

# THE WORLD'S MOST HAPPENING PLACE

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

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Three decades ago, when globalisation was the flavour of the season, a big section in India, comprising the conventional Right and Left, was up in arms against it. The argument, broadly, was that globalisation was a conspiracy hatched by the developed West to take over the emerging markets of the developing world, that included India. Some of us, though we shared the concerns about globalisation, felt that this cannot be the sole argument against it. Our scepticism was based on the evolving global power order at that time.

The advent of the globalisation era had coincided with a significant geo-political development. Starting with the late '80s, fissures started erupting in the USSR body politic, ultimately leading to its dismemberment and collapse in the early '90s. The West's aggressive globalisation push started around that time. It had arguably seen the collapse of the USSR and the end of bipolarity in global politics as an opportunity to attempt a West-centric global standardisation.

Scholars in the West were gung-ho over this prospect. Recall Francis Fukuyama's famous article in 1989 in the reputed journal, *The National Interest*, provocatively titled "The End of History?" Later, in 1992, he expanded his theses into a book, *The End of History and The Last Man*. Fukuyama's argument was that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, humanity had reached "not just ... the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government".

The unipolar world that Fukuyama had conceived in his article was the dominant thought in the West at the time globalisation was unfolding. Naturally, the thinking world outside had doubts and scepticism about the real intent of that process. Many scholars in the world questioned the validity and ambition of Fukuyama's argument. History proved them right and Fukuyama wrong.

Three decades into its existence, globalisation is at the end of its tether. Countries the world over are increasingly turning inwards. Global institutions are losing their relevance and influence over large parts of the world.

But the world is not turning nationalist, as some had argued at the time of the emergence of globalisation. Instead, we see a process of the emergence of new power blocs in different parts of the world. These power blocs are hankering to become strategic poles, thus leading to the emergence of a multi-polar world order. Multipolarity is the new flavour of the season in the 21st century, marking a death blow to globalisation and unipolarity.

Under the new pecking order, America continues to enjoy primacy but a much reduced one. The American leadership seems content with its role in global affairs reduced while its priorities seem more domestic than global. The European Union is struggling to find its coherence to emerge as an important pole. But internal contradictions like Brexit and disputes over the entry of East European nations bog it down. The rise of a China-centric Asian power order that has spawned new alliances, both regional and interest-based, is a phenomenon in our neighbourhood. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) have

been causing ripples in the world today.

A new Hanseatic League-style arrangement is trying to reemerge on the world stage with the coming together of countries like Ireland, the Netherlands, the Nordic and Baltic states, while the Arab League, with 22 member states, is in complete disarray with war, terror and despotism. Erstwhile superpowers like Russia and the United Kingdom are struggling to find a place of prominence in the new 21st century world order. Leaders of both countries have great power ambitions — the UK leadership talks about “Global Britain” while Putin centered his 2018 campaign around the slogan “Strong Russia”. Yet it appears to be a long road ahead for both countries.

Amidst all this, India is quietly building itself as an important power. Vibrant democracy, literate and skilled manpower and a vast middle class with strong purchasing power are its advantages that attract world attention today. Its strong leadership under Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) has been able to bring the country on par with major powers in the world through proactive diplomacy and global positioning. Yet we still have to travel a long distance before we emerge as a strong pole. We are no doubt capable of it, but for it to happen, we need to do a few things, and do them differently.

The Indian Ocean is where India’s future lies. The global power axis is constantly shifting eastwards from the Pacific-Atlantic region, and the Indian Ocean region has emerged as the most influential region today. It is here that the power axis will settle down ultimately in this century; it is here that the emerging new economies come together with strong traditional economies; it is here that populations and markets with purchasing power exist; it is here that strong military powers with massive defence spending exist; it is here that massive energy-guzzlers like India and China are located. It is the world’s most happening place today.

The Indian leadership needs to appreciate the fact that in the emerging multipolar world order, India is a natural leader in the Indian Ocean region. By turning eastwards and focusing on building an Indian Ocean Bloc, it can aspire to rise as a guiding pole for many countries in the region. India has to think and act fast. As an influential region, it is already witnessing major competition among the leading powers. But with its historic, cultural and civilisational linkages with countries in the region and its present standing in the world, India could become a natural gravitational force for countries, mostly the island nations, in the region.

An Indian Ocean Conference of the stakeholder nations in the region is thus an idea whose time has come.

The Fourth Indian Ocean Conference is taking place in the Maldives, with leaders of about 40 countries participating.

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