

THE POWER GAP WITH CHINA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

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In a conversation on Monday, external affairs minister S Jaishankar laid out the big picture about how the world has changed and how India sees the world, four decades after he first entered South Block as a junior diplomat. He made a series of significant points. The old bipolar politics of the Cold War between the United States (US) and Soviet Union, with elements of a multipolar system, has given way to a multipolar system with elements of bipolarity between the US and China. The world is more globalised, but it is also, now, witnessing an era of protectionism. Non-alignment was a strategy adopted at a particular time, and while India would not be a part of any alliance system, it could not stay out on critical global issues and once it was in the game, it had to play the game.

These interventions give a glimpse into the Indian worldview. But Mr Jaishankar's most important point was about the power differential between India and China. He suggested that while the two countries had similar economic trajectories and growth rates in 1988, when Rajiv Gandhi made his historic visit to Beijing, China has leapfrogged since then — by focusing on economic growth and embracing the world and opportunities therein. India, by contrast, grew too, but as Mr Jaishankar acknowledged, it wasn't able to industrialise to the extent it should have; manufacturing remained a weak spot; embrace of the world was somewhat limited; and free trade agreements did not yield the dividends India had hoped for.

This power differential — and India's recognition of the power differential — is significant. It shows a realistic appraisal of the challenge at hand, and underlines what India has to do to compete more effectively. For India, the best foreign policy is a high growth rate. Unless India is able to get its economy right — and what is visible is a slump — its global ambitions will never be met. It will continue to pale in front of China. It will find managing the neighbourhood more difficult. It will become less attractive to its western partners and global businesses. It will not be able to modernise its military. It will not be able to provide global common goods which earns both soft and hard power. And it will be a story of opportunities lost. The minister's assessment is a plea to get the economic story right, for foreign policy to be effective in a new world.

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