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India's Feeble Foreign Policy

A Would-Be Great Power Resists Its Own Rise

Manjari Chatterjee Miller

For the last decade, few trends have captured the world's attention as much as the so-called rise of the rest, the spectacular economic and political emergence of powers such as China and India. Particularly in the United States, India watchers point to the country's large and rapidly expanding economy, its huge population, and its nuclear weapons as signs of its imminent greatness. Other observers fret about the pace of India's rise, asking whether New Delhi is living up to its potential, whether the country's shoddy infrastructure will hold it back, and whether it is strong enough to counter an increasingly ambitious China. All of this frenzied discussion, however, overlooks a simple fact: within India itself, the foreign policy elite shies away from any talk of the country's rising status. As a senior official who has worked on India's relations with Western countries recently told me, "There is a hysterical sense, encouraged by the West, about India's rise." A top-level official in India's foreign ministry echoed the sentiment: "When do we Indians talk about it? We don't."

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What explains this discrepancy? As I found through a series of interviews with senior officials in the Indian government, many of whom requested anonymity, it is a result of three important facts that have gone largely unnoticed in the West. First, New Delhi's foreign policy decisions are often highly individualistic—the province of senior officials responsible for particular policy areas, not strategic planners at the top. As a result, India rarely engages in long-term thinking about its foreign policy goals, which prevents it from spelling out the role it aims to play in global affairs. Second, Indian foreign-policy makers are insulated from outside influences, such as think tanks, which in other countries reinforce a government's sense of its place in the world. Third, the Indian elite fears that the notion of the country's rise is a Western construct, which has unrealistically raised expectations for both Indian economic growth and the country's international commitments. As one senior official with experience in the prime minister's office said, the West's labeling of India as a rising power is "a rope to hang ourselves." By contrast, Chinese political leaders and intellectuals pay a great deal of attention to the international hype surrounding their country's emergence, and Chinese think tanks and media outlets regularly try to shape and respond to this discourse.

India's discomfort with being labeled a rising power should lower Washington's ambitions for its partnership with New Delhi. India can be convinced to play an international role in areas where its narrow interests are at stake, but it will not respond positively to abstract calls for it to assume more global responsibility.

TACTICS WITHOUT STRATEGY

By and large, three bodies in the Indian government work together to make foreign policy: the prime minister's office; the National Security Council, led by a powerful national security adviser; and the foreign ministry. The prime minister's office is seen as the ultimate seat of authority, and other foreign-policy makers jockey to move closer to it. One factor, however, cuts across all three bodies. All three offices and their top positions are filled by Indian Foreign Service officers. Understanding the structure of the foreign service and the role of its officers is essential to explaining why the rise of India garners more attention in New York than it does in New Delhi.

The Indian civil service was created by the British government in the nineteenth century to help administer its vast colonial empire. Known as "the steel frame" of British rule on the subcontinent, the civil service was retained by India after it won its independence in 1947. The service remains highly prestigious today: new officers are selected through a competitive civil-service exam and sorted into the various branches based on their rank. The foreign service stands out as one of India's most elite institutions, reportedly accepting recruits at a rate of only 0.01 percent. Unlike the diplomatic corps in China, for example, in which officers are recruited according to need, a fixed number of Indians are admitted into the foreign service each year. And unlike in the United States, in India, the most significant ambassadorial and foreign policy jobs are usually filled by career civil servants rather than political appointees.

Once they survive the cut-throat admissions process, the foreign service officers go on to serve as key advisers in the prime minister's office, on the National Security Council, and at the foreign ministry. They also tend to hold the most powerful positions within these bodies: the foreign secretary, the administrative head of the foreign ministry, is always a foreign service officer. And three of the four people who have held the position of national security adviser since the post was created in 1998, including the current one, Shivshankar Menon, have been foreign service officers.

The powerful role of the Indian Foreign Service produces a decision-making process that is highly individualistic. Since foreign service officers are considered the *crème de la crème* of India and undergo extensive training, they are each seen as capable of assuming vast authority. What is more, the service's exclusive admissions policies mean that a tiny cadre of officers must take on large portfolios of responsibility. In addition to their advisory role, they have significant leeway in crafting policy. This autonomy, in turn, means that New Delhi does very little collective thinking about its long-term foreign policy goals, since most of the strategic planning that takes place within the government happens on an individual level.

My interviews with top officials revealed that there are few, if any, top-down guidelines for the making of Indian foreign policy. The senior official who has dealt with Western countries told me, "We have a great deal of flexibility and autonomy in shaping policy on a day-to-day basis within the overarching framework of policy." Pressed to explain that framework, the official said, "It is

not written anywhere or formalized. . . . It's expressed in speeches and parliamentary statements." After a brief pause, the official admitted with a laugh, "But those damn things are also written by us," referring to the foreign service officers.

Several current and former ambassadors confirmed this situation, stressing the lack of top-down planning. One ambassador with close links to the national security adviser's office put it this way: "You make up your own goals, which is hugely enjoyable and has impact. But it would be nice to have direction from time to time." A former ambassador to several European countries agreed, saying, "I could never find any direction or any paper from the foreign office to tell me what India's long-term attitude should be toward country X. Positions are the prerogative of the individual ambassador." Another former ambassador elaborated:

I was completely autonomous as ambassador. There is little to no instruction from the [prime minister's office], even in cases of major countries. I had to take decisions based on a hunch. I sometimes got very, very broad directives. But I violated virtually all of them. The prime minister was a temperamental man who told me that politically it was suicide and that if it were made public, he would disown me. The fact that I got it right had a lot to do with luck.

Not only do India's foreign service officers wield enormous power; they also enjoy near anonymity of action. The ultimate responsibility for their decisions lies with the political figures in charge: the prime minister and the foreign minister. They must play the

tricky game of persuading the political leadership to accept their decisions, resulting in a bottom-up policymaking process. As Jaswant Singh, a former foreign minister, explained, "If a [foreign] minister has the skills to command the respect of the [foreign ministry's] officers, he will make policy and implement it. Otherwise, it is the civil servants who make the policy and the minister is simply the figurehead."

This lack of top-down instruction means that long-term planning is virtually impossible. Many of the officials I interviewed confirmed that India produces no internal documents or white papers on grand strategy. Moreover, newly minted ambassadors are given very loose guidelines and little background information about their regions of responsibility, and they are not required to produce reports on their goals.

Other factors contribute to the lack of long-term planning. The foreign service's exclusive admissions policies leave New Delhi short-staffed in that arena, and overburdened foreign service officers have little time or inclination for strategic thinking. As the ambassador with ties to the national security adviser's office told me, "It's hard for people to focus on a long-term strategy because they deal with day-to-day thinking." Officials at both the foreign ministry and the prime minister's office described their roles as too often consisting of either putting out fires or getting bogged down with the mundane, and they expressed concerns about the shortage of personnel. Moreover, the two departments within the foreign ministry that are supposedly meant to handle long-term strategizing, the Policy, Planning, Research Division and the Public



Diplomacy Division, are widely seen as lacking clout.

The absence of grand strategic thinking in the Indian foreign policy establishment is amplified by the lack of influential think tanks in the country. Not only is the foreign service short-staffed, but its officers do not turn to external institutions for in-depth research or analysis of the country's position. U.S. foreign-policy makers, by contrast, can expect strategic guidance from a broad spectrum of organizations that supplement the long-term planning that happens within the government itself. But in India, there are very few policy-oriented research institutions that focus on

international relations. Those that do are often private organizations funded by large corporations, so they inevitably focus chiefly on trade issues. Even when Indian think tanks house retired foreign service officers and ambassadors—who often have access to senior government officials—they are still not seen by the government as useful sources of advice. This is true even for India's best-known think tanks, including the Centre for Policy Research, which houses first-rate experts, and the Ministry of Defense-funded Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

When asked whether policymakers ever consult with think tanks, the senior

official who has experience working with Western countries replied, "It is very different from the United States. . . . I sometimes talk to individuals [at think tanks] but on a personal basis—the problem is think tanks don't have much information or access to government information." Another official who has worked in the foreign ministry similarly stated, "We just don't have that kind of intellectual input yet. We recognize that we can't become a superpower without it." This lack of consultation stands in sharp contrast to the situation in China, where regular interaction among the government, intellectuals, and think tanks results in prolific debates about the domestic and international ramifications of the country's rise.

Countries that aspire to great-power status usually look beyond tactical challenges, imagine a world that best suits their interests, and work to make that vision a reality. The problem for New Delhi is that its foreign policy apparatus is not yet designed to do that. India's inability to develop top-down, long-term strategies means that it cannot systematically consider the implications of its growing power. So long as this remains the case, the country will not play the role in global affairs that many expect.

EXPECTATIONS GAME

Although perhaps flattering to Indian officials, the international discourse on India's rise also makes them deeply uneasy. This is because it risks raising expectations—for the Indian economy to grow at a pace that is simply not achievable and for New Delhi to take on an international leadership role that it does not want to assume.

Several of the officials I interviewed referred to the fiasco of the Bharatiya Janata Party's 2004 "India Shining" campaign as an example of this liability. During the 2004 national elections, the ruling BJP campaigned on the successes of the Indian economy, all but ignoring the daily struggles of the vast majority of the population without access to basic services. The BJP's subsequent trouncing served as a cautionary tale to Indian leaders about prematurely promoting their country's emergence. Now, as the ambassador who is close to the national security adviser's office pointed out, "The prime minister does not have one speech where he talks about the rise of India but not about [the need for] growth." To be successful, Indian politicians need to spend more time focusing on domestic issues and the economy than on trumpeting their foreign policy clout.

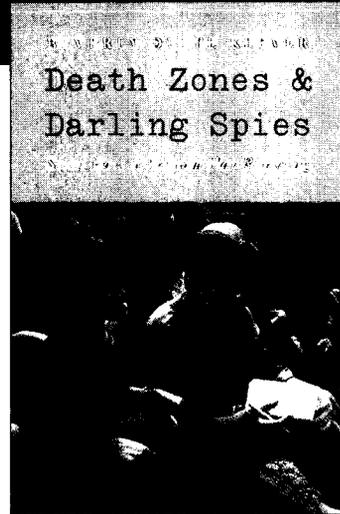
New Delhi's caution about raising expectations is tied to its fear that a growing India might have to take on responsibilities commensurate with its power. Officials who have worked with the foreign ministry and the prime minister's office told me that the disadvantage of the international discourse on India's rise was that the West, particularly the United States, might pressure India to step up its global commitments. India might have to abandon its status as a developing country and could be forced to make concessions on environmental issues, such as limiting its carbon emissions, and on trade, such as opening up the Indian market further to U.S. exports. India has not adequately thought through what its growing clout will mean in terms of assuming global leadership.

This fact has had significant bearing on New Delhi's foreign policy, and it

should be taken into account by other countries when they consider how to approach India. India's discomfort with the idea that great power brings great responsibility means that the United States and other Western countries must be cautious about asking India to assume a larger international role. New Delhi is not likely to take the lead on climate change or support ambitious humanitarian interventions. Nor will it eagerly sign on to efforts to bring down barriers to global trade—after all, India still sees itself as a developing country that needs to rely on protectionism to nurture its infant industries. And despite India's tense relations with China and its pride in being a democracy, New Delhi will be wary of Washington's efforts to impose on it the status and the burdens of acting as a liberal counterweight to an authoritarian China.

New Delhi's strategic thinking may be strengthened by the recently proposed expansion of the Indian Foreign Service, the growing number of Indian think tanks, and the increasing interest of the Indian diaspora—which has come to play a large role in New Delhi's economic diplomacy—in Indian foreign policy. In the meantime, if the West wants India to play a larger international role, it needs to offer the country concrete incentives and assurances that discussions of its rise are not simply excuses to force it to make concessions. By supporting India's long-standing desire to join the UN Security Council as a permanent member, for example, the international community can signal that it wants to both empower India and give it a greater say in world affairs. India might eventually find that although global leadership can be a burden, it also has its benefits. 🌍

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