

INDIA AS A DEMOCRATIC SUPERPOWER

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Foreign Ministers of the Quad (India, Australia, United States and Japan) in Tokyo on October 6, 2020. | Photo Credit: AP

As a Rhodes scholar travelling from Sydney to Oxford, way back in 1981, I didn't feel that I could fly over nearly a billion Indians without stopping to learn, and to pay my respects. Even then, in the three months I spent back-packing here, it was obvious to me that democratic, free India was going to be one of the world's leading countries.

Today, with the world's third largest economy — at least in purchasing power terms — with a vibrant free market, a booming tech sector, a population that's eager to learn and to innovate, a gloriously rumbustious press, and an honest judiciary; with a government that's rapidly closing the infrastructure deficit; and with an openness to the wider world, symbolised by a vast diaspora including 7,00,000 Indian-born Australians, India is no longer the emerging democratic super power that I frequently referenced as Prime Minister.

India has emerged as a democratic superpower, more than capable of providing leadership that the world often needs and that America cannot always give. These ominous times, that would have seemed almost unthinkable just a few years back, when history had supposedly ended, are India's chance to step up in support of free countries and free people. Because make no mistake, this newly minted “no limits” partnership, this new Beijing-Moscow axis, these dictators on the march; unless deterred, or somehow touched for the better, will end what until recently have been the best times ever.

Russia's latest war has not been provoked by anything Ukraine has done. It is Ukraine's existence as a free and independent country that Russia's ruler objects to. It is a war of national extermination to which no free country can be indifferent. I know this because Vladimir Putin told me himself, when I verbally shirt-fronted him after a Russian missile battery shot down MH17 in 2014, killing 38 Australians among 298 victims, insisting as he did even then, in the first phase of this invasion, that the Ukrainian government was fascist, that Ukrainians were really Russians, and that Ukraine had no right to exist as an independent country.

He wants to correct what he sees as the greatest geo-political disaster of the last century by restoring Greater Russia. That is his dream, and it means that the Baltic states and Poland are next in the firing line, once Ukraine is pulverised into submission, war crime by war crime, atrocity by atrocity, in a war his pride cannot let him lose, and his ministers are too indoctrinated or intimidated to stop.

Editorial | [In conjunction: On evolution of democratic society](#)

And do not think that China is not watching, nursing grievances of its own over its “century of humiliation”, determined to take Taiwan, and to demonstrate that China is once more the Middle Kingdom, the world's top country, around which all others must cluster, tremble and obey. Australia knows what a world dominated by China would look like, because of the 14 demands publicly made of us in late 2020, that we accept all Chinese investments, Chinese students, cease all criticism of China, and end our alliance with the United States.

As a fellow member of the Quad, Australia stands with India in resisting Chinese aggression

over the line of control in Ladakh. That's what Australia has always done: stand with the victims of aggression, from Belgium in the Great War, to Poland in World War II, to the people of East Timor when they sought their independence, to the people of Iraq against Islamic State in my time as PM, and now Ukraine to which Australia was the first country to dispatch heavy armoured vehicles.

Russia's attack on Ukraine has caused commodity prices to spike and disrupted vital supply lines, for food quite as much as for energy. With these dictators set on national glory, everything bends to the power of the state; and trade is just a strategy to be turned on and off like a tap. Almost unavoidably, the world will be more disrupted as countries rethink who can be relied on.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi grasped this when he withdrew India from the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership deal. These times have turned fraught; demanding a re-think of the China-centred globalisation of the past couple of decades — notwithstanding a world that, until very recently, was more free, safer, and richer than ever before. As long as China has brutal and hegemonic ambitions, businesses in countries like mine have a patriotic duty not to be dependent on a country that could threaten us. But that's also an opportunity for India, trustworthy trade partner, to substitute for China in fellow democracies' supply chains requiring manufacturing at scale, quality and price.

India's trade minister Piyush Goyal was right when he said that the new Australia-India trade deal's ambition just to double trade within a decade was too modest. Why shouldn't PM Modi's "make in India" campaign extend to all the consumer lines and the intermediate goods currently made in China?

Especially now that it is clearer that trade can only be free and fair if it is based on the values that democracies largely have in common. For obvious reasons, independent India sometimes kept the West at a distance. But now, 75 exemplary years on, with its democracy entrenched, there is no reason for mutual wariness, or for India to be anyone's junior partner. If the free world is to have a leader 50 years hence, that's likely to be India.

As a country that earned its freedom, most honourably, largely through moral suasion and peaceful protest, through satyagraha, India would know the love and passion that is now moving millions of Ukrainians to risk everything they hold dear for that which they hold dearest of all, freedom itself.

If there's one country whose traditional friendship with Russia, and whose historic aloofness from power plays, and whose palpable goodwill to all might just get through to the Kremlin and to the ordinary Russians whose lives are also being blighted by this war, it is India.

To the extent the Russian leader still has a conscience, India is uniquely placed to appeal to it, should it have a go at summoning the better angels of Russia's nature to a new beginning; so that what's now being torn down in spite may yet be rebuilt in spirit of generosity and goodwill.

Why not exercise the moral leadership, of which India might be more capable than any other country, to urge Russia to give up the territory it has seized? If Russia listens, untold further bloodshed would be averted.

Even unheeded, being the great power, most ready to put principle before calculation would only enhance India's standing in the world.

(Tony Abbott was the 28th Prime Minister of Australia)

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