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# What does it take for a country to rise? An analysis of Indian foreign policy in power transition contexts

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## Abstract

Based on the literature on rising powers, we contend that India has historically perceived itself as a civilizational entity and benefited from the loopholes opened by power transition periods to connect its material capabilities with its normative ambition. Our methodology compares how India behaved after the Cold War (from 1991) with China's emergence (2008 onwards) through three variables: (i) the acquisition of economic and military power, (ii) the quest for globalized authority, and (iii) the deliberate pursuit of international leadership. We conclude that if the first was already present after the Cold War, the other two only followed more recently, when India employed a deliberate strategy to shape global issues.

**Keywords:** India; Power Transition; Rising Power; Great Power.

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## Introduction

Since the formation of International Relations as an academic field, after the First World War, scholars have studied the relative positions of states, whether through asymmetries of military power or the ability to exert influence. According to Gilpin (1987), due to systemic features such as the distribution of material resources and the international political economy, it is the relationship between units that generates asymmetries and functional allocation between them. Consequently, within an unequal and anarchic system, the *de facto* power wielded by the strongest governs the actions of its weaker counterparts.

Considering power as relational, the West has built up its hegemony over the South and the East since the establishment of the Westphalian system of states. In the East, countries such as India and China had enjoyed empire status predating the

formation of Western states. With the expansion of the West, the East was subjugated and transformed into a periphery or semi-periphery of the global system. Only in the mid-20th century did some of these countries emerge, partly due to the disruptions of the Second World War and the demise of colonial structures and exhibited noteworthy economic growth rates. History has also shown that global power shifts – as, for instance, the post-Cold War and the currently increasing USA-China rivalry – can influence or condition the margin of maneuver of new aspiring powers (Flemes 2007).

In this context, one of this special issue's objectives is to understand the effects of global political and economic shifts on the agency of intermediate powers. In this paper, our goal is to analyze how India, one of the most potentially defining global players, has implemented its foreign policy in order to rise. Based on the literature on rising powers, we contend that India has historically perceived itself as a great power and has employed its foreign policy apparatus to acquire what it deems as its "rightful" status (Tharoor and Saran 2020). We argue that it benefited from the loopholes opened by power transition periods to connect its material capabilities with its norm-maker ambition.

Our methodology compares how India acted to rise after the end of the Cold War, when India lost its main partner, the Soviet Union, and after 2008, when China's emergence started to set the global agenda. These two timeframes are particularly useful due to their impact on power rearrangements. After the Cold War, the US emerged as an undisputed military, economic, and normative power. With the 2008 financial crisis, coupled with some questionable foreign policy decisions, such as the never-ending War on Terror, Washington saw its margin of maneuver shrink as other actors started to gain prominence: the European Union consolidated its foreign policy pillar, Russia regained momentum, and Brazil led initiatives like BRICS and IBAS. Among these actors, there is India.

Drawing from the framework originally proposed by Miller (2021), we compare India's strategy through three variables that are deeply connected to its rising power aspiration: (i) the acquisition of enhanced economic and military power, (ii) the quest for globalized authority, and (iii) the deliberate pursuit of international leadership beyond its region. The pertinence of employing these variables is threefold. First, economic and military power has been historically deemed paramount for a country's emergence. Second, recognition as a global authority is what distinguishes an emerging power from a revolutionary power harboring ambitions of systemic overhaul. Third, the pursuit of leadership beyond its region as a conduit to global influence has garnered increasing attention within the scholarly discourse on emerging powers (Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier 2012).

To this end, the article is structured in four sections. First, we introduce our theoretical underpinnings, highlighting how rising powers usually observe systemic reordering as opportunities. Subsequently, based on the three abovementioned variables, we analyze how India behaved after the Cold War and if (and how) it capitalized from this global shift to foster its national interests. Third, we apply the same framework to understand how another transition

period, the rise of China, affected India's global aspirations. By comparing India to itself in two different contexts, we aim to conclude that India has embraced a multifaceted foreign policy approach that particularizes it from other rising powers. Our final remarks summarize our main findings.

## What does it take for a country to rise? An assessment of the literature on rising powers

Throughout the history of International Relations study and praxis, the systemic distribution of power has stood as a pillar of political action and academic studies. Among the most renowned contributions is Kindleberger's (1986) theory of hegemonic stability, arguing that the presence of a hegemonic liberal power is a crucial, albeit not exclusive, determinant for the evolution of a global market economy. Robert Gilpin contended that at the core of the theory lies the perception that "a liberal international economy requires a hegemon committed to liberal economic principles" (Gilpin 2001, 94). This description already shed some light on the moment it spread: the theory was useful to rationalize the role of the United States in the aftermath of the Second World War while cautioning against the perceived risks posed by Soviet expansion.

Although accepted as a possible explanation for the state of affairs of that particular timeframe, critics started to proliferate. Among the critique, we identify four aspects: i) the "liberal economy" argument shadowed a normative content; ii) outdated focus on the likelihood of war; iii) homogenization and generalization of transition processes and rising countries, lacking nuanced analysis; iv) absence of "inside-the-black-box" elements as domestic politics and the role of the leaders.

Regarding the first element, critics evolved around the role of the hegemon in benefiting from the order and obstructing its change. Even Gilpin acknowledged that the theory of hegemonic stability carried normative implications, as it legitimizes the role of the hegemon not only as necessary, but also as beneficial: "(...) critics assert that the theory can be used and in fact is used to support and rationalize American imperialism and domination of other countries" (Gilpin 1987 87-88). Because of the advantages (and costs) associated with the hegemonic position, the hegemon could shift from benevolent to predatory behavior as its dominance wanes. As the power distribution is relative, if the hegemon erodes, another country arises. It was the basic premise of Paul Kennedy's (1987) "The Rise and Fall of Great Powers".

Considering the second and third critics, if these up-and-down movements manage to alter solidified and relatively stable institutions and fundamental relationships, the international system might face a "structural change". Therefore, differential power growth can provoke the rise of game-changing actors dissatisfied with the global distribution of goods and the production of norms. Rising countries usually combine two characteristics, one material and one behavioral: the increase in material capabilities (especially economic and military assets) and a revisionist

disposition (which can be more aggressive or more accommodational) towards the status quo (Lemke and Tammen 2003).

Nonetheless, power transition theorists often neglect why different rising powers have historically adopted different engagement patterns. Mainstream theories depart from a binary, zero-sum relation of one country emerging to reach the most powerful. Such perspectives may oversimplify the contemporary global landscape. Even if we have two major powers, it does not automatically equate to traditional bipolarity, as an array of players now aim to autonomously assert themselves. As a consequence, we have been witnessing heightened regionalism, with disputes increasingly addressed at localized levels, and a different set of dominant players in domain-specific matters (Jaguaribe 2021).

In that regard, Milani et al. (2017) underscored several caveats to the power transition theory, highlighting its emphasis on the high likelihood of a direct war between the established and the contending power while assigning a minor explanatory role to peaceful transitions that prevail today<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, they contend that second-tier countries can also play a pivotal role in shifting power dynamics and perceptions. Similarly, for Stuenkel (2011), “undecided” countries on the fringe of the Western World Order can, to an important degree, determine whether institutions will survive fundamental power shifts.

Rising powers, therefore, have different paths. Thus, by overshadowing this diversity, we consider that power transition theory exhibits tangible limitations. In the traditional theory, there is an assumption that these aspiring, rising powers are great powers to be. This “evolutionary” perception masks significant particularities. Some countries, like Brazil, have been “on the rise” for decades without actively challenging the prevailing world order. Others, like India, have increased their material capabilities and have been progressively adopting an active stance. Both are, however, considered rising powers. We question, then, what does it take for a country to rise?

For Guimarães (1998), large peripheral countries – undeveloped countries with a large population and a territory that could reasonably be exploited economically – typically aspire to ascendancy. While it serves as a foundational premise, this definition does not tell the whole story. We second Milani et al. (2017) in their argument that graduation is not an outcome but a nonlinear process of change in international hierarchy, scale, and status, including going from rule-taker to rule-maker, occupying an influential role in the international political economy, acquiring recognition by its peers, deepening ties with its region, and having a project to global prominence transcending short-term imperatives.

Likewise, for Miller (2021), for a country to rise it should be *perceived* as a rising power, as there is a social-relational aspect related to the recognition by external actors. To gain “endorsement”, as mentioned, it must not only acquire economic and military power, but also globalize its interests, going beyond regional confines in the quest for conquering global authority. For Miller, countries that engage in all these behaviors are active rising powers. Those that engage only in increasing

<sup>1</sup> See also Allison (2017).

their material power are reticent and accommodational rising powers, as their projection can only be partial without the other two elements.

In this process, active rising powers must develop what Miller (2021) calls “idea advocacy”, a narrative, predominantly crafted by the elites, delineating the path to greater power status and the rationale underpinning it. We would add, however, that the consensus around the “idea advocacy” is not constant. For some countries, as we will argue in the Indian case, the domestic convergence around its international ambitions has been strongly articulated. This is not the case for other rising countries<sup>2</sup>.

Connecting this argument with the fourth critique outlined above, if rising powers are diverse, there is theoretical value in case studies. In this paper, we focus on India. Although until recently the country was interpreted as being reticent and inward-faced (Amorim and Silva 2014), we argue that the material power is now fully connected to the “idea advocacy” and the narrative that India is destined to be a great power (Tharoor e Saran 2020). When did India change its behavior and start to actively search for global authority?

As we will detail in the following sections, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, India initially adopted an accommodational stance to focus on its economic development. After building a trustful reputation, especially amongst unstable neighbors, India started to actively promote its worldview when China rose with a different setting of preferences and norms from the Western pattern.

The roots are, however, ingrained in the historic and sacred writings that have shaped the Indian worldview. Unlike some of the other rising powers analyzed in this special issue – thereby attesting their plurality –, whose aspirations are based on a recent ascendant trajectory, India sees history in a long-term perspective that refers to the greatness of its past. According to Hindu sacred writings, like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Arthashastra of Kautilya, India is a *vishwa mitra*, a partner and a well-wisher of the world, whose profile is based on the heritage of a civilizational entity, with a moral ethos built on a tradition of global service (Saran 2017). The narrative, embraced by subsequent political leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is that India’s rise means the resurgence of civilization and is based on great purposefulness (Juluri 2015).

Although the past is not a constraint to the future, it has explanatory value. In reassessing the question “what does it take for a country to rise?”, India’s trajectory underscores an interplay of a strong historical, cultural, and political background to support its intention to be great (again). However, it would be simplistic to assume that India’s rise was inevitable, thereby neglecting the role of context and leadership.

By its very existence, India occupies global mind-space and its growing vigor would only expand that appreciation. The questions now are really of the extent to which

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<sup>2</sup> In Brazil, for instance, there is neither political nor academic consensus on the country’s status. See, for instance, Flemes (2010).

its revival is shaping the world order and what that portends for the future. This means choices, policies, leadership, delivery, and not least, an awareness of who we are and how we assert our collective persona. (Jaishankar 2024, 197-198)

Therefore, the upward movement gained momentum when decision-makers intentionally chose – and intention is key – a proactive strategy, expanding the scope of India's international presence and material capabilities to maximize systemic permissiveness. It wasn't the case after the Cold War, but it became a well-planned and executed strategy after 2008. In the next sections, we will introduce how India has been fulfilling its ambition of a rising power.

## “Reticent” rising power: India after the Cold War

In the aftermath of the Second World War, nations had to consider the power asymmetry and geographic and strategic proximity to the two superpowers in channeling their foreign policy options. India, for instance, gravitated toward the USSR, benefiting from military assistance and support on multilateral forums. Despite this convergence, India sought a foreign policy free from ideological constraints in some international niches. During the Cold War, India spearheaded the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), highlighting the existence of a longstanding North-South conflict hindering socio-economic development. Consequently, India forged closer ties with Third World countries (Ross 2013).

With the USSR's collapse in 1991, the US solidified its status as a power without rivals. Progressively, other centers of power emerged, including the European Union, China, Japan, Brazil, and India. We argue that, within this context, India adopted a distinct approach to capitalize on the opportunity to rise. This decision was intricately woven into India's overarching strategic vision, which requires retrospective examination to fully grasp the roots of such inclinations.

Before colonization, India stood as one of the world's primary trade hubs. Colonial hegemony, however, engendered negative consequences, including a focus on raw material supply, insufficient investment in logistics and infrastructure, and policies limiting land occupancy. The belated independence of India signified a multifaceted process involving the resumption of not only territorial and material dimensions, but also the sense of state ownership. The inherent distrust of Western models and external interference, intricately linked to the trauma of colonization, impelled India to seek models that afforded greater autonomy even if contradicting the Western and orthodox playbook. Therefore, Miller (2021) asserts that, after the Cold War, India's foreign policy was grounded in principles that resonate with its historical identity as a non-aligned nation, diverging from Western-imposed expectations about its behavior.

Consequently, it is unsurprising that in the years following 1947, India opted to embrace a Soviet-style economic model of central planning, exemplified by Prime Minister Nehru's Five-Year Plans in the 1950s and 1960s, aimed at enhancing self-reliance and reducing external dependence



(Ogden 2014). However, the economic landscape underwent a significant shift with the external account crisis triggered by oil shocks in 1973 and 1979, ultimately leading India to seek a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to avoid default in 1981. It was followed by another in 1991, when India's international reserves could only cover three weeks of imports (Rangarajan and Mishra 2015). Under contextual pressures, India substantially liberalized its economy in the 1980s and 1990s. Additionally, the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the loss of its principal political and commercial ally, rendering it more susceptible to external demands. If power transition contexts provide opportunities to rising powers, the odds seemed to be against India.

However, India still managed to capitalize during this critical juncture to advance on Miller's (2021) first variable: acquiring enhanced economic and military power. Unlike other developing nations, in India the state played a prominent role in controlling the liberalization process, and privatizations did not entail the management relinquishment of state-owned companies. This control over economic policy at the national level enabled Delhi to orient its industrial strategy toward the military project.

As it was the cornerstone of India's behavior – not only but especially – after the Cold War, it is noteworthy that India's military reforms predated its economic changes. A crucial turning point for India's military endeavors occurred with its substantial defeat in the 1962 border war with China. Military spending in India experienced a significant upswing again in the 1970s and 1980s under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1966-1977; 1980-1984), whose assertive policies increased military activity domestically and regionally, including India's nuclear program.

From this perspective, according to Nayar and Paul (2003), India's nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998 represented the culmination of a long-term strategy aimed at achieving a more robust status in the international system based on the desire to acquire great power status and correct what was perceived as a "status inconsistency". India conducted its inaugural tests in 1974 following the war with China, which had become a nuclear power in the preceding decade. China, in turn, facilitated the nuclearization of Pakistan to curtail India's aspirations for regional preeminence. As a result, India is situated in the most nuclearized region globally, alongside Pakistan, China, Russia and, if the perimeter is extended, North Korea and Israel.

To counterbalance the influence of China and Pakistan in Asia, India has pursued alliances with other states to recalibrate forces. During the Cold War, the USSR stood as its primary security partner, and India emerged as one of the largest importers of arms from the Soviets (Sennes 2001). The Soviet Union also served as a diplomatic ally in international forums, such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), where the Soviets consistently vetoed resolutions targeting India amid conflicts with Pakistan (Albuquerque 2022a).

In the aftermath of the Cold War and the loss of the Soviet Union as its main ally, India sought an external partner, particularly the United States, to counterbalance the Chinese presence in the region. This movement was not trivial, considering that since India's nuclear tests in the 1970s, the United States had imposed export controls on dual-use technologies for India due to its non-membership in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Ganguly and Mukherji

(2014) assert that the shift in the international order after the end of the Cold War has prompted a reassessment of some foundations of India's foreign and defense policy towards an approximation with the US, including establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel, maintaining a critical stance towards Iraq (previously an ally), supporting the US during the Gulf War, and the cessation of support for the Palestinian cause.

Here, we can refer to one of the rising power theory arguments: in systemic reordering contexts, rising states can be more revisionist or more accommodational. Here, India opted for the latter: it refrained from pursuing global leadership and focused on a more inward developmental approach (Narlikar 2009). However, this was not passive complacency, as India sustained its ambivalent position on the nuclear program, citing concerns about the discriminatory nature of the regime and India's vulnerability in its region. Decided to keep its options open to both defend itself from a turbulent regional context and use nuclear energy as a development tool, J. Singh, India's Senior Advisor on Defense and Foreign Affairs, called the NTP a "nuclear apartheid" (Singh 1998). On the contrary of the Western's expectations, India adopted less conventional strategies, such as pursuing nuclearization outside the bounds of the NPT and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Therefore, in analyzing Indian foreign policy amid a power transition context, we summarize some substantial elements by recalling Miller's (2021) observations. According to the author, active rising powers usually adopt three simultaneous strategies: enhancing economic and military power, searching for globalized authority, and displaying eagerness to take on leadership roles. While India engaged in the first kind of behavior, it showcased a certain hesitancy in globalizing authority and shaping perceptions of its changing status. In contrast to China's aspiration to take on leadership roles, which will be explored in the next section, India exhibited reticence despite its significant economic clout. Although we consider that India fulfilled one of Miller's variables, namely the investment in the economy and military power, it did not conquer globalized authority, and its leadership was mainly confined to its own development agenda. It is, therefore, as per Miller's definition, a reticent and accommodational power.

The quest for economic and military power was undoubtedly there. According to Kapila (2015), between 1950 and 1980, India's GDP had an average annual growth of 3,5%. It connects to the process of structural transformation that accelerated with the economic reforms that began in the 1990s, but a high-productivity and capital-intensive sector coexisted with an agriculture marked by low productivity. After the Cold War, "the share of its GDP measured in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) as part of the global economy more than doubled during a period of less than thirty years – from 3.6% in 1990 to 7,6% in 2018." (Manzi and Lima 2021, 4).

The increase also translated into military investments. As mentioned before, the defeat by China had a huge impact: if we consider military expenditure as a share of GDP, India invested 2% in 1960 and 4% in 1964, right after the Sino-Indian War. At the dawn of the Cold War, in 1990, the percentage was 3,1%, with a slight decrease to 2,9% in 2000 – as a comparison, in 2000, China invested 1,8%, and Brazil 1,7% (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2024).



If the first indicator could have taken India to a prominent role in the international system, the other two stalled its rise. Based on Miller (2021), we offer some explanations. First, during the post-Cold War period and the consolidation of U.S. hegemony, opportunities for the emergence of potential rising powers arose. India's ascent, however, was timid at best. The primary focus was on creating the conditions for its economic growth, and not on adopting global responsibilities. While some recognized its significance, others highlighted its hesitancy in fully adopting the behaviors expected of rising powers, mainly attributed to its suspicion of external interference. As Narlikar (2011, 1607) put it, "India's record of assuming global responsibility has been lackluster at best".

Indian foreign policy ideas exhibited continuity from the Cold War era, emphasizing non-alignment, moral ethos, and autonomy. India continued to view itself as a civilizational entity and an independent actor, not confined to the East or West. The persistence of an inward-focused approach to nation-building resulted in reactive rather than creative foreign policy notions. According to Miller (2021), India's discomfort with new ideas about its global role, coupled with a strongly Indo-centric framing of Asia, limited its ability to position itself as a central player on the world stage. For Narlikar (2009), two possible explanations relate: first, to the imperatives of regional security that drag India's attention and render it suspicious of Western interferences; second, to its political culture highly associated with Nehru's anti-colonialism and self-sufficiency narratives. One example is India's reticent behavior in negotiating reciprocal tariffs in the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) debates:

Such an attitude was understandable in the post-colonial euphoria of the 1950s and 1960s when a large number of developing countries sought strategies of self-sufficiency and tried to secure their independence through third-world conglomerates such as the MNA. The persistence in these actions and the concomitant reluctance to participate proactively in the world, however, makes it difficult to adjust to the new, more liberal, and self-confident India (Narlikar 2009, 103 [author's translation]).

Second, India held a distinctive status in the international community, setting it apart from China. As a robust and diverse democracy, India presented itself as the only Asian country rivaling China in size and population while upholding a commitment to liberal democratic norms. It positioned India as a potential natural partner for those aligned with the liberal international order. Despite this, challenges persisted in gaining recognition as a rising power, primarily due to perceived fluctuations in India's commitment.

As S. Jaishankar (2024, 5) posited, India's "early diplomacy was eventually constrained by the capability factor. (...) But somewhere, there was also the inadequate projection of a great civilization". Therefore, to acquire external recognition and prove its value, India had to embrace its "idea advocacy" and, "be confident of its own values and beliefs, and base its policies on those convictions. These will draw from the totality of its culture, heritage and traditions." (idem, 9).

Like China, India historically regarded itself as a major power and a great civilization. However, unlike China, India did not immediately apply these ideas to the context of contemporary great power competition. The difference of India's behavior from other rising powers, especially China, laid in its reticence.

## **“Active” rising power: the “Indian imperative” as an alternative to the rise of China**

After a period of unchallenged dominance, the relative decline of the US economy in the early 2000s has not only weakened its commitment to a liberal international order, but has also introduced a new element of uncertainty, altering expectations. This vacuum of political and economic leadership had the potential to ignite a new phase of competition. While India's reticence initially delayed its rise, China seized the opportunity and emerged as a significant player in the evolving global landscape.

Although beyond the scope of this article, it is worth briefly noting that China's economic reforms, initiated in the 1970s, propelled it from a poor, developing country to an economic powerhouse within a span of four decades. This rapid ascent has resulted in the uplifting of 300 million Chinese from poverty, and integration into global supply chains as a producer of high-value goods (Miller 2019). A noteworthy aspect of this transformative journey has been the strategic emphasis on reopening Chinese universities, prioritizing the acquisition of knowledge, and enhancing human resources (Saran 2023).

In 1978, according to data from the World Bank<sup>3</sup>, China's GDP slightly surpassed that of India, standing at US\$ 293.6 billion compared to India's US\$ 293 billion. Fast forward to 2020, China's nominal GDP reached US\$ 15.5 trillion, 17% of global GDP, while India's GDP for the same year was estimated at US\$ 2.66 trillion. The economic asymmetry between the two nations is starkly evident, highlighted by the fact that China's total annual exports surpass India's entire GDP. According to Saran (2023), a key explanation for this divergence lies in the fact that China strategically established a system where foreign-introduced technology was swiftly assimilated, forming the foundation for local innovation and refraining the “brain drain” phenomenon.

When, therefore, China detached from the other peers and started to grow unrivaled? In 2005, statements from Chinese party leadership started to emphasize that its status as an emerging power had entered a new historical phase, marked by the country's “peaceful rise” (Pinto 2005). Following this narrative, a key turning point was undoubtedly the global financial and economic crisis of 2008, when the United States, first, and its Western allies, later, faced a severe economic downturn. While the crisis endured in the epicenter of capitalism, China rebounded and resumed its high-growth trajectory, due to its substantial holdings of US treasury

<sup>3</sup> Available at: World Bank Group – WBG. *China*. Washington, 2024. Accessed January 6, 2024. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/china>

securities and an abundant stimulus package. It began to showcase the efficiency of its economic management model, characterized by rigorous state regulation, in contrast to the discredited free and self-regulated market advocated by the US (Moura 2021).

China's prominence in the global economy gradually translated into a more assertive foreign policy that impacted relations to former peers. In the early 2000s, China positioned itself as an emerging economy alongside nations like Brazil, India, and South Africa. It embraced the "developing country identity" by, for instance, promoting the BRICS as a strategic alliance. However, after 2005, and mainly following the 2008 crisis, China seized the opportunity to scale-up. It shifted its focus and increasingly measured itself in relation to the United States (Mahbubani 2021; Breslin 2021).

The expectation of acquiring a great power status also influenced how India understood the rise of China as either an obstacle or an opportunity to its own rise. As introduced before, China-India relations are somewhat turbulent, especially after the Sino-Indian War of 1962. After the 2008 crisis, when the asymmetry between them began to widen again, another major shift inducted China's diminished sensitivity to India's interests, its quest for economic and political influence in countries around India, and a reduced tolerance for closer India-US relations (Saran 2023).

The situation started to change when the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the attributed "blame" to Islamic fundamentalism prompted President George W. Bush to portray India as a responsible actor. This narrative aimed to neutralize the influence of Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country, and China, characterized as undemocratic and authoritarian. Starting in 2005, discussions on this matter unfolded in the US State Department, culminating in a joint statement by President Bush and Prime Minister Singh in 2008, wherein the US declared India to be "a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology that deserves to acquire the same benefits and advantages as other nuclear states" (Bhatia 2017, 127).

The Indo-American Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, ratified by both countries in 2008, signified a shift in the opportunities available to India within the international system. By forging closer ties with the US, India transitioned from nuclear isolation to engagement with international agencies such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Furthermore, the narrative of India as a responsible actor positioned the country as a trusted entity within its macro-regional circle, in contrast to the negative perceptions of China, Russia, and Pakistan. This alignment with the US also garnered official support for India's pursuit of a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in 2010.

Therefore, India, in opposition to its stance after the Cold War, did not passively accept the role of spectator. For many high-level officials, across the political spectrum, the race with China is not yet over (Tharoor and Saran 2020). Recalling the critique outlined in the first section about the need to open the black box, the resurgence of India's aspiration to great power status has a layer of explanation in its domestic politics, as the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in recent decades has brought about profound changes in the country's behavior. As a party that

defends Hindu nationalism, traditions and culture, the BJP has adopted policies that highlight the inevitability of the Indian worldview. Based on Miller's (2021) variables, table 1 compares India's stance after the Cold War and after 2008.

**Table 1. India and rising power variables after the Cold War and after 2008**

	<b>Economic and Military Power</b>	<b>Globalized Authority</b>	<b>Leadership</b>
Post-Cold War	Present	Absent	Partial and niched
After 2008	Present	Present	Present

Source: the authors.

If the first variable was already present, it intensified. During the first BJP coalition government (1999-2004), investments on military modernization skyrocketed, as defense became an asset for India to acquire global prominence. After the agreement with the US, even India's investments on nuclear capacities were portrayed as a pragmatic move instead of a threat. In 2010 and 2020, respectively, India sustained 2,9% and 2,8% on military expenditure (compared to China's 1,8% on both years) (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2024), but now on a substantially larger GDP. In 2019, India became the world's fifth largest economy, surpassing France and the United Kingdom, with a projected third place in 2030 (European Commission 2018). Therefore,

The period marked by the strongest economic acceleration can be dated to the middle of the 2000s when the global economy also registered record rates of growth. The Indian performance is also distinguished by two aspects which reveal a higher degree of maturity of development: 1) contrary to what had occurred until the beginning of the 1990s, the Indian economy presented a more stable and less volatile economic performance, which strengthens the basis for structural economic growth, and 2) the Indian economic growth performance showed more resilience to external shocks rooted in the different crises which took place throughout the 1990s in emerging markets and the global crisis of 2008. (Manzi and Lima 2021, 6)

The remarkable economic performance was coupled with intentionally seeking globalized authority and leadership beyond its neighborhood – which entails the shift from reticent to active rising power. For Prime Minister Narendra Modi – although this narrative has historically crosscut the political spectrum –, India is bound to assume the mantle of world leadership and occupy its “rightful” place (Ayres 2018). In the words of Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar (2024, 69), there is a “conscious endeavor to shape global issues”, and “India has today moved out of the defensive non-aligned posture, engaging multiple nations on a range of issues with equal

confidence. It is also a greater contributor to solutions, regional or global” (xii). Additionally, the Minister contends (xvii) that “an early exhortation within the Modi government was to get the world to change its thinking about India. This meant building and demonstrating capabilities across a wide spectrum”, thereby projecting the message of a New India, “perceived more as part of the solution than the problem” (xviii). Therefore, for India, it should not be enough to be a great power, but, instead, a “leading power” (Tharoor and Saran 2020), not merely as an abstract ambition but as a strategy with specific targets.

The paths to this goal can be illustrated by a plethora of concrete examples, for instance, the exhortation of Hindu nationalism within India to reinforce self-confidence. On one hand, it has a convening power, exemplified by the growth of the use of *Bharat*, one of the country’s official Hindu names as per the Constitution. On the other, it has been undermining one of India’s most valuable international assets: its democracy. The Citizen Amendment Act from 2019, for instance, has hindered the acquisition of Indian citizenship by Muslims. Also, Modi’s government has been criticized by the ramping authoritarianism and censorship of opponents<sup>4</sup>. Although US leaders still sustain the narrative that US and India are close partners who share democracy as a core value, some actions taken by Modi have caused backlash on India’s perception abroad, which can pose a threat in the short run<sup>5</sup>.

Another strategy is the recognition of its peers (or peers-to-be), based on the idea that India is ready to “engage with America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbors in, extend the neighborhood, and expand traditional constituencies of support” (Jaishankar 2024, 1). Therefore, one such strategy was to redefine and scale-up relations with its extended neighborhood. Regarding Southeast Asia, India replaced the former “Look East” policy, formulated in the 1990s, for the “Act East” policy, symbolized by its closer ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members. To reinforce its regional and global footprint, the BJP government has also launched the “Link West” approach directed to the Gulf countries, and the Connect Central Asia Policy, especially after India joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in 2015.

Moving beyond its neighborhood, by becoming an “acceptable” nuclear power in the eyes of the West, India has turned into an ally to be conquered. For this reason, the country has managed to simultaneously be a priority to the US, Russia and China. In the case of the US, the nuclear agreement and the formal support for admission as a UNSC permanent member are illustrative. More recently, in 2017, during the ASEAN Summit, the two countries, alongside Japan and Australia, relaunched the QUAD, a quadrilateral dialogue to reinforce democracy and security in Asia. As for Russia and China, despite persistent tensions, the three countries

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, a *Journal of Democracy* issue on India, available at <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/news-and-updates/is-india-still-a-democracy/>. Accessed on 18th March 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Arundhati Roy has published an op-ed in the *New York Times* covering this topic. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/13/opinion/india-us-diplomacy-china-biden-modi.html>. Accessed on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2024. A survey from the Pew Research Center published in 2023 also shows some data on international views of India and Modi. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/08/29/international-views-of-india-and-modi/>. Accessed on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2024.

coordinate within the BRICS, and in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russia remains a strategic military partner, from which India imports high-end defense technologies as nuclear submarines.

Other example is India's active stance at multilateral fora. At the World Trade Organization (WTO), India has development as a core belief and is an active demander of developing countries' special status and governments' right to protect sensitive sectors (Mahrenbach 2013). In the G20, Indian presidency in 2023 was an unequivocal display of its diplomatic capabilities and available resources, especially after India managed to negotiate a consensual declaration amidst the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and convened the Global South Summit, to reinforce the role of developing countries in economic and financial forums like the G20. The Indian presidency was also successful in approving the adhesion of the African Union to the G20 after years of intense negotiations (Rakhra 2023).

At the United Nations, together with Brazil, Germany and Japan, India is part of the G4, a group that aims to reform the membership of the UNSC, especially its permanent members' current configuration, to adapt global governance bodies to the actual configuration of power (Albuquerque 2022b). Even as a non-permanent member, India has been showcasing its desire to promote its national interests and worldviews. In 2011, for example, India expressed opposition to the exclusion of non-permanent members from the negotiation process regarding resolutions on Libya and Syria after the Arab Spring (Puri 2016). In 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, India did not implement sanctions imposed on Moscow by many Western countries, and contested Russia's suspension from multilateral institutions (Albuquerque 2023).

If, in the 1990s, India was reticent, it is now nothing but active.

## Conclusion

Based on the literature on rising states, we argued that shifts in the systemic distribution of power have historically presented opportunities for emerging countries. The literature on power transitions, however, has showcased limitations, such as the stationary view of zero-sum transitions and the lack of focus on the rising power's diversity. Regarding the latter, India is, undoubtedly, a rising power to be reckoned with. It has not only a strategic geopolitical position and remarkable economic indicators, but also a civilizational past that supports its future endeavors.

Therefore, we analyzed Indian foreign policy in two transition contexts, namely the end of the Cold War and the rise of China. We applied a framework consisting of three variables to compare the Indian behavior in these pivotal contexts: economic and military power, globalized authority, and international leadership. When a country only meets the first criteria, it is considered an accommodational rising power, as there are still some conditions to be fulfilled in order to enable it to shape global issues. It was precisely the case after the Cold War. Due to its colonial



legacy and partition traumas, India was reticent to engage with Western great powers and focused its strategy to either inward-looking development strategies or to alliances aimed at reducing asymmetries, such as Third World coalitions and the MNA.

After 2008, however, India strategically planned to achieve globalized authority and international leadership, especially after the BJP came to power with the narrative of retaking India to its “rightful” place. The “Indian imperative” is intrinsically linked with the country’s self-assessment as a civilization entity, an “idea advocacy” that has been crafted by the elites and has acquired broader acceptance within society. Therefore, our analysis leads us to the conclusion that while India only partially met the requisites in the aftermath of the Cold War, it has now fully embraced its desire to be recognized as a great power.

As this is a process in the making, future research agendas will be required to complement our findings. One is the current challenges to Indian democracy following BJP policies and its possible impacts on how India is perceived abroad. Another topic that requires further research is the development of comparative analysis between rising powers to simultaneously highlight their diversity and better assess how they strategize their path towards ascendancy. Connected to both, the role of the elites and the domestic convergence around foreign policy also deserve more in-depth accounts.

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