

## NEEDED: A 25-YEAR HORIZON

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

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The writer, a former rear admiral in the navy, is author of 'A Nuclear Strategy for India'.

Even a casual survey of retired ICS officer Penderel Moon's monumental work on the transfer of power from Britain to Independent India shows how the joy in Delhi eclipsed any thoughts of the islands in the Indian ocean. It took the benign intervention of Lord Mountbatten on the Indian side to force Whitehall not to retain the Andaman and Nicobar islands and the Lakshadweep Islands as part of the wider British Indian Ocean territories. In 1947, or even two decades later, there was no strategic community in Delhi — the earliest strategic noises from Indians began to be heard only in the 1980s. Panicked by Pakistan's attempt to capture Srinagar in 1947, the Chinese war of 1962 and Pakistan's second attempt in 1965, the entire government closed ranks and concluded that India had only one strategic choice — to hold onto the territory the British had transferred to us. It was the right strategy for the time to preserve our territorial integrity. A foreign policy of non-alignment to get the best deal out of the Cold War in support of the national strategy also cannot be flawed.

Now, 70 years have passed and we are well into the 21st century. The Cold War is over and the Soviet Union, with whom we had a strategic alliance, has been reduced to a state in demographic decline whose GDP is lower than India's. What will the world look like in 2050? Technology threatens to change the world apart from geopolitics. Yet we must make our bets, because altering the strategy of a country takes a quarter of a century. Geopolitically, the defining event is the rise of China and the biggest question of all — will China take over the American hegemony by 2050 with all the downstream consequences? For 70 years we have been used to a world in which the rules were laid down at Bretton Woods and by the formation of the United Nations, in which the United States held sway. The belief that liberal democracy is the way to wealth and prosperity has grown and also been taught in colleges. Now, the foundation of that belief is being rocked by China, whose rise in material prosperity runs parallel to a firm belief in the merits of an authoritarian government run by a communist dictatorship. People once aspired to be like the US — a liberal democracy, warts and all. But if the world's hegemon is an autocracy, will not governments aspire to be the same? The consequences can be earth-shaking. The proportion of the US government defence budget that results from overseas deployment is almost 60 per cent. If this amount is to be ignored, China already spends about the same as the US democratic defence budget. Writing scenarios on which to base policy is crucial for a rising power like India which, like it or not, will become the swing state with a \$10 trillion GDP by 2035. Clearly, territorial integrity is a ridiculous strategic choice for a state with a population of 1.3 billion, a GDP of \$10 trillion and a defence budget of \$ 200 billion, by 2035. But what scenarios are we working towards?

On the one hand, we have a scenario where the hegemon is a liberal democracy, whose foreign policy includes pushing its ideas among the countries of the world. On the other hand, we have a world led by an autocratic hegemon with a dreadful record of human rights, but possessing an impressive war chest of \$4 trillion to push its own ideas of hegemony through the debt-driven diplomacy of one-belt-one-road, whose closest chums are Pakistan and North Korea. India will have to live with one of these scenarios and it will take a quarter century to prepare all arms of the government to cope with either.

The intellectual basis of these two situations are contained in two books. One is Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* and the other is Joshua Kurlantzick's *The Retreat of Democracy*. In Fukuyama's world, the increasing democratisation of the world will lead to international peace — for liberal democracies do not make war on each other. In Kurlantzick's world, the revolt of the middle classes, inspired by the Chinese hegemon will see the retreat of democracy and increasing conflict.

Those familiar with Net Assessment of the United States (security framework) will realise the merits of defining the world for which policy is to be made. Foreign policy can be changed overnight, economic policy takes a while longer, but defence policy takes two decades. For instance, the Indian army has magnificently fulfilled the strategic objective of territorial integrity in the 20th century. For the 21st century, it is patently obsolete. The navy, which will have the primary task of influencing geopolitics, has no weapons to influence the course of a land war, and the air force is still fighting over denying territorial airspace. The National Security Advisor must task either the National Security Staff, the Integrated Staff or a think tank, with defining scenarios appropriately, so that the government can plan its strategic policy on a common basis.

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