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Introduction: Creating Diversity in Readings of India’s Global Role

Kate Sullivan

The purpose of this volume is to explore vantage points from around the globe on India’s contemporary role in world politics. India’s growing power and international status have drawn increasing scholarly, policy and media attention over the past two decades; however, English-language debates centring on India’s ‘rise’ have been dominated by a broadly singular approach. That approach has been to read India’s changing global role either in relation to the interests and policy concerns of the United States or through the lenses of mainstream, US-centric International Relations (IR) theories, particularly Realism. Rajesh Basrur (2009, pp.104–5), in a 2009 survey of high-impact global and Asian IR journals, comments on the ‘narrow intellectual ambit’ of scholarship on India’s international relations and finds it to be still dominated by US policy concerns and a commitment to Realism. At the same time, Ian Hall (2010, pp.602–3) observes the emergence of ‘Indian realists’, an ‘increasingly vocal and influential group of Indian scholars, many of them trained…in the United States’, who advance ‘the increasingly familiar argument that if India is to achieve its rightful place in the international system, it must set aside traditional concerns, and learn to act as other major powers do’. The resultant, often prescriptive scholarship has little to say about the ways in which India’s contemporary global role is being interpreted and understood in other parts of the world, as well as within India itself. Yet at a time when the global order is shifting towards multipolarity and modes of participation within multilateral organisations may need to expand, it is increasingly important to understand the nature and extent of India’s international influence in the eyes of multiple global stakeholders (Zakaria, 2008; Wade, 2011). Thinking beyond India, too, we might argue for a more general imperative to recognise and appreciate relations between ‘other’
increasingly influential states who are already navigating, shaping and creating international institutions and processes in distinctive ways.

By treating the growing international influence of India as a common element of world politics, the chapters in this volume offer a set of alternative ‘non-Western’ readings of India. Respectively, the chapters draw on Chinese, Japanese, South Korean, South African, African, Brazilian, Mexican, Iranian, Syrian and Russian perspectives. They make reference to a range of shared global issues, processes and institutions—including climate change, development cooperation, UN Security Council (UNSC) reforms, nuclear politics and the terms of world trade. Individually, the chapters offer a deeper understanding of how each country or region views an aspect of its relationship with India against broader understandings of an international society whose political, economic and social contours are shifting. Collectively, they demonstrate the advantages and difficulties in pursuing ‘inter-area’ IR scholarship.

Competing Visions of India in World Politics: India’s Rise Beyond the West has three central objectives. The first is to seek greater diversity in contemporary readings of India’s global role as a means of problematising existing modes of assessing India’s global influence. Existing accounts tend to ‘measure’ in terms of India’s robust economic growth, expanded military capacity, demonstrated nuclear weapons capability, proximity to the United States and identity as a democracy (Mohan, 2003; Nayar and Paul, 2003; Hagerty, 2009). This makes sense in the context of US conceptions of India as a significant trading partner, a potential balancer to China, a possible challenger to—or, increasingly, a stakeholder in—the global non-proliferation regime and a global partner on issues such as counter-terrorism and the promotion of liberal democracy. Yet a new range of emerging global stakeholders are being driven by other priorities, such as resistance to the power exercised both directly and structurally within the existing global order, the pursuit of material interests in domains such as world trade or international climate change negotiations and the promotion of new norms of global governance, such as the democratisation of international institutions. As a result, the countries whose readings of India are explored in this volume seek distinctive ends in their engagement with India, compared to those sought by the United States and other major Western powers. They offer differing evaluations of the extent of India’s global influence, both material and normative. Indeed, some of them even challenge the idea that India is a significant international player at all.

The second objective of the volume is to assess the extent to which external perceptions of India match, or are discordant with, its
projection of self as a global power. Self-understandings of India's shifting identity since the end of the Cold War have been an additional area of neglect in recent scholarship on India's rise. This omission is again troubling, considering that India has only recently, and only partially, chosen to behave in ways which have resulted in the elevation of its international status in the eyes of existing powers. On the one hand, India is seen as a rising power that exhibits increasing conformity with the interests of the established powers (Mohan, 2003). On the other hand, India is a power that is not yet prepared to abandon its traditional Southern vision of developing country solidarity (Narlikar, 2010). A pressing question is whether India has lost much of what made it both a distinctive state and an ideological ally of significant parts of the developing world during the Cold War. Multiple readings of India's contemporary global role can shed light on how India's complex, changing and occasionally conflicting foreign policy priorities are being received in different locations.

The third objective of the volume is to further develop understandings of contemporary international society as it is experienced, understood and shaped by a core group of ‘non-Western’ global stakeholders. The manner in which major and secondary states view one another has been a broadly neglected dimension of IR; yet, the relationships between these states are becoming increasingly important in an era of power transition. In the chapters that follow, we see some of the ways in which secondary states challenge pre-existing ideas about power and influence in world politics. Such states hold distinctive positions in reference to major issues of global governance. They are often, but not always, keenly aware and cognisant of one another’s global ambitions and priorities. Their identities and interests overlap in significant ways as they confront the challenges posed by dominant states and seek to resist the structural power embedded in international institutions. Yet their identities and interests also diverge as they jostle and compete with one another amid the new opportunities that the changing structures of power within the global order are beginning to offer.

As a result of these three central objectives, this volume differs from a range of existing works on India’s rise. Several of these works, while impressive in scope, build their analyses of India’s contemporary global role substantially on Realist assumptions and focus primarily on interest-based accounts of and responses to India’s rise (Chellaney, 2006; Cohen, 2001; Ganguly, 2003; Nayar and Paul, 2003; Pant, 2009b). Others explicitly read India’s rise as a result of a deeper Indian policy shift towards Realist thinking and precepts. C. Raja Mohan (2003, p.263;7),
for example, has argued that India has come to pursue a ‘more pragmatic and interest-driven foreign policy’ resulting in a fundamental change in India's international identity: India has chosen to place ‘considerations of realpolitik and national security above its until recently dominant focus on liberal internationalism, morality and normative approaches to international politics’. Yet other works not only adopt Realism as a theoretical paradigm but explicitly advise Realist thinking and a pro-American tilt as a foreign policy strategy for India (Pant, 2009a, 2008). These enquiries delineate a quite specific space in which India’s future might unfold: Mohan (2006, p.30) predicts that ‘alliance formation and balancing are tools in the kits of all great powers—and so they are likely to be in India’s as well’, while Pant (2009a, p.250) counsels that

India must come to grips with its discomfort with the very notion of power and in particular its wariness of the use of ‘hard power.’ Throughout history, all major powers have been required to employ the military instrument skilfully.

Other recent works on a rising India have sought to introduce new dimensions to the study of India’s international and regional experiences. Sandy Gordon (2014) has examined the intersection of the domestic, neighbourhood and regional spheres to examine India’s ‘rise as an Asian power’, while Harsh V. Pant (2008) explores the domestic debates that have accompanied key Indian foreign policy challenges and opportunities over the past two decades. Ian Hall’s (2014) edited volume _The Engagement of India_ comes closest to the scope of this volume by exploring the ways in which the United States and a number of major Asian states have sought to ‘engage’ India, and the manner in which these engagement strategies have contributed to India’s rise. However, no work to date has sought to explicitly diversify readings of India’s global role by locating readings of India’s rise in the historical experiences and contemporary self-imaginaries of a range of second-tier, non-Western states, spanning Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, as well as Asia.

Each of the contributors in this volume focuses on a narrow slice of world politics and places emphasis on the governmental perspectives of their chosen country or region in relation to India. Their discussions bridge the domestic–international divide and are of broad appeal across several disciplines—most obviously IR and comparative politics. They offer alternative insights into India’s global role that will be useful to both scholars and practitioners alike. Yet beyond this, they collectively
present a distinctive methodological commitment: by opening the conversation about India to a range of ‘alternative’ voices, the volume as a whole offers new directions in the ways we create knowledge within English-language scholarship about the international realm.

**Situated knowledges: The value of ‘non-systematised’ global perspectives**

What do diverse readings of single state actors in world politics contribute to the discipline of IR, apart from simply adding nuance and complexity? Perceptions of India’s global significance vary in each of the cases presented in this volume and are intimately tied to the self-understandings that respective leaderships, or segments of leaderships, hold about their own country’s global standing, interests and goals. Together, the chapters raise an important empirical challenge to the existing dominance of US readings of India’s rise. Yet what end might this diversity serve?

The answer to this question depends on the kinds of knowledge claims privileged by the researcher. At a number of stages during the production of this volume, individuals outside the project encouraged us to adopt a set framework of analysis that would allow each chapter author to produce their country or regional reading of India in a uniform fashion.¹ A common suggestion was to develop a list of ‘priority issues’ with regard to India and then to elicit common responses from each of the countries/regions in reference to those issues. However, the question of whose issues of priority these would be, or from where the act of prioritisation might originate, was of major concern to us. It was difficult to conceive of a single list of issues in terms that did not either induct them from the priorities of an abstract third party (usually implicitly the United States) or deduce them from a set of theoretical assumptions that underpinned mainstream, dominant modes of IR theorising. Moreover, since India’s engagement with the world is uneven, a further concern was that the pre-selection of issues would lead us to select only those countries which engage with India on the terms we pre-specified.

Our aim in this volume is precisely to eschew the laying down of a fixed template of issues upon, or lenses through which, our country perspectives should focus. Systematising our perspectives of India would have worked against one of the volume’s central aims: producing diversity in readings of India’s contemporary global role by seeking to locate India-related interests and values within country perspectives themselves. We have aimed not to produce a regimented survey of country
readings on the same issues but to explore perspectives of India through the prism of specific issues that our contributors, on the basis of their deep understanding of their country or region of study, determine are important to particular countries in their engagement with India.

The collective method we draw on in this volume has therefore purposefully sought to avoid the ‘systematisation’ of perspectives of India. Inspired by standpoint theory, we have instead taken steps to develop ‘situated knowledges’, that is, to account, as far as possible, for the situatedness of the ‘knowing subject’ who makes sense of India’s contemporary global role in each of our cases (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002, p.315). We join others in the discipline of IR in questioning the idea that positivism (the privileging of empirical validation or falsification) is the soundest basis for objective scientific enquiry and in challenging the rationalist assumption that the interests of international actors are pre-given (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998). However, from standpoint theory we take two specific insights: a critical approach to the idea of objectivity that justifies our commitment to situated knowledges and an approach to overcoming the challenges of relativism that emerge in the process.

First, we build on Donna Haraway’s (1988, p.580) quest to find a ‘usable doctrine of objectivity’. Haraway’s central critique of the proclaimed ‘objectivity’ of positivist approaches to scientific enquiry is what she describes as the ‘gaze’ of the ‘unmarked position’ that claims ‘to represent while escaping representation’ (ibid., p.581). In the discipline of IR, universalist accounts and theories have traditionally been privileged where the unmarked, apparently ‘objective’ position claims to provide accounts of international politics that are valid for all states (O’Hagan, 2002; Smith, 2000). Problematically, the concepts, theories and epistemological approaches employed to generate so-called universalist accounts originate from scholarly and policy agendas that are pertinent primarily to the interests, values and agendas of specific, dominant parts of the world, particularly the United States. For example, Rajesh Basrur (2009, p.105) views IR as ‘a US-dominated discipline [that] reflects American policy interests…as well as an academic carryover from the Cold War era’. Similarly, Steve Smith (2000, p.374) finds that IR remains an American social science with a rationalist mainstream, and that ‘the US academic community still dominates the discipline’. He further argues that ‘mainstream U.S. IR defines the appropriate methods of how to study international relations in such a narrow way as to restrict understanding of other cultures and rationalities’ (Smith, 2002, p.67). In recent readings of India’s rise, our observation is that the implicit
or explicit presence of US centrism persists in keeping with Smith's critique. Therefore, we begin with an identification of the limitations of the dominant universalist commitments of the discipline of IR that we see as underpinning current, dominant US-centric accounts of India's rise. To provide ‘objective’ accounts of India’s contemporary global influence, we follow Donna Haraway (1988, p.586) in seeking ‘the subject position … of objectivity’, that is, in concerning ourselves as much with the knower as with their knowledge. The situatedness of our ‘readers’ of India is defined and operationalised differently in each of the chapters in this volume, centring variously on an influential self-understanding of a country’s positioning among the society of states; a dominant understanding of a national, historical experience; the evolution or make-up of the national institutions that formulate responses to India; or some combination of these. In this way, as much as offering accounts of India’s rise, we have produced a range of contemporary partial snapshots of country self-perspectives. Indeed, the primary drivers of perceptions of India, we argue, are countries’ own imperatives, interests and self-conceptions, rather than India’s intended self-projections. We treat the multiple contingent visions of India in this volume as coexistent and equally salient, and ‘incapable of being squashed into isomorphic slots or cumulative lists’ (Haraway, 1988, p.586).

Second, we acknowledge that the resultant fragmentation of views of India opens each account to a critique of relativism. In addressing this, we again take our cue from standpoint theory, which typically ‘views the process of approximating the truth as part of a dialogical relationship among subjects who are differently situated’ (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002, p.315). What this means concretely for this project is the seeking out of linkages between the country perspectives and the identification of both shared and divergent approaches to, and positions on, India’s global role and salient issues of contemporary world politics. These interlinkages are explored in the conclusion to this volume, where we aim to take steps towards what Haraway characterises as an ‘alternative to relativism’, namely ‘partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections’ (Haraway, 1988, p.584). The broader stories the chapters collectively tell, such as the promise or threat of new rising powers to non-Western states, the extent to which power transition is welcomed and the frequently shared experience of occupying a lower tier in some facet of the global order, offer a fuller account of contemporary world politics. The idea that the relations among the great powers can be considered the ‘essential skeleton’ of the ‘vast and amorphous world body politic’ appears increasingly limited
(Bull, 2002, p.200). Our understanding of both India and the states whose perspectives we present is that they are situated within a network of connections with both dominant states, other second- or lower-tier states, and international institutions and transnational actors, and that they should therefore be understood in terms of their behavioural priorities and choices within these multiple contexts.

Both methodologically and epistemologically, therefore, our multiple readings of India’s global role aim for a shift—as incomplete as it may be—from the ‘objectivity’ of implicit or explicit US-centric perspectives to localised, situated knowledges, and from the search for a singular reading of India’s contemporary global role to ‘webbed accounts’ of the phenomena that constitute world politics (Haraway, 1988, p.588). In doing so, we take, in Anne Tickner’s (2003, p.296) words, ‘concrete actions to map out and incorporate multiple, competing know-hows that are scattered throughout the world’.

Some methodological challenges

While this volume offers alternative perspectives on India’s global role by embracing situated knowledges, we acknowledge several limitations. The first centres on our choice of country perspectives. Our aim is to solicit diverse world perspectives on India’s global role, thereby situating India as a global power rather than a regional power. For this reason we do not focus on how India is viewed within South Asia, but rather we seek perspectives from a number of major, non-Western global stakeholders. The very act of selecting major powers, and delineating what is ‘non-Western’, is of course a choice from somewhere, and we have tried to factor broader international as well as regional significance into our final selection. Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa form a starting point because of the growing salience of the BRICS as an international institution outside of the political-economic sphere widely referred to as the ‘West’, and as a major grouping that features in India’s calculations. Japan and South Korea stand as significant Asian states that play a prominent role in a newly economically and politically powerful Asia. Selected African accounts, dealt with in one chapter, are central to an understanding of India’s new extra-regional reach as a patron rather than a client, as well as India’s extra-regional competition with China. Distant Mexico, the second-largest economy in Latin America after Brazil, yet emblematic of the region in its low trade and political engagement with India, also merits inclusion. Iran, as a potential impediment to India’s relations with the United States and as a symbolic
litmus test for India’s independent foreign policy, forms a further significant vantage point. Finally, Syria, while an outlier to the other country studies, since it is not understood as a secondary state, is nonetheless caught in a contemporary crisis that is challenging India’s engagement both globally and in the Middle East in important ways. Other additional non-Western power perspectives could also have been included, such as Egypt, Indonesia and Nigeria, and certainly, in our quest for alternatives to Anglophone Western accounts, we might equally have explored French or German, or Central or Eastern European readings. However, our choice of major second-tier powers could not be exponential and, of course, the final selection is in part a practical matter, limited by the expertise and availability of willing contributors. On the whole, we believe the range and geographical spread we include to serve our three central purposes well: we do, after all, manage to offer alternative readings, evaluate the uptake of Indian self-conceptions and gain insights into alternative experiences of contemporary world politics.

Second, the volume consciously seeks out official or governmental perspectives of India from the countries concerned. Each chapter seeks to make explicit the distinctive vantage points not only of the countries or regions under study but of the official governmental institutions, or particular parts of those institutions, within each country or region. This leaves open the question of the degree to which a country perspective that is explored only through a focus on a specific issue, process or institutional setting can be said to be representative, and whether other salient perceptions of India circulate in those countries. Given our commitment to producing situated knowledges, we emphasise the importance of disaggregating perceptions, that is, of identifying the specific group of domestic actors whose perceptions are being presented at a given moment or in a given period, and of acknowledging the presence of other domestic ‘India discourses’. We also recognise that official accounts can often only be considered ‘front-stage’ interactions—to use the language of Erving Goffman (1959)—that is, strategic or instrumental performances of a role in relation to a given audience (which may or may not be India), and that they therefore may not equate with unofficial, private or ‘backstage’ perspectives.

Third is the choice of issue upon which each chapter focuses. While each of the cases provides a justification for the centrality of the issue(s) they are exploring to their particular country of analysis, these justifications are not uniform. Our emphasis has been to select not the most dominant issue but one which reveals some aspect of the way in which
both values and interests affect others’ perspectives of India. The focus on a single issue or a limited issue base is in keeping with our aim of disaggregating perspectives, in recognition of the likelihood that perspectives of India vary across leaders, ministries and issue areas, as well as over time.

Finally, while collectively our methodological aim has been to develop situated knowledges, this is not to suggest that each of the chapters follows the same methodology. The disciplinary influences of history, political science and IR all feature in the chapters in this volume, with others bearing the trademark interdisciplinarity that often characterises the work of Area Studies scholars. The disciplinary background and methodological approach of the authors is eclectic in the same way that our perspectives seek to be, in appreciation of the richness of the conversations that can and do take place with, about and between different global players today.

Overview of chapters

A central rationale of Competing Visions of India in World Politics: India’s Rise Beyond the West is to explore the extent to which external perceptions of India match India’s projection of self as a prominent global actor. Therefore, Chapter 1 begins by examining and evaluating some of the ways in which India discursively constructs itself as a prominent global power in the contemporary post-Cold War era. In this first chapter, I argue that three central themes currently underpin justifications for a greater global role for India within India’s official foreign policy discourse: a role for India (i) as a ‘synthesising power’, reflecting India’s aspirations to adopt a prominent role in a globally interdependent and economically integrated world, (ii) as a ‘didactic power’, reflecting a vision of India as a norm-setter ‘by example’ and a producer of global knowledge and values and (iii) as an ‘alternative power’, where India aspires to appear as a recognisable but alternative global actor to the great powers of the twentieth century.

Moving onto the country perspectives, the volume begins by looking at understandings of India in Asia. In Chapter 2, Nicola Horsburgh evaluates the nature and rationale behind Chinese thinking, both past and present, towards a nuclear India. Horsburgh identifies two drivers of Chinese perspectives: status and security. Concerned about India’s increasing recognition as a responsible nuclear actor, in particular by the United States, China engages in a strategy of downplaying and undermining India’s legitimacy in international nuclear politics. This suggests
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Note: The letters ‘n’ following locators refer to notes.

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