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## Understanding the Behaviour of Emerging Powers: A Case Study of India

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### ABSTRACT

The proposed study aims to examine the traditional notion that emerging powers should project their power in international affairs, dominate their region, and use hard power as their primary means of doing so. In contrast to the idea of middle powers in ascendancy, India, the largest state in South Asia and a so-called emerging power in the post-Cold War world, does not appear willing to project its might in the subcontinent, despite its enhanced overall capabilities. In contrast to the conventional patterns of growing great powers, its external engagement approach is centred on economic growth, capacity-building, and South-South collaboration. In order to better understand the behaviour of emerging powers in relation to their greater range of capabilities, India is used as a case study in this instance.

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### Introduction

The purpose of the proposed study is to examine why and when emerging powers tend to exert power in order to influence their region and the international structure as a whole. The prime idea is to understand the conventional wisdom that emerging powers are supposed to dominate their region, project themselves as great powers in international affairs and there are certain ways of doing so by focusing primarily on hard power. In the post-Cold War world, India, being so-called an emerging power, the largest state in South Asia, with its increased overall capabilities, does not seem to be willing to project its power in the sub-continent, which appears contrary to the conceptualization of emerging powers. In order to examine this, the study supports the argument that states have different trajectories to become emerging powers. Thus, here India is taken as a case study to garner a better understanding of emerging powers' behaviour



vis-à-vis their increased variety of capabilities. The selection of India as a case study also stems from the existence of several studies that characterize India as a rising or future great power. Therefore, this study will focus on the dynamics of power used by an emerging power and its implications for India.

### *Understanding Emerging Powers*

To determine whether states are emerging powers, there is no accepted or standard procedure. Nonetheless, a key feature of a developing power is that “it possesses certain qualities, such as institutional influence, military prowess, economic expansion, and soft power” (Renard & Biscop, 2013). It is argued that “while a country may be an emerging power, it is above all else an emerging economy with only the potential or hope of increasing its global influence. The seven elements of state power: geography, population, economy, resources, military, diplomacy, and national identity, are mostly to be attributed for this”(Shaw et al., 2010). Yet, when it comes to International Relations as a discipline, there is no firm consensus on the constituents of the emerging powers within the hierarchy of power. As Paul Kennedy writes, “there is no standard or agreed method to decide which states are emerging powers. However, a fundamental characteristic of an emerging power is that it is also an emerging economy, being that economic development is necessary and preliminary to political and military emergence” (Kennedy, 1987). States are categorized as regional powers, intermediate powers, emerging (middle) powers, and great powers in that hierarchy.

The conceptualization of the term middle powers, by some of the scholars, has been done “on the basis of relative power, specific systemic and/or regional roles, a potential to emerge as future great powers, or just a vague sense of being ‘in the middle’ geographically, economically, culturally or diplomatically” (Holbraad 1984: 67–75). Thus, the term ‘emerging powers’ refers to middle powers that are moving up the power hierarchy and have the capacity and desire to become great powers while also being expected to have a greater influence on the international system’s structure. According to scholars like Jordaan and Hurrell, “emerging powers are semi-peripheral, materially inegalitarian, often recently democratized, and tend to demonstrate much regional influence and self-association. They tend to opt for reformist rather than radical change, favour regional integration and attempt to construct identities that are distinct from those of the weak states in their region” (Jordaan 2003; Hurrell 2006). Some scholars have distinguished between new or emerging (middle) powers and traditional middle powers in a number of ways.

Selcher argues, “emerging powers are referred “as ‘new’ or ‘emerging’ middle powers, the only difference to the traditional middle powers being that they still somehow pertain to the category of ‘developing’ or ‘newly industrialising’ countries” (Selcher 1981). It is also maintained that “traditional



middle powers are not powerful relative to the states in their geographic immediacy which is in contrast to emerging middle powers that are powerful, sometimes even dominant, regionally” (Jordaan 2003). Majority of scholars in the field of emerging (middle) powers show agreement over this point that “these emerging powers are also a regional powers or even regional ‘hegemons’. It has also been assumed about emerging powers that they are regional powers mainly because of their economic preponderance” (Jones and Hildreth 1986). The new or emerging (middle) powers are primarily regional powers and middle powers in terms of their power resources on a global scale, whereas classic middle powers are specifically defined by their participation in the international system. According to an expert, “Regional powers usually combine leadership and power over resources. Regional powers, in contrast to middle powers, have to bear a special responsibility for regional security and for the maintenance of order in the region” (Nolte 2010).

Thus, efforts have also been made to integrate various perspectives in international relations theory in order to comprehend the complexity of this topic in order to analyse emerging powers. When seen from a realist and neo-realist perspective, the international and regional systems’ structures act as a significant catalyst for the influence of emerging powers. According to liberal theory, the political and economic dynamics of the current emerging powers are crucial factors that affect how these states wield their authority. Constructivism concludes that the state’s social ideals, leadership concepts, the desired international or regional order, and the region’s boundaries are the most significant factors.

Based on the above arguments, it can be summarised that emerging powers are regional powers too and make a shift to other regions to influence the extra-regional affairs. Therefore, they possess a system-shaping role after peacefully compounding their own region. Hence, in India’s case, it is better compared with China, Brazil, instead of other traditional middle powers like Canada, Australia or any other small powers.

#### *India as an Emerging Power: Attributes and Trajectory*

In the context of India, its aspirations to become a global power are well-supported on a robust economic, demographic, strategic, military, diplomatic and cultural foundation laid in the last few decades. According to Van de Wetering (2020), analyzing India’s material capabilities as well as its foreign policy decisions is necessary to comprehend its significance as a rising power” (Van de Wetering, 2020). Following the end of the Cold War, rapid economic expansion appears to be translating into increased military capabilities, especially India's capacity to project power. Modernizing army and air force capabilities and attempting to turn the Indian Navy into a blue water navy have accounted for a large



portion of India's increased defence spending since the end of the Cold War and the start of economic liberalization. In recent years, the necessity to be able to operate outside of India's boundaries has been expressed by all three components of the Indian armed forces. The Navy's portion of defence spending has increased dramatically in recent years, which is undoubtedly a key area in which a state may demonstrate its influence. The 2007 maritime strategy document of the Navy highlights "repeatedly about the need to 'project power' as a means of supporting foreign policy objectives and achieving national aims" (Integrated Headquarters 2007).

Moreover, strategically located in the Indian Ocean, India controls important sea lanes and enjoys geopolitical clout in global trade and Indo-Pacific security. India's participation in multilateral forums such as Quad, SCO, BRICS and ASEAN boosts its role in shaping regional and global governance. With regard to India's role in G20, one scholar argues, "as the first rising power with a democratic system and 1.3 billion people to host the summit, India's assumption of the G20 chair in December 2022 was a momentous occasion" (Gautam, 2022). Similarly, Jacob et al. (2024) underline that "India has sought to expand its global influence and to offer a developmental model to other countries of the Global South by maintaining strategic autonomy and expanding diplomatic and developmental partnerships" (Jacob et al., 2024).

India is the largest country and the strongest power in South Asia. Initiatives like SAFTA and the Neighbourhood First Policy strengthen regional cooperation and enhance India's influence in promoting regional integration. According to Chinoy, Vignesh and Banerjee (2025), "India is looking to expand its global influence, safeguard its policy autonomy, and maintain international stability by managing relations with competing powers, promoting regional cooperation through its Neighbourhood First policy, and serving as a bridge between the Global North and Global South" (Chinoy et al., 2025). When it comes to security and strategy, a credible nuclear deterrence posture, ongoing continental border disputes, maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific, and active defence relationships through joint exercises and strategic cooperation make up India's overall security and geopolitical strategy.

In the same way, with improved capacities, domestic defence manufacturing, and advancements in defence technology supported by expanding strategic alliances with major international powers, India has simultaneously accelerated its military modernization. On the other hand, by combining its physical power with cultural diplomacy like yoga, Ayurveda, diaspora participation, and its larger civilizational identity, India also exerts considerable normative influence and soft power. Apart from this, extra-regional powers also shape the behaviour of states in international relations. It is argued that "India's rise



as an aspiring power is shaped by its balancing act against the growing power of China, the need to build strategic partnerships with major powers like the United States and Japan, and to sustain cooperative relations with Russia and China (Matheswaran, 2014, p. 8). Nonetheless, the pursuit of strategic autonomy has remained one of the core principles of Indian foreign policy. Sridharan concludes, “India’s behaviour as an emerging power has been marked by strategic autonomy, pragmatic engagement with major powers and a desire to expand its global influence while retaining its policy independence and flexibility in international relations” (Sridharan, 2017). This remains a fact that India’s strategic autonomy, as seen in its calibrated engagement in forums such as Quad and SCO and its nuanced position on conflicts like Russia-Ukraine, reflects both diplomatic flexibility and the challenges of maneuvering in great power politics in a highly unequal global order.

### *India as an Emerging Power: Constraints or Reluctance?*

Undoubtedly, around the world, interest in India’s economy has been growing, and rightly so. According to Goldman Sachs Research (2023), “India will become the world’s second-largest economy by 2075” (Goldman Sachs Research, 2023). India had always been South Asia’s dominant force. However, its rise is conditioned by huge internal and external constraints. Domestic challenges, including persistent economic inequalities, development gaps and infrastructure and governance limitations, continue to limit the depth and inclusiveness of growth. On the external front, India’s strategic vulnerabilities arise from tensions with China and Pakistan and from wider sensitivities in maritime chokepoints. India also remains dependent on global supply chains and advanced technology. These limitations are reflected in indicators such as its relatively low per capita GDP, which places it among lower-middle-income countries, despite being the world’s fourth-largest economy; and weaker global rankings in purchasing power parity and per capita income, which constrain its soft power and economic diplomacy. Although India is much talked about as an emerging great power and the fastest-growing major economy, the major question is whether it can become a significant Asian power and expand its influence outside of South Asia.

It is also necessary to ask whether there are internal and external limitations or whether there is only a different route to becoming a major power, which may occur in a deviant instance. Some scholars have categorized “India as an ‘awkward great power’ due to its reluctance to assume full global responsibilities commensurate with its capabilities” (Hall, 2016). When examined through the prism of classical realism, which anticipates rising states to maximize power by coercion, harsh balancing, and the building of blocs based on alliances, India stands out among rising powers. Instead of making a



permanent commitment to any one bloc, India has been dedicated to strategic autonomy rather than strict military alliances, keeping flexible partnerships across rival power centers.

It has been observed that India does not seem to project its power in the subcontinent. To substantiate it further, even with an increase in economic and military power, India showed its reluctance to intervene in its neighbours, such as during the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009. At the same time, its foreign policy, which included the Gujral Doctrine earlier, demonstrated a liberal view towards its neighbours, which dictated a non-reciprocal foreign policy towards its neighbours except Pakistan. This has been a center of criticism due to India's reluctance to strategic domination vis-à-vis its neighbours. Also, India's foreign policy of Non-alignment during the Cold War period and participating in multilateral forums like IBSA and BRIC, etc., in the post-Cold War era, stand India apart from other emerging powers. As per one expert, "India's BRICS participation forms part of its 'multi-alignment' strategy, representing partnerships with major powers while avoiding military alliances" (Tamerkan, 2022). It is apparent that in the case of India, institutions and conventions are the foundation of its worldwide reach. Nayudu (2013) argues that "India is not losing sight of regional stability and leadership in South Asia as it aspires for a larger role in global governance, which India considers as important pillars of its larger international profile" (Nayudu, 2013). Instead of using coercive supremacy, it favours participating in international forums and rule-making procedures.

In a similar vein, one of the Carnegie Endowment articles argues that "India is seeking to enhance its global stature by positioning itself as the 'voice of the Global South' and advocating for enhanced representation of the developing world while not becoming overly reliant on any one major power bloc. It is a proclamation of a foreign policy of pragmatism, independence and pursuit of an inclusive multipolar international order" (Chivvis & Geaghan-Breiner, 2023). India's military strategy is modest and predominantly defensive, with minimal aggressive military projection and doctrines focused on deterrence. Debnath (2022) contends that "India is trying to enhance its global stature through initiatives like Vaccine Maitri, International Solar Alliance, disaster-relief operations, health diplomacy, and South-South cooperation, while emphasizing inclusivity, sustainable development, and collective welfare. This approach signals India's desire to be a responsible global leader and a positive force in an increasingly interconnected world" (Debnath, 2022). As another expert argues that "India, while bolstering its economic, diplomatic and military capabilities, aims to shape a multipolar international order, represent the interests of the Global South and secure a greater role in global institutions, particularly the United Nations" (Khan, 2023).



Additionally, India employs culture, democracy, and diaspora networks as tools of international involvement and places a strong focus on soft power and civilizational impact. And, its ascent is due to the projection of power driven by development rather than territorial expansion. Ganguly (2003) puts it appropriately that “the emerging power behaviour of India is marked by strategic autonomy, growing economic and military strength and a willingness to influence the regional and international environment while preserving the independent decision-making process” (Ganguly, 2003). Thus, in terms of conceptualizing emerging powers like China, Brazil, or South Africa, all of which are regarded as dominant in their respective regions, particularly in the case of China, these considerations also imply that India is an anomaly.

### *Conclusion*

The study seeks to investigate the conventional wisdom that emerging powers should employ hard force as their main tool to dominate their region and assert their power in international affairs. India’s aspirations for greater influence in international affairs, regional leadership, and strategic autonomy have defined its rise. India has generally taken a moderate and reformist stance, bolstering its economic, military, and diplomatic capacities to gain recognition as a significant power while pursuing changes to the international order and opposing external restrictions on its sovereignty. Its leadership in developing-country forums, commitment to non-alignment, and efforts to expand its strategic capabilities demonstrate a long-term aspiration to play a more prominent role in the global power structure. So far, India appears to be emerging as a major power in an unconventional manner, especially in Asia and the Global South. The scope of the current study demands more in-depth investigation and examination of various subtleties.

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