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India: Driving the Global Superhighway

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IN EARLY 1991, AS THE global structure of the cold war lay in tatters and India was starting to consider the role it would play in the new system that had emerged, the soon-to-depart Indian ambassador to the United States mused about his parting advice. "I keep telling my government," he told the author, "if you want to drive on the superhighway, you have to get up to 100 kilometers per hour." The decade that followed was a time of transformation for India, domestically and internationally. A more economically-driven foreign policy was the natural consequence of its accelerating growth. These trends, along with the collapse of the Soviet Union, thrust India's relationship with the United States into a much more central position for both countries. But the ambassador's metaphor was particularly apt in describing the coming transformation of India's role in the world's multilateral deliberations. Nearly two decades later, India has found the transition to highway speed surprisingly unsettling, but it is starting to find its stride.

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Out of the many multilateral settings in which India participates, four paint a good picture of how India's global diplomacy is evolving. The United Nations is the scene of the most traditional, and from the U.S. point of view, most contentious, Indian positions. The G-20, now emerging as the primary forum for coordinating policies on international finance among the major world economies, is at the other extreme, the least publicized and most harmonious. In the international nonproliferation system, India is an anomaly, and for historical reasons, quite suspicious of the existing institutions. Finally, the international deliberations on climate change, and most recently the Copenhagen summit, are the best examples of the changes starting to take place in India's approach to multilateral diplomacy. This paper looks briefly at each of these settings and draws conclusions about how India's multilateral "personality" is evolving.

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India has always had a high profile in the United Nations. In the early decades after independence, the organization provided something of a bully pulpit for Indian views on global issues. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) has to a large extent set the tone in the General Assembly and the UN committees, which have universal membership. On average, the State Department's published vote tally for 2008 shows that countries vote with the United States 18 percent of the time in the General Assembly; India came in slightly above this average, at 23.7 percent.¹ India, like other countries, tends to use the General Assembly as a place to advertise its nonaligned solidarity. The major exception to this very traditional NAM-driven record is peacekeeping. Today, India is one of the three principal troop contributing countries, and its professionalism and pragmatic approach to the policy issues involved have reinforced its standing as a major player.

Neither New Delhi nor Washington seems to consider the General Assembly and the universal UN committees as important shapers of the global agenda. The big prize for India in the United Nations, one it has sought for years, is a permanent seat on the Security Council. Its last big push, made together with Japan, Germany, and Brazil, took place in 2005, but the Indian government now appears to recognize that a permanent seat is at best a distant goal. The process of amending the charter is difficult and requires the support of all of the current permanent Security Council members, including China, which is an unlikely prospect.

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For the time being, India's sights are set on a seat in the next rotation of the council's non-permanent members. India was last on the Security Council from 1991 to 1992 and has a good chance of being elected again at the end of 2010. As we will see below, this development will pose the next challenge for India's multilateral diplomacy: what balance to strike between its traditional UN posture and its goal of taking its place among the world's leaders.

THE G-20 AND INTERNATIONAL FINANCE

India appears in a very different light within the G-20, which formed a decade ago but has gained renewed prominence in the wake of the global financial crisis. India's membership is based on the size of its economy and its standing as one of the most rapidly growing countries in the world. The prime minister and his planning chief, two of the three officials who regularly attend meetings, have impressive economics credentials—both possessing doctorates in economics. India's role as a center of international finance is relatively modest, but its international economic profile is rising.

India has played this rather uneven hand so as to reinforce its standing as a member

of the group. Its interventions have been serious and substantive, and its statements at meetings have stressed the importance of the group working together. For example, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated at the 2008 summit, "We must also give the world a clear signal of our resolve to take specific coordinated action to handle the current crisis in a manner, which restores confidence and which also responds to the needs of developing countries."² Most interestingly, India's participation in this group has coincided with an effort to position itself as a country that can both give and receive aid. In November 2009, India decided to purchase 200 metric tons or \$6.7 billion worth of gold from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a substantial percentage of the gold sales undertaken by the financial institution to provide itself and its members with additional liquidity.³

The G-20 meets behind closed doors for discreet consultations, in addition to the public debate that takes place outside of its meetings. The style of the group thus encourages the kind of participation that reinforces India's ambitions to be seen, as one observer put it, as "a member of the board of the world."

NONPROLIFERATION: COMING IN FROM THE COLD?

The third multilateral setting, the international nonproliferation system, arouses instant resentment in India. Even before its nuclear tests in 1998, India was one of only three countries who did not sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (together with Pakistan and Israel). The treaty's recognition of Nuclear Weapons States is limited to those whose first nuclear explosion took place before 1967, and India's came later, in 1974. For practical purposes, amending the treaty to change this eligibility date is impossible. India's policy seeks global nuclear disarmament, and it opposes the spread of nuclear weapons technology beyond the countries that now possess it. Indians note that they are in favor of nonproliferation, but do not feel that they are a part of "the system." The nonproliferation system goes beyond the treaty, and includes a larger network of institutions such as the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, and non-institutional groupings like the Proliferation Security Initiative. They are all devoted to reducing various kinds of proliferation risks. Most consider the treaty one of their reference points, and several treat India as the object of controls rather than a "fellow nonproliferator."

This historical baggage explains an Indian approach to the nonproliferation institutions that lies somewhere between aloofness and hostility. The U.S.-India agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation, and the agreement by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to allow its members to engage in civilian nuclear trade with safeguarded facilities in India has changed India's standing. It has not, however, wiped out decades of

mistrust on both sides. India's nuclear scientists continue to view the nonproliferation organizations as instruments of external domination over India's nuclear policy. For their part, many current members of the nonproliferation organizations believe that the civilian nuclear deal with India flies in the face of the basic NPT bargain and are in no mood to allow India to join the club.

This might have been simply a historical anomaly in India's multilateral posture. However, the Obama administration has placed a high priority on revitalizing the nonproliferation system, as well as on implementing the U.S.-India civilian nuclear agreement. To mesh these two goals, it would be useful to reexamine how the nonproliferation institutions deal with India, and ideally to bring them closer together.

Two issues on the Obama administration's agenda will be watched with particular care. As part of the civilian nuclear agreement, India has agreed to participate in negotiations for a Fissile Materials Cutoff Treaty (FMCT). India is fully prepared to do this, but concluding the negotiations will be difficult. The more neuralgic issue is the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which became a symbol of resistance to U.S. pressure and of India's nuclear autonomy when India refused to sign it in the 1990s. The U.S. Senate voted against ratifying the treaty in 1999, making it extremely difficult for any Indian government to revisit the issue. This action effectively rules out any Indian move toward signature unless the administration is able to persuade the Senate to ratify, something that seems unlikely in the immediate future.

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Nonproliferation, in other words, presents a case where India's domestic policy rather than its multilateral diplomacy is in the driver's seat. Some other multilateral settings such as trade negotiations also share this trait. This is a situation familiar to the United States, where treaty ratification in the Senate often sparks an argument over whether a particular agreement infringes on U.S. sovereignty. Nonetheless, it is difficult for the United States to handle when another country is in the same position.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE COPENHAGEN PIVOT

The final example of India's evolving multilateral position comes from the climate change negotiations that culminated in the Copenhagen summit in December 2009. As with nonproliferation, the issue engages the whole world and is also a high priority for the Obama administration, in contrast to its predecessor. Once again, there is a close interplay between domestic policy and India's multilateral position. But in this case, there has been a clear evolution in India's position, both with respect to the negotiations themselves as well as the negotiating process.

India's position on climate change and emissions control had been clear for some time. From the Indian government's perspective, climate change was an important

problem, but it was primarily the responsibility of the industrialized countries whose historical emissions and current per capita greenhouse gas output dwarfed India's. India would not accept emissions caps or their functional equivalent, but would promise not to exceed the per capita emissions levels of the developed countries. Until mid-2009, India's role in climate change discussions was largely confined to restating this basic position. India's environment minister, Jairam Ramesh, famously reinforced this at a public ceremony during Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to New Delhi in 2009.⁴

Over the next few months, a kind of "good cop–bad cop" pattern developed, sparked by China's decision to send a climate envoy to Washington in an effort to work out an understanding with the United States on the broad outlines of an acceptable agreement at Copenhagen. Ramesh, speaking at a conference in Washington in early October, spoke of India being "a deal-maker, not a deal-breaker," and on his return home wrote a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh urging that India become more deeply and pragmatically engaged in pre-Copenhagen negotiations with the United States and others.⁵ When the letter was leaked, the Prime Minister's climate envoy, a skillful diplomat named Shyam Saran, publicly took a much tougher position, stressing that India not only would not accept emissions caps, but that it would not agree to de-emphasize the legally binding commitments the Kyoto Protocol had placed on the developed countries.⁶

As Copenhagen approached, both the hard and the soft positions were publicly restated, and India also began talking about what it might do in lieu of emissions caps. The first proposal, made during Ramesh's October trip to Washington, was that India would put into its own domestic legislation undertakings that would have the effect of reducing the rate of increase in India's emissions. This was the standard the U.S. said it would like to apply to developing countries. However, as Copenhagen approached, India proposed a different standard: a voluntary pledge to cut the "carbon intensity" of its economy (ratio of Green House Gas Emissions to GDP) by 20 to 25 percent by 2020 from 2005 levels. The sudden shift in tactics appears to have been influenced by the fact that China was engaging in negotiations with the United States and was looking for a way to help identify a pathway to lower emissions that the Copenhagen meeting could embrace. India did not want to be left out of the game.

In the end, Indian and Chinese pledges on carbon intensity figured in the final outcome of Copenhagen. India and China, together with Brazil and South Africa—the "BASIC" countries—staged a dramatic walkout, but returned to the negotiations. These four countries succeeded in watering down (but not eliminating) the language about "monitoring" countries' record of compliance with their voluntary pledges.

In case anyone had doubts about which developing countries were positioning themselves to be the deal-makers, President Obama's surprise appearance at what was

supposed to be an internal meeting of the BASIC group made it clear. India was the one of the group that worked out the final arrangement, although it was not as prominent a member as China.

INDIA'S EMERGING MULTILATERAL STYLE

India's policy in multilateral organizations, as with most countries, reflects three factors: its overall foreign policy, its domestic pressures, and its view of how best to work with other countries in a multilateral setting. Underlying all of these is a concept referred to by Indian commentators as "strategic autonomy." This concept has stood the test of time and remained central to Indian policy. No Indian government dares give the appearance, much less accept the reality, of allowing another country to exercise excessive influence on its foreign policy. In practice, this translates into an acute sensitivity about any suggestion of pressure from the United States.

This makes India a cautious player in the multilateral arena. Apart from "leadership organizations" like the G-20, India is wary of joining new organizations that do not include the full range of developing countries. Even when it agrees to join—as it did for example, with several different U.S.-led "clubs" of democracies—India tends to be a hesitant, even reluctant, participant. A group of democracies may come down hard on countries with which India has important geopolitical business, such as Burma. Even groups whose purposes India has formally adopted may be controversial. For example, India is a member of the Chemical Weapons Convention, but has not been keen to join the Australia Group, which coordinates chemical weapons-related export regulations, because it is not universal. India has spent years considering whether to join the Proliferation Security Initiative, a U.S.-led informal grouping that is explicitly not linked to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Lurking behind this reluctance to join is the concern that these non-universal groups may be seen, domestically and in the developing world, as proxies for a policy that permit too much U.S. influence over India.

India also seeks to avoid new commitments, especially those that could be economically costly or politically controversial at home. In practice, this is often a more important goal than having an acknowledged role in leadership circles. In an effort to reconcile these sometimes competing objectives, India has increasingly turned to what one might call "non-commitments." India's moratorium on new nuclear tests, for example, was an essential part in the context of the U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement. This formal restatement was a critical step in obtaining the NSG's consent to that agreement. However, India made clear that its moratorium was "voluntary" and "unilateral," and refused to allow any mention of it in its agreements with the United States or the NSG. Similarly, its position at Copenhagen rested on voluntary pledges

to reduce energy intensity, but it was unwilling to incorporate the pledges into any multilateral document.

At the same time, India wants to raise its profile and deepen its influence in global deliberations. It seeks a seat on the United Nations Security Council, ideally a permanent one. For about five years, it has attended the G-8 meetings as an invited guest, together with China, Brazil, South Africa, and Mexico. In September 2009, soon after the installation of a newly elected government, it hosted a ministerial meeting of key participants in the World Trade Organization's Doha round of negotiations. At the regional level, India sought admission to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group in 1991, hoping to reinforce its standing as a player in Asia-wide forums. Its application was denied, and APEC has since instituted a 10-year moratorium on new members.⁷

But Indian officials are increasingly conscious that these leadership positions come at a price. On the UN Security Council, in the World Trade Organization, or in Asia-wide organizations, when India takes a position it will almost inevitably annoy some domestic constituent or international friend that the Indian government cares about. The price of India's accelerated economic growth and higher profile in the world is that


The price of India's accelerated economic growth and higher profile in the world is that countries care more about India's policy positions—for better and for worse.

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countries care more about India's policy positions—for better and for worse. This is what makes the Copenhagen example so interesting. India did emerge as a deal-shaper. But in order to achieve this position, it had to modulate its traditional position. It also had to come closer to accepting that others would be making judgments about the voluntary commitments it had put forward. In the course of 2010, India and its international friends will have an opportunity to evaluate how well this worked for all the parties concerned. The next test may come in early 2011 if India is elected to a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council. This will provide India with an opportunity to further establish its record as a bridge-builder, and to create a leadership position based in part on India's vital role in peacekeeping missions.

From the U.S. perspective, more effective and assertive Indian participation in negotiating the most pressing current global issues will probably complicate negotiations in the short term. This was surely the case at Copenhagen, and it is significant that both India and China formally accepted the Copenhagen agreement in March 2010.

Over the span of a few years—and certainly over the next decade—active Indian involvement is a prerequisite for developing global agreements that are taken seriously. The experience of Copenhagen suggests that, however difficult the negotiating process, India and the United States are getting better at engaging one another in a multilateral

setting. If India's bid for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council is successful, they will have other opportunities to work together. Multilateral diplomacy will still be difficult, but this practical experience is likely to move India toward a more nuanced operating style, and the United States toward a better understanding of how to engage India on difficult global issues. 

NOTES

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5. Jim Yardley, "New Script for India on Climate Change," *The New York Times*, 3 October 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/04/world/asia/04climate.html>.

6. Nitin Sethi, "Jairam for major shift at climate talks," *The Times of India*, 19 October 2009, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Jairam-for-major-shift-at-climate-talks/articleshow/5136979.cms>.

7. The 1991 application was denied in part because a number of member economies questioned India's commitment to free market and open trade principles because India's ties with the Asia Pacific countries at that time were relatively modest. Other reasons include the fact that India, as a very large country, might change the dynamic of an organization that was still trying to establish itself, as well as concern that accepting India would bring about an application from Pakistan that would then be hard to turn down. Some of these factors have changed significantly since that time; others are probably exaggerated fears. India is unlikely to press its application again without some kind of assurance of success.