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India's emergence as leading power

Geopolitical factors favour rise of the country as a rival centre of power co-existing, competing, and collaborating with other major powers

The historian William McNeil has described the nature of power and its relationship with notions of fairness and ethics in the following words: "It seems unlikely ... that recent and prospective enlargement of human capacities to organise and exert power will be permanently arrested by scruples against its use ... Power in short ingests weaker centres of power or stimulates rival centres of power to strengthen themselves. This fact has dominated the whole history of mankind."

This represents the realist school of international relations where any ethical anchor is dispensable but does reflect current geopolitical reality substantially. In aspiring to be a leading power, India, too, is placing its bet on sinews of power, current and prospective. It rejects the likelihood of being "ingested" by a more powerful entity. But would it be stimulated to emerge as a rival centre of power?

McNeil has described how such a transference of power may take place from an established to an aspiring one: "No population can overtake or surpass the rest of the world without using the most efficient and powerful instruments known anywhere on earth; and by definition such instruments are located at the world centres of wealth and power — wherever they may be. Thus any geographical displacement of world leadership must be prefaced by successful borrowing from previously estab-

lished centres of the highest prevailing skills." We have several examples of this from history. The Roman empire borrowed heavily from Greek civilisation and culture in its march towards pre-eminence. During their pursuit of dominance, the Arabs actively sought and assimilated advanced knowledge from the Central Asians and Persians, who, in turn, borrowed heavily from the Indians and Chinese, particularly in mathematics, astronomy, and medical science. In more recent history we see the example of the Americans building a powerful and advanced economy by borrowing technology and skills developed by Britain and the rest of Europe during their industrial revolution. Japan of the Meiji era repeated this process. But the most recent and spectacular example of this is the emergence of China as a great power. During its four decades of reform and opening up, it has soaked up advanced Western knowledge and technologies like a giant sponge. During this phase it has been modest, ready to be student and apprentice, and this was the true meaning of Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum "hide your capabilities and bide your time". The cumulative outcome of this "beg, borrow and steal" strategy has enabled China to emerge as a formidable economic and technological power in its own right. In McNeil's terms, a geographical displacement of power from the trans-Atlantic to the trans-Pacific is underway, with China at its centre — a rival centre.

One may understand this displacement of power



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from another historical perspective. It unfolds in a trajectory defined by three phases, though overlapping. In the first, countries borrow knowledge systems and advanced technologies from apex centres and adopt them. This is followed by a phase of assimilation when borrowed technologies and knowledge systems underlying them are mastered and internalised. In the third and final phase, an emerging centre of power is able to generate new knowledge and technologies in a relatively autonomous manner. This is when geographical displacement of power starts becoming a reality and when contestation between an established centre or centres and the emerging rival becomes most acute. Where is China at this juncture? It is probably going from the second to the third phase. India, by contrast, may be transiting from the first to the second phase. China is already competing with the US in high tech areas like artificial intelligence, robotics, and quantum computing. India is yet to matter in this race. True, India has its centres of excellence such as its space programme and this evokes justifiable pride. But centres of excellence must expand to become continents of excellence, otherwise they may well be overwhelmed by a sea of mediocrity around them.

If a lesson is to be drawn from China's experience, it is to remain modest and humble while soaking up knowledge and technology from wherever it is accessible. This is particularly so in an age where the key driver of growth is technology and successful societies of the future will be knowledge societies.

Geopolitical factors favour the emergence of India as a rival centre of power co-existing, competing, and collaborating with other major powers. The established centres of wealth and power are still the US, Europe, and Japan, though their relative weight may be declining. They see their pre-eminence threatened by the rise of China. India possesses geopolitical value for them as the only country which has the attributes and assets to become a credible countervailing power, denying China a dominant role in the emerging global order. They have a stake in India fulfilling its immense potential. This could be judiciously leveraged to encourage a critical mass of capital and technology to flow to India and help it sustain an accelerated rate of growth. As a vibrant and pluralist democracy, India shares political values of its more powerful partners and this is an advantage.

The cosmopolitan temperament of India's people and their ability to handle immense diversity are unparalleled civilisational assets in dealing with a globalising world. But leveraging these assets will demand relative humility and willingness to learn rather than be a know-all. Constant references to past luminescence do not prepare minds for a brilliant future.

We are at a rare moment in our history when the ruling political dispensation enjoys unprecedented political capital and is led by a charismatic and ambitious leader. These are perishable assets and must be harnessed to make difficult choices, which alone will determine our trajectory to great power status. As with individuals, opportunities for nations have a short shelf life. They will not be waiting for us to unwrap when we think we are ready. The world is moving on and India must either stay ahead of the curve or be reconciled to a future of limited options.

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