at the end of World War II, was a Cartesian idea of dominance through rules, enforced by coercion and zero-sum outcomes. It has been challenged, the contours of the new order are evolving, and new “emerging global powers” are assuming prominence.

Rise Of Emerging Global Powers

In 21st century, emerging global powers (EGPs) leveraged democracy, development and technology to narrow the gap with entrenched powers that had risen on the strength of industrialisation, mercantilism and colonisation. Many EGPs are civilisational powers, seeking to regain global status, build global reach, play a global role with responsibility and reform global governance.

India is a major EGP that continues to rise while China is an example that had risen faster in the past. Middle powers are vestiges of the old hierarchy with a different role compared to EGPs in the new global order, that will be more inclusive and participatory.

Today, EGPs have greater capacity, capability and willingness to pursue their objectives. Developed countries had recognised this potential while referring to

emerging markets and developing countries, which foretold the BRICS movement. For EGPs, reforms were necessary in global governance and multilateralism to voice their aspirations and concerns and to secure space in economic and diplomatic decision-making. They also utilised their newfound leverage to create institutions that served their interests. Even major powers, that created the rules-based order and exercised leverage through dominant status or coercive ability, often resorted to unilateral actions.

Three trends that will shape the transition to the new order merit deeper examination.

Alliance building in a fragmenting world

The balance of power shifted in 21st century. Cold War alliances were guided by ideology and security interests and the non-aligned movement provided a counterpoint. While globalisation advanced, fragmentation also grew on account of political systems, development priorities and domestic nationalism. New vacuum needed new alliances.

While the global leadership role of the US has dimmed, it remains the pre-eminent global power. Its superpower status after winning WWII began its decline soon after the collapse of the erstwhile USSR. Although its military bases maintained global presence, there was relative decline in share of global economy and influence in global affairs.

Its National Security Strategy documented the shifts in strategic orientation. US' Former President Barack Obama's pivot to Asia and Donald Trump 1.0 designation of China as the principal adversary signalled focus on the Indo-Pacific, realignment and new partners. Trump 2.0 disenchantment with NATO, the cornerstone of its alliance structure, declining interest in the Indo-Pacific and engagement in wars in West Asia marked a different reality. Calls for increased burden sharing by alliance partners, joining conflict only with key allies and unilateral use of force without the support of traditional allies, signalled strains in the alliance and divergence in US and alliance interests.

Certain allies increased defence budget and sought diversified security options. The US is drifting towards becoming a hemispheric power, markedly different from its historic global role.

In contrast, China has promoted global leadership aspirations to accompany the rise in comprehensive national strength. Its hegemony involves a modern tributary relationship, economic dominance and strategic superiority. Its spectacular economic rise and global outreach provided heft.

Its subsidised export-led manufacturing boom led to domestic overcapacity and global de-industrialisation while trade and investment tied the Global South and certain developed countries into China dominated supply chains. China's debt-trap diplomacy and elite capture politics increased dependencies in the Global South. It built alliances with countries that had differences with the West and offered inducements to Europe as an alternative for countervailing power. Its priority in building new alliances was embedded in the China Dream project and global initiatives on development, security, civilisation and governance.

India's economic rise and global recognition of her civilisational values needed partnerships that would respond to new opportunities and challenges. Her traditional approach prioritised development rather than security alliances. Thus partnerships sought stability in her neighbourhood through bilateral and SAARC initiatives; collaborations in the extended neighbourhood through Act East, ASEAN mechanisms and Link West; maritime priorities through BIMSTEC, IORA, MAHASAGAR and Quad; and global governance through BRICS, G7 Plus and G20. India forged strategic partnerships with like-minded countries for shared objectives of democracy, development and global responsibility.

Her recent free trade agreements (FTAs) deepened ties in key interests such as energy, market access, technology, mobility and emerging issues such as critical minerals, advanced manufacturing and digital cooperation. Evolving from non-alignment to strategic autonomy, she integrated a security dimension with select partners, including both counter-terrorism and defence cooperation, which went beyond bilateral coordination to regional balance and stability.

Conflicts And Weaponisation Of Economy

The 21st century has been characterised by the frequent use of force or threat of use of force or use of terrorism. Currently, there are three major theatres of conflict: Ukraine-Russia, in which NATO is allied with Ukraine, while China supports Russia; West Asia, in which Israel, supported by USA, is in conflict with several countries in the region; and China's periphery, where Chinese territorial ambitions have aggressive expression along maritime and land frontiers. Conflict resolution has become more complicated due to asymmetries in military power, tendency to prolong conflict and demands of building narratives. Further, diplomatic negotiations and the role of UN and UNSC have been diluted. Conflicts cast a shadow on the region and impacted global supply chains.

There is urgent need to develop mechanisms to encourage preference for diplomacy over war to maintain peace and stability; and in the event of conflict, to incentivise de-escalation and conflict resolution through negotiations between parties as well as plurilateral groups.

A disturbing feature of simultaneous globalisation and fragmentation is the growing tendency for weaponisation of economic activities. Unilateral imposition of tariffs and non-tariff barriers, embargo on financial flows, freeze on assets, curbs on technology exchange and sanctions on presumed errant States have negative outcomes in a globalised world. Developed countries use WTO for protectionist measures when developing countries gain comparative advantage. Countries with dominant status in critical minerals or technologies impose restrictions or export controls that affect supply chain resilience affecting economic activity.

As we move towards new industry and knowledge economy, there will be need for better coordination for adherence to a reformed rules-based order to counter tendencies for protectionism or injury to competitors.

Geographical Space Coexists With Cyberspace

The historical experience of trade, investment, technology and migration in geographical space coexists with growing importance of data, analytics and AI in 21st century. The rise of cyberspace is a new phenomena, with Big Tech creators, citizen

and corporate users, and evolving role of regulators. Many Big Tech companies are larger than the GDP of most countries and they influence policy-making and participate in rule-making negotiations. Big Tech seeks further expansion to dominate cyberspace as well as to influence cognitive and temporal space.

While activities in the geographical space are still the dominant feature, our digital footprint in cyberspace will influence the future of human activity, interstate relations, and global governance.

Roadmap For India

The rise of India, unlike many before us, comes at a time of geopolitical churn and geoeconomic uncertainty. The headwinds of protectionism and shifting alliances pose challenges to our trajectory. India will need to, on the one hand, develop contingency plans to deal with black swans and white rhinos, and on the other, stay committed to the strategic path of strengthening democracy, achieving faster development and empowering her citizens to realise the goal of being a global power.

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