



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Indian Debates on America's Rebalance to Asia

Divided Opinion: Strategic Opportunity or Strategic Concern?

Despite Washington's efforts to gain India's unwavering support for its rebalancing or so-called pivot to the Asia-Pacific, New Delhi's backing nevertheless remains reluctant.¹ At first glance, China's growing assertiveness in the region would seem to make a stronger U.S. presence in Asia firmly in India's interest. Indeed, some Indian diplomats have welcomed the U.S. move, especially in private. There has been no clear endorsement, however, by top political authorities and none is likely to come. The direction of Indo-U.S. relations is greatly dependent on whichever school of thought currently dominates India's foreign policy landscape. The question of what the U.S. pivot means for India and how New Delhi should respond has sharpened a debate that has now been underway for more than a decade.

The biggest split within this domestic debate is between those who consider America's rebalancing as a strategic concern and those who see it as a strategic opportunity. To the extent that domestic debates are precursors to shifts in actual policy, mapping various possible trajectories as they are discussed in the domestic space is likely to provide an understanding of future shifts in Indian foreign policy. These debates thus provide important clues to both the current ambivalence and future directions of India's strategic policy.

Indian Foreign Policy Schools of Thought on the Pivot

Indian foreign policy thinking is often less uniform and more fractured than most outside observers realize. Even under the over-

powering stewardship of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, foreign policy was a contested space. George Perkovich’s work on India’s nuclear policy and Srinath Raghavan’s take on Nehru’s strategic thinking provide some evidence in this regard, as does the more recent conceptual work by Deepa Ollapally and Rajesh Rajagopalan.²

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On the issue of the pivot, opinion in India can be divided into four different schools of thought: Soft Nationalists; Great Power Realists; Hard Nationalists; and Bandwagoners.³ These schools come with defined worldviews and ideological commitments leading to a particular interpretation of the current strategic environment. In turn, they offer distinct recommendations for Indian foreign policymakers interpreting the pivot. **The following table lays out these four groups along three dimensions: (1) Reading of the current strategic environment, especially the U.S. “decline thesis” (2) Perception of the pivot as a strategic opportunity or a strategic concern and (3) Policy recommendation.**

Indian Foreign Policy Schools of Thought and Policy Preferences

Foreign Policy Schools	Strategic Environment	Perception of U.S. Pivot	Foreign Policy Prescription
Soft Nationalists	U.S. in relative decline; China rising	Strategic concern	Maintain strategic autonomy
Great Power Realists	U.S. in relative decline; China rising	Strategic opportunity	Increase strategic engagement with U.S.
Hard Nationalists	U.S. in relative decline; China rising	Strategic concern	Strategic independence from U.S.
Bandwagoners	U.S. decline a myth; China rising	Strategic opportunity	Strategic alignment with U.S.

Soft Nationalists

Ideologically, Soft Nationalists detest the notion of alignment in great power politics. Historically speaking, they support the Nehruvian idea of non-alignment and prescribe a policy of equidistance from great powers. The widely noted *Nonalignment 2.0* authored by a number of eminent Indian analysts, business leaders, and foreign and defense policy practitioners in 2012 best captures the sentiments of this group.⁴

Their view of the current power transition in Asia is underpinned by a perception of a weakening U.S. and a rising China. As two eminent Indian historians put it, “colossus it may be, but both wars (Afghanistan and Iraq) have exposed America’s limitations.”⁵ For this group, President Barack Obama’s pivot is an attempt by the declining hegemon to wrestle control of power transitions occurring in the Asia-Pacific and represents a strategic concern mainly for three reasons. First, active rebalancing against China would lead the latter to become more aggressive. Second, it might motivate smaller states in the region – feeling confident under the protection of a U.S. pivot – to undertake risky endeavors vis-à-vis China. Third, the greatest strategic concern is that active rebalancing against China might force India to choose sides and hence restrict its foreign policy choices. In other words, a declining hegemon may press India into a conflict not of its own making. Soft Nationalists prescribe a policy of strategic autonomy and equidistance from both U.S. and China in addressing the U.S. pivot.

Great Power Realists

In opposition to Soft Nationalists, Great Power Realists see a strategic opportunity in the strategy of the U.S. pivot since the hegemon now seems ready to share space and power with New Delhi in the Asia-Pacific region.⁶ The pivot, for them, represents a rare constellation of American interests aligned in favor of a larger strategic footprint for India. They suggest following a policy of hedging against China’s growing power and engaging with the United States, including U.S.-Indian military cooperation. However, they remain wary of using the ‘alliance’ word in any India-U.S. partnership since ‘alliances’ have no market value in Indian domestic politics. They vouch for the utility of greater ‘strategic engagement’ with the U.S. in terms of diplomacy and defense cooperation.

Hard Nationalists

Hard Nationalists broadly espouse ‘strategic independence’ from great powers, explicitly so in response to the U.S. rebalance. Their policy preference amounts to a kind of ‘security mercantilism,’ suggesting that India eschew reliance on other powers for its national security and instead rely on internal balancing, particularly through the development of large nuclear arsenals. In the context of the pivot, their focus is not so much on U.S. decline – though some identify a steep relative drop in U.S. power – but rather on China’s rise.⁷

Given America’s challenging fiscal condition, this group considers the pivot to be unsustainable over the long run. One of their key concerns is the possibility of a grand accommodation between the U.S. and China, leaving India to fend for itself. For them, the prospect of a “G-2” makes the U.S. a very unreliable ally. This sense of fickleness is further accentuated by the fact that the U.S. has no direct stake in the Asia-Pacific. On the other hand, countries such as Japan, Vietnam, Philippines, and India have unsettled territorial conflicts with China and thus an intrinsic interest in maintaining the “correct” balance of power in the Asian continent. Hence,

Hard Nationalists argue against over-reliance on the U.S. strategy of rebalancing against China. As one noted commentator argued, “America’s security coattails are not long enough anymore for a strategic partner such as India to ride on, alongside America’s treaty allies in Asia.”⁸ Instead, they prescribe ‘strategic independence’ built upon a large scale nuclear arsenal comprising hydrogen weapons and Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs).

Bandwagoners

Bandwagoners primarily come from India’s military community and differ from Great Power Realists in one important aspect: they seek U.S. support to achieve ‘perceived gains’ – both material and prestige – beyond simply maintaining a regional balance of power. ‘Gain’ rather than ‘survival’ motivates Bandwagoners for a close strategic partnership with the United States. Contrary to the impression that U.S. power is in decline, this group is skeptical of the decline thesis. They hold that the United States can easily recuperate from its ongoing economic woes as it has demonstrated on a number of previous occasions. They also emphasize the point that the U.S. military is still the most potent in the world. It makes sense to them for India to be on the side of the hegemon since they share common goals – particularly on the containment of China. Unlike the Soft Nationalists, Bandwagoners see a clear conflict of interest between India and China.

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However, unlike the Hard Nationalists who counsel ‘strategic independence,’ Bandwagoners call for increasing alignment with Washington, especially in the military domain. A big difference between this group and the Great Power Realists relates to the mode of balancing. The latter’s preferred long term strategy is internal balancing which is rendered more feasible if the U.S. provides strategic stability in the region via the pivot. The Bandwagoners favor a strategy of external balancing with the pivot seen as representing an excellent opportunity for India to forge

close military ties with the U.S.

This group also prescribes bandwagoning with the United States for other strategic reasons. According to them, India’s rise depends upon U.S. goodwill. In the defense sphere, it is the only country which can provide India with the advanced technology it requires. In the global political realm, the U.S. is the best advocate for India’s ascent - from a future Security Council seat to the current nuclear breakthrough.

Conclusion

This vigorous domestic debate suggests that India’s policy on U.S.

rebalancing in Asia is far from settled. To an important extent, India's ambivalence over U.S. engagement in Asia is born out of a fractured domestic consensus. The different schools of thought are a simplified way of understanding various foreign policy impulses as they are being discussed domestically with regard to the U.S. pivot. What this exercise suggests is largely along the lines of Ollapally and Rajagopalan's thesis: Indian foreign policy at present is witnessing a struggle between the traditional inertia of a Soft Nationalist legacy and a more pragmatic (and activist) orientation emerging within the foreign policy elite.⁹ The debate on the pivot is another instance of this tussle; however, this time the Soft Nationalists have a slight edge, which explains the rather reluctant behavior of India to fully embrace the U.S. rebalance.

How can we understand the Soft Nationalist edge? First, there seems to be genuine concern in India over the sustainability of the pivot by a financially weakened U.S. A second and even more important reason is the mixed policy signals sent out during the Obama Administration's first term, particularly with regard to accommodating China at the expense of India and other powers.¹⁰ During his debut visit to Beijing, foreign policy experts viewed President Obama as pursuing a great power condominium with China and the U.S. jointly managing global affairs. In fact, according to one close observer, senior Obama administration officials early in their tenure reportedly told their Indian counterparts that the U.S. "was not doing balance of power in Asia anymore."¹¹

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Of course, within two years U.S. policy direction shifted in response to growing Chinese assertiveness, and President Obama declared the rebalancing strategy. However, the damage had already been done and left a lasting impression across a broad spectrum of Indian foreign policy elites. A lingering sense that the United States is not a reliable long-term ally – especially when its own affairs are in a state of disrepair – has tipped the Indian domestic debate, at least for now, in favor of those expressing 'strategic concern' about the U.S. pivot in the Asia-Pacific.

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