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India's Indo-Pacific Gambit: An Awkward Power Striving for Status²

Abstract: It seems that the Indo-Pacific label has been deployed by India to validate its great power aspirations. Such operationalization of strategic region-building acknowledges that the positioning of any international actor emerges as a power in context – it is not entirely an intrinsic property of an actor, but depends on the kind of interactions it has in specific (temporal and spatial) contexts. This condition is one of the key sources of the awkwardness of India's great power. It reflects simultaneously (i) the contested nature of India's standing – jostling between an aspiring great power, a regional South Asian hegemon, and a begrudging middle power; and (ii) the neglect of Indian aspirations (and self-perception) of great civilizational state. The paper examines these dynamics by, firstly, deploying a discursive study on foreign policy making, whose framework then provides the analytical backstop to the assessment of Indian foreign policy making in the Indo-Pacific region. As such, the concluding section of the paper suggests that the case of India confirms the assumption that it is the complex interactions between contestation and neglect that frames the awkward status of power on the world stage.

Keywords: great power, civilizational state, Indian Foreign Policy, Indo-Pacific region, middle power, regional power

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² The author wishes to acknowledge the financial assistance of the NAWA Chair Professor Grant (PPN/PRO/2020/1/00003/DEC/1) from the Polish Academic Exchange Council and NCN grant (ZARZADZENIE NCN 94/2020) from the Polish National Science Council.

1. Introduction

The year 2020 might go down in history as a good year for Indian foreign policy. And this is despite the global COVID-19 pandemic and its toll on the country, not to mention the ongoing military standoff along the border with China, and the growing religious, ethnic, and economic tensions. The European Union (EU) not only appears to have taken a harder line on New Delhi's erstwhile rival Beijing, but Brussels' views might be moving closer to those of India with the development of a new Indo-Pacific strategy (Ishikawa, 2020; Kavalski, 2022b). This shift in Brussels' foreign policy outlook comes despite the lack of progress on the EU-India Free Trade Agreement. In particular, the German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, asserted that "the geopolitics of the post-COVID-19 world will be played out in the maritime continuum of the Indian and Pacific oceans" (Bhaskar, 2020). Maas' statement was virtually reiterating the conclusion drawn by the Australian government a few months earlier, in June 2020, that "many of the future challenges are likely to occur in, and emanate from, the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific" (Baruah, 2020; Kavalski and Cho, 2018).

The flavor of such unprecedented accolades seems to have been made only sweeter for New Delhi by the signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement on Geospatial Cooperation (BECA) between India and the US on 27 October 2020 (*The Hindu*, 2020). Washington tends to offer BECA agreements only to its closest and most loyal allies. The agreement allows partner countries exclusive access to US satellite data that can then be used in the navigation and conduct of military operations. At the signing, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, made it abundantly clear that BECA was part of Washington's containment of China. As he ascertained, "the United States will stand with the people of India as they confront threats to their freedom and sovereignty". Pompeo went on to assert that China is "no friend to democracy, the rule of law, transparency, nor to freedom of navigation, the foundation of a free and open and prosperous Indo-Pacific" (Deutsche Welle, 2020).

Such privileged treatment of India is not coincidental. Already in 2017, in the first US National Security Strategy developed under President Trump, India received a special mention because of its crucial position in what Washington was beginning to call the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Many commentators interpreted the FOIP initiative as a replacement of the Obama Administration's "Pivot to Asia" strategy. This marked the first formal enshrinement of the Indo-Pacific region as a "unified strategic theatre" in a US security strategy document (Pant and Rej, 2018). Editorials across the country were praising the US for singling India out as a "leading global power" crucial to the achievement of American objectives in "the Indo-Pacific" (George, 2017). Such acknowledgment was quickly flaunted as a vindication of India's muscular foreign policy in the wake of the May 1998 nuclear tests which intended to demonstrate the

country's "rightful place in the world" as "a great power capable of inflicting unacceptable military and diplomatic costs [on its adversaries]" (Lak, 2008, p. 248; Kavalski, 2008a). In fact, the bonhomie between New Delhi and Washington has come to reflect a growing affinity for the shared language of "hard power" capabilities, which – in the case of India, at least – has fostered a perception among many policy-makers and commentators that the country is "becoming Asia's America" (Ibid., p. 277).

Thus, it is often overlooked that India's post-1998 geopolitical stance reflects a conscious attempt to overcome the country's traditional middle power ranking by projecting a much more assertive foreign policy. In other words, the aim was not merely to demonstrate the heft of India's nuclear capabilities, but to reiterate the country's self-image as a great power capable to project its interests beyond the confines of India's immediate neighborhood. In this respect, this study suggests that the articulation of an Indo-Pacific region is intricately connected to the awkward nature of Indian power in global life. In fact, it could be argued that the case of India evidences the fraught nature of the ranking of nations in contemporary international affairs. Some scholars have indeed gone as far as labelling the whole analytical category a "myth" (Chapnick, 1999; McCulloch and Kavalski, 2005). The issue of conceptual clarity gets even fuzzier when discussing the ranking of the so-called emerging or rising powers, whose role, agency, and impact are subject to a different kind of contestation (Payne, 2008; Kavalski, 2021c). To complicate matters further, many of the recognized and newly emerging claimants to the middle power status are additionally considered as the dominant actors in their respective regions.

Such a complex context does not help with the development of a coherent definition of the category of middle power. The instance of India adds another analytical wrinkle to such lack of conceptual clarity: while most countries have tended to accept their designations as middle powers (even if they were not necessarily content with it), India rejects it outright. Instead, Indian foreign policy elites and pundits have long insisted that owing to its unique status of a "civilizational state", their country is and should be treated as a great power. This sense of strategic importance is backstopped by a strong self-perception of national and cultural greatness reinforced by growing nuclear capabilities (Chakrabarti, 2017; Nordin et al., 2019). Foreign policy making has thus morphed into a powerful ideology for the consolidation of a conflict-ridden domestic political stage through the projection of strategic fantasies and dreams into the past.

To that effect the first section of this study positions its investigation within the scholarship on the discursive study of foreign policy making (Kavalski, 2022). In particular, the exploratory endeavour of this article draws on the approaches and perspectives pioneered by the so-called Copenhagen School. Such analytical framework then provides crucial assistance with detailing the content, context, and contestations of India's middle power status and points to two

significant re-articulations of the criteria for ranking countries in order to validate India's position as a great power (and not a middle power): (i) the first one is the promulgation of an "Indo-Pacific" locale as the domain of India's great power projection; and (ii) the second one is the redefinition of the concept of great power to fit India's current characteristics. Such framing helps outline the hybrid nature of India – an awkward middle power with great power aspirations – as a partial agent in contemporary international affairs. The concluding section of this paper brings those investigative strands together to demonstrate that India's idiosyncratic discourses of its power status as well as the narratives of its historical and normative framing, position the country as an awkward power on the world stage.

2. The discursive study of foreign policy

While many could probably claim to have originated the study of foreign policy through discourses, it was the representatives from the so-called Copenhagen School that seem to have developed this approach into a coherent research program during the 1990s (Hansen, 1996). The proponents of this perspective noted that the import of discourses has tended to be sidelined in the analyses of inter-state relations. The reason for such occlusion appeared to be that discourses were perceived as too abstruse to account meaningfully for state interests on the international stage (Wæver, 1998; Diez, 2001). The Copenhagen approach rests on the assumption that the analysis of domestic discourses of "we" concepts such as "state" and "nation" has important explanatory potential in understanding foreign policy developments (Wæver, 1998, 100). Thus, the discursive study of foreign policy asserts that the formulation of a state's external affairs is a function of the logic of language, "not the relation between language and some extra-linguistic 'reality'" (Williams 2005, 23). In this respect, it is "the vocabularies" of international interactions and the particular "language of [their] discourse" that exposes the dynamics of external affairs (Pattanaik 2008, p. 408).

In fact, some have claimed that the origins of this approach could be traced back to the Southasian strategic thinker Kautilya and his emphasis on the importance of language as the foundation of "a science of politics" (Boesche 2022, p. 31). The claim is that the public articulations of foreign policy are perceived as symbolic resources which simultaneously reflect and create social processes through which meanings are exchanged – that is, the discursive processes of foreign policy making are embedded in specific political, social, and historical conditions. In this setting, foreign policy making becomes an identity issue, which takes coherence through the articulations of (and in response to) national insecurities. In particular, the overlap between foreign policy narratives with discourses of security "acts as an archive where memories of the dead and the

sacrificed mingle with the memory to come of those willing to kill and be killed" (Dillon, 2004, p. 86). This in turn suggests that "the meaning of an action" is constituted by "the storyteller not by the action" (Wæver, 2000, p. 284). The claim is that foreign policy statements not only actualize, but also reflect a choice of a particular conceptualization of a national self-image; thus, they are predominantly aimed at domestic audiences rather than the alleged external target.

In this respect, the study of discourses is about "tracing the developments of a few key concepts, their historical origins, their transformations, [and] their constitutive relationship to other concepts" (Wæver, 1998, p. 110). It scrutinizes the concomitant narrative articulations that underwrite the formulation of foreign policy (Diez, 2001). The result is a narrative produced by collating relevant statements that reveal the external stance of a state by tapping into the discourses of its domestic legitimation. Thus, discursive study of foreign policy engages in a textual process tracing which both uncovers "the narratives within narratives" context of external relations and exposes that what distinguishes the explanation of international phenomena are "the ingredients used in the narrative accounts" (Suganami, 2008, pp. 347–355). The contention is that this approach provides a meaningful encounter for simultaneously experiencing and deducing the ingredients of Indian discursive formulations regarding the international agency of a country such as India.

The inference is that foreign policy choices reflect specific articulations of state interests, which, however, are not independent of the discursive context in which they emerge. In this respect foreign policy can be defined as "a discourse of power which is global in scope [yet] national in its legitimation" (Campbell, 1998, p. 70). To paraphrase from a different context, foreign policy is a regime of truth expressed "as a discourse of danger through which government takes place in the name of fears that are nonetheless functional to the re-production of the political order" (Dillon, 2004, p. 88). In the Indian foreign policy context, the claim is that the discursive study of foreign policy reveals the ways in which 'culturally conditioned ideas, images, and "institutional scripts"' shape the notion and practices of India's international relations (Latham, 1998, p. 129). In other words, the domestic articulation of foreign policy objectives contributes to the public "participation in the idea of the nation" (Hall, 1996, p. 612). That is, the language of international relations "glues" individuals together into a shared national pattern.

The discursive approach of foreign policy extends the following trumps to the study of a country's international interactions (Zolkos and Kavalski, 2007). Firstly, it allows the introduction to the discursive ingredients that go into the broth of foreign policy making without interfering in the actual voice of these articulations. Although structured by the one collating such utterances, the ability to retain the authenticity of domestic articulations allows for a large amount of noise to seep through. Secondly, the discursive study of foreign policy does not

impute, nor endow coherence on the story it tells. Instead, it facilitates a confrontation with the complexity underpinning seemingly akin propositions. Thirdly, such an approach makes accessible the cacophony of domestic articulation of foreign policy-making. It traces the complexity and trajectories of narrative changes (Pan and Kavalski, 2022). The discursive collations offer flexible modes of “narrative explanation/understanding” that render discursive contextualization “fundamental” to the explanation of international affairs “either because explanations are given in a narrative form or because they invariably contain narrative accounts within them” (Suganami, 2008, pp. 338–355; Kavalski, 2018c).

In other words, the discursive study of foreign policy derives its logic, content, and coherence from the warren of pronouncements populating the terrain of a country’s international affairs. Therefore, the foreign policy discourses of India are analyzed in this study as systems or chains of meanings which constitute a “signifying practice in which statements have a regular and dispersed relationship” and which do not achieve full closure (Kavalski, 2010, p. 250). This inherent openness of discourses indicates the ubiquity of the political contestation to sew them up – i.e. it indicates the ability to fix their meaning in a unambiguous and politically beneficial way. These assertions reflect a belief in the differential formation of conceptual meanings and in the possibility of generating (narrative) explanations while remaining sceptical about the existence of “stable (if arbitrary) relationships between signifier and signified” (Wæver, 2000, p. 23). This article subscribes, therefore, to the position that identities (political or other) remain unavailable a priori to their discursive embodiments.

Drawing on this approach, the article views foreign policy articulations as (concurrently) discursively enabled and discursively limited. This allows for their problematization on the agency-structure axis. On the one hand, the structure of discourse conditions foreign policy practice, i.e., it “delimit[s] what can be said and what not” (Zolkos and Kavalski, 2007, p. 389). The policy effects of discourse are exposed not as causal, but rather as creating the horizon of the possible. On the other hand, the structure of discourse does not have an independent existence, but is knowable to us through particular agency articulations. The mutual dependency of agency and structure in the Copenhagen approach suggests that the foreign policy practices of India is perceived within the layered discursive structures of security, international engagement, instrumental entrepreneurship, etc., but at the same time these discursive structures are articulated, represented, selected and transformed by the specific context of their respective national foreign policy articulations (Kavalski, 2010).

The ambition here is to demonstrate the importance of the national “we” subject as a substantial component of foreign policy formation. The contention is that foreign policy statements dramatize, actualize and confirm the conceptions of a national self-image. Therefore, this analysis “sticks to discourse as interesting in itself,” in order to avoid getting bogged down in discussions about

the intentionality of foreign policy choices (Wæver, 1998). At the same time, however, while foreign policy articulations can be read as sequences of explicit national identity reproductions and reconstructions, the current investigation pays attention to what remains figurative, implicit and inter-textual.

3. India – an Asian middle power or an Indo-Pacific great power?

In the beginning of April 2020, as the world was coming to terms with the nascent COVID-19 pandemic, India unleashed a massive relief program to counter the outreach of China's new "Health Silk Road" into its neighborhood. As one of the main producers of genetic drugs, India began donating planeloads of medical supplies to countries in its strategic environs – such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, and the Indo-Pacific littoral space (Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, Comoros and Seychelles) (AsiaNews, 2020; Kavalski, 2021b). This diplomatic push came despite (and probably in spite of) the plight of close to 200 million migrant laborers who lost their jobs (and accommodation) as a result of India's stringent lockdown measures and who had to embark on foot on long and perilous journeys to their homes (Biswas, 2020). The contrast between the uncomfortable picture presented by the precarity of those working in India's informal economy and the country's diplomatic outreach to assert its influence illustrates the awkwardness of India's position on the global stage power status.

On the one hand, the overwhelming majority of observers tend to acknowledge the country's middle power status. As early as the 1970s commentators were asserting with confidence that India is a "rising middle power" (Mellor, 1979, pp. 231–242; Kavalski, 2017b). Historically speaking, such proclamations reflect India's commitment to non-alignment during the Cold War, which immediately put it in an intermediary position and meant that New Delhi could be regarded "neither as a corner, nor as a pole by itself" (Murthy, 1986, p. 391; Kavalski, 2020a). Yet, by assuming a leadership position in the so-called Third World, India was able to champion a distinct mode of internationalism pivoted on coalition-building and multilateralism. In the wake of the Cold War, and especially in the context of a perceived shift to the East in global politics, the country's middle power status has become even more readily observable (Nayar, 1999, pp. 303–328; Kavalski, 2014a). As some have noted, while "India [has] the capacity to resist most, if not all demands placed upon it by the other states, including the recognized major powers", it still lacks capacity to "make other important states comply with Indian demands, nor can India obtain all that it desires in the international arena" (Perkovich, 2003; Kavalski, 2016a).

It is important to note that as one of the most prominent non-Western middle powers, India has strategically maintained counter-hegemonic rhetoric as part of a foreign policy agenda aimed both at reforming the neoliberal world order and ensuring a more just and fair distribution of economic resources and opportunities (Jordaan, 2003; Kavalski, 2003). While never fully satisfied with the established hierarchy of power relations, India has never championed a radical revision of the existing international system and has therefore been labelled as a “quasi-*status quo* middle power” (Paul, 2003, p. 139; Kavalski, 2016b). Such experience has also established India among the pre-eminent “bridging powers” in the world – an in-between category, which reflects its limited global influence, yet attests both the country’s “independence” and “indispensability” as a “good global citizen” operating as “the essential connective tissue that a fragmenting world requires” (Khilnani, 2005; Kavalski, 2007c). In this respect, the ranking of the country as a middle power has been fairly well-established and is treated largely as a given in the literature.

On the other hand, there appears to be some confusion about the country’s rank because of India’s position in its home region – South Asia. Traditionally, India has been recognized as the big brother of South Asia – not only because of its size, location, and material preponderance, but also because of Indian military interventions in East Pakistan (which led to the establishment of Bangladesh) and Sri Lanka. In this respect, India has long been recognized as “a factor in the domestic politics of most of its neighbours” (Khilnani, Sunil et al., 2012, p. 16; Kavalski, 2010b). Commentators are therefore quick to point out that the country is either “a South Asian superpower” (Munro, 1989) or “a major regional power” (Basrur, 2011, p. 182). At the same time, and despite its hegemonic role in the region, the South Asian context has been described as a veritable constraint on the country’s aspirations. In particular, the protracted confrontation with Pakistan has encumbered India’s foreign policy imagination and continues to act as an impediment on the country’s strategic outreach (Kavalski, 2006). The point here is twofold: (i) being the dominant power in a region characterized by conflict has dented India’s international reputation; (ii) the security concerns borne out of the persistence of conflict in the region ties down vital tactical and decision-making resources that India could otherwise deploy to pursue its national interests beyond South Asia (Prys, 2012, p. 143; Kavalski, 2020b).

Yet, in the context of the rise of Asia to global prominence – largely backstopped by the economic performance of China and India during the 1990s and the first decade of the 2010s – many commentators have started to assert that India is no longer merely a regional hegemon, but also a continental great power and perhaps even a global one. As the preeminent Indian strategic thinker, C. Raja Mohan (2006) proclaimed, “after disappointing itself for decades, India is now on the verge of becoming a great power”. A central feature of this narrative has been the criticism of the alleged “softness” of the Nehruvian foreign policy,

which “twisted India’s strategic culture into all kinds of absurdities” and ultimately led to the “enfeebling of a once fierce nation” (Sreeram Chaulia quoted in Kavalski, 2012a, p. 136). The contention is that “a country with non-violent values has little chance to enter the great power system” (Nayar and Paul, 2003, p. 105). In particular, the 1998 detonations of “the Hindu nuclear bomb” promulgated the conviction that the “strategic capacity to first inflict harm and then negotiate restraint” has allowed India to transcend the geopolitical straitjacket imposed on the country by its middle power status (Kapur, 2006, p. 3; Kavalski, 2007b). In this setting, New Delhi’s involvement in the BRICS (Brazil-Russia-China-India-South Africa) grouping and active lobbying for a United Nations (UN) Security Council seat have been taken – both domestically and internationally – as yet another indication of India’s emergence as a “new global power” (Tellis, 2005, pp. 5–52).

The strategic conflation between India’s leadership position in South Asia and its global great power ambition reflects the country’s longstanding displeasure with its marginalization in international affairs. The middle power ranking of the country has been taken as confirmation of an “international order confining India to an inferior position” (Vinay Rai quoted in Kavalski, 2015b). At the same time, India’s great power aspirations suggest that the country “has something unique to offer to the rest of the world” (Singh, 2006, pp. 48–49; Kavalski, 2005). The conviction in India’s exceptionalism can be traced back to the first post-independence Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. He openly asserted that the “indelible imprints”, which Indian civilizations have left on the history of the world, confer on the country “the rank that ignorance has refused her for a long time and to hold her place among the great nations” (Nehru, 2004, pp. 222–223; Kavalski, 2009a). Perhaps surprisingly, given his anti-Nehruvian stance, the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi echoed similar sentiments when he stated that owing to “our culture, traditions, and history India has to play the role of a leading power in the world rather than just a balancing force” (quoted in Kavalski, 2017c). In this respect, the country’s middle power ranking has never sat comfortably with the self-perception of India as a “great civilizational state” whose influence emanates from India’s unique history and culture.

It is in this context that Prime Minister Modi has begun to promote “Buddhist diplomacy” not merely as the foreign policy mantra of his government, but also as a framework through which to leverage India’s civilizational capital vis-à-vis other major powers. Culture and history thereby have become repositories for socio-political consensus backstopping the foreign policy conviction of “India’s emergence as a great power that is fully autonomous, influential, and respected by the world” (Ogden, 2014, p. 4; Kavalski, 2018a). Such a stance has led to two significant reformulations of the context and criteria for ranking the global standing of countries in order to validate the position that India is a great power and not a middle power: (i) the promulgation of an “Indo-Pacific” area as the domain of India’s

great power projection; and (ii) the redefinition of the concept of great power to fit India's current characteristics. The following paragraphs detail these in brief.

4. India's Indo-Pacific region

Traditionally, regions have been defined as clusters of proximate states, constitutive of geographic or geostrategic "mental images" (Acharya, 2007) "politically made" (Katzenstein, 2005), "geopsychologically arranged" (Pempel, 2005), or "spoken into existence" (Neumann, 1999). Framed by the threats and opportunities provided by the confluence of the Indian and Pacific littoral space, this narrative – from its very inception – aimed to ascertain the extension of India's influence beyond the constraints of its South Asian home region. In fact, the articulation of an Indo-Pacific space has been a relative newcomer in India's strategic entrepreneurship. Initially, New Delhi seemed to prioritize its involvement in the BRICS and IBSA (India-Brazil-South Africa) groupings as well as lobbied actively for a UN Security Council seat (Tellis, 2016). Such international grandstanding however has not been done for the promotion of alternative global governance mechanisms. Far from it, New Delhi has used these forums to overcome the structural constraints of an "international order confining India to an inferior position" (Kavalski, 2015a, p. 432).

For instance, India's interest in the BRICS was primarily transactional – firstly, by deploying the forum domestically as evidence that the country is treated as China's peer and, secondly, using it as a venue to promote its view of Pakistan to an international audience (Pant and Sharma, 2019). The fact that Russia and China were part of BRICS was what initially attracted India and made it shift its interest away from IBSA. In fact, New Delhi was a keen supporter of a RIC (Russia-India-China) forum, but this never really took off (Rajagopalan, 2019). Subsequently, it was India's annoyance with both Moscow's and Beijing's disregard that led New Delhi to revive its interests in the IBSA and effectively use it as a splinter organization of the BRICS (Bhatia, 2019; Zolkos and Kavalski, 2007). Yet, a number of Indian commentators have recently urged the government to dismantle all such forums because they fail to safeguard not only India's "own interests but also [those] of the wider global order" (Pant, 2020). New Delhi's Indo-Pacific foray emerges on the background of this experience.

In this setting, India has invested significant strategic capital in the construction of an "Indo-Pacific" geopolitical zone where it plays a leading role (alongside Japan, Australia, and the United States). The Indo-Pacific region has thereby become a geopolitical shorthand for the country's "extended neighbourhood" – an aspirational strategic discourse flaunting the positioning of India "as an essential cornerstone of global affairs" (Nehru, 2013; Horesh and Kavalski, 2014).

The explicit strategic ambition underpinning such foreign policy move is that “through the Indo-Pacific construct, India envisages a greater role for itself in the wider region” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019). Observers of Indian strategic discourse have traced the origins of the geopolitical narrative on the Indo-Pacific to a 2006 article penned by the foreign policy analyst Gurpreet Khurana (Scott, 2012; Kavalski, 2012b). The actual geopolitical footprint of this rhetoric has tended to be rather fluid and fuzzy. For instance, during the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, Prime Minister Modi defined the Indo-Pacific region as stretching “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018).

The conceptual fuzziness notwithstanding, what seems to have remained constant ever since the promulgation of the Indo-Pacific idea has been (i) the pursuit of India's national interest beyond South Asia as the centerpiece of the country's global engagement and (ii) the attendant desire to contain China's outreach in what New Delhi perceives as its own strategic space for expansion (Kavalski, 2019b). The explicit geopolitical framing of the Indo-Pacific has thereby provided India with a platform for the development of a balancing strategy towards China while building partnerships with like-minded countries. It seems that Japan was among the first to respond to India's call for an Indo-Pacific geostrategic locale. Already in 2007, during his first visit to India, Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe spoke of the “confluence of the two seas” – that is, the Indian and the Pacific Oceans – as playing a crucial role in building connectivity that foster the establishment of a “broader Asia”. According to Prime Minister Abe (2007), “our two countries have the ability and the responsibility” to ensure the “stability, freedom, and prosperity” of this region (Kavalski, 2007d).

Nearly a decade later, in 2017, this Indo-Japanese partnership would lead to the development of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) (The Times of India, 2017). While the stated intention of AAGC was to provide “high-quality, reliable, sustainable, and resilient infrastructures” that will enhance “the growth and interconnectedness between and within Asia and Africa”, both New Delhi and Tokyo were quite explicit that one of the central aims of the AAGC was “to counter [China's] Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)” (Dasgupta, 2017) by promoting a “liberal and value-based order” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015). At the same time as the AAGC's *Vision 2025* indicated, its key objective is to ensure “peace, security and development of the Indo-Pacific region” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015; Rudakowska and Kavalski, 2021). Consequently, as more countries have been willing to partner with India to uphold this aim, New Delhi's Indo-Pacific framework has facilitated the – simultaneously discursive, institutional, and strategic – foundation to push back against any actual or perceived attempts by Beijing to change existing norms and frameworks of international interactions.

In this respect, the projection and maintenance of such strategic foothold in India's extended neighborhood has been closely associated with the cultivation of India's “Look East” policy – the country's first (and, arguably, the most

successful attempt to date for) forward foreign policy outreach towards South-east Asia. In fact, some commentators have gone as far as describing the concept of the Indo-Pacific as a “Look East 3.0” (Chandran, 2013; Kavalski, 2007a). The narrative of the Indo-Pacific has also been crucial to the rebranding of the Look East into the Act East policy by Prime Minister Modi in order to elucidate the strategic geometry of new partnerships pivoted on India (Tellis, 2016; Kavalski, 2017a). In particular, the upgrade to relations with Australia, Japan, Indonesia, New Zealand, and Taiwan intends to demonstrate that “without India there is no Indo-Pacific – be it a region or century” (Gupta, 2011; Kavalski, 2010a). Some have even noted that the democratic credentials of India’s Indo-Pacific partners suggest that this framework of relations might be the harbinger of an “Asian NATO” (Ollapally, 2011, p. 215; Kavalski, 2008b). In fact, the so-called Quad alliance between India, Australia, Japan, and the US seem to offer meaningful confirmation of this trend (Chellaney, 2020; Kavalski 2021a). In other words, the label of the Indo-Pacific has been promoted by India not merely as a rebranding exercise, but also as part of its strategic discourse that it has emerged as a great power in world politics.

5. India's discursive framework of great power

The second innovation in the understanding and ranking of countries has involved a re-definition of great power to make it more applicable to India’s circumstances. Conventional classifications look at metrics such as military expenditure, the size of populations and economy etc. According to these metrics, India easily qualifies either as a great power or as an emerging great power. At a whopping \$71 billion, the country has the third highest military expenditure in the world following that of the USA and China and well above Russia (SIPRI, n.d.). Also, with a population of over 1.3 billion people, more than 50 percent of whom are under 25 years old, India is projected to become the most populous country in the world by 2024 (United Nations, n.d.). And if this data was not impressive enough, the country’s economy has maintained an average growth rate at 6.5 percent per year since 1990 achieving a GDP (PPP) of close to \$11 billion in 2019, which makes it the world’s third largest economy (again following the USA and China) and well above established major economies such as Japan and Germany (Ogden, 2019). In the context of these figures, it is not surprising that India ranks on fourth place in the Asia Power Index (Kavalski 2018b; Lowy Institute, n.d.).

Yet, it is the very same data that reveals the awkwardness of India’s claim to global power status. For instance, in terms of military expenditure, one of the main achievements has been the acquisition of India’s first (and so far, only) operation aircraft carrier *INS Vikramaditya* in 2009. Still, as a recent report indicated,

the Indian Navy not only lacks the forward-projection (i.e. “blue water”) capabilities, but also, by the time these are developed, *INS Vikramaditya* will be obsolete (Philip, 2020; Zolkos and Kavalski, 2008). In this setting many Indian commentators have promulgated the paradoxical opinion that “real ‘blue-water’ status is a matter of geopolitical outlook, rather than hard facts” (Singh, 2015; Kavalski 2009b). Yet, the lack of blue-water capacity severely undercuts both India’s Indo-Pacific credentials and much vaunted nuclear program (as its second strike capabilities are closely tied to the availability of naval resources such as submarines and aircraft carriers). While the country tested its first nuclear device in 1974, the nuclear program was ramped up only after the 1998 Pokhran-II nuclear tests. Currently, India possesses 150 nuclear warheads, which puts it behind Pakistan’s 160 and China’s 320 nuclear weapons (Gurung, 2020). At the same time, India “possesses fewer attack helicopters, transporters, tankers, and AEWG aircraft than any one of the permanent five members of the UN Security Council, and in many cases fewer than other Indo-Pacific powers like Australia, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan” (Joshi, 2015, p. 120; Zolkos and Kavalski, 2016).

In terms of its human capital, despite the impressive population size, nearly 30 percent of Indians are illiterate, with the illiteracy figure for girls and women at nearly 40 percent (Government of India, 2011; Kavalski, 2012c). Such data is compounded by the realization that close to 25 percent of India’s population are living in poverty and that since the end of the Cold War India has developed as one of the most unequal societies in the world (WID.world, n.d.; Kavalski 2014b). Likewise, in terms of the economic indicators, India’s GDP per capita of \$1,706 puts it below countries such as Lao (\$2,339) and Nigeria (\$3,570) and far behind its continental rival China (\$7,993).

In this setting, most Indian analysts have propagated an idiosyncratic framing of India’s great power – one, which pivots on the unresolved tension between two strategic visions: on the one hand, its willingness to play an active role on the global stage; and, on the other, its preoccupation with the defense of its territorial integrity (Mohan, 2004, p. 208; Kavalski and Cho, 2018). Thus, while the logic of the former perspective advocates an assertive foreign policy stance, the latter is more apprehensive about New Delhi’s international agency, owing to the perceived diversion of attention (and resources) from the protection of India’s volatile borders and domestic social order. In his perceptive review of the literature on great power in India, Manjeet S. Pardesi (2015) uncovers a novel definition of the term. Such Indian account of great power asserts that in order to qualify as one, a country does not require “global’ capabilities”, but that it must be able to transcend its home region to affect the geopolitics of at least one other world region” (Ibid.; see also Kavalski, 2011a).

According to this account, it is logical that this region should be adjacent to the home region of the country pursuing a great power status. While this claim might have some empirical validity, it is not necessarily self-evident. The point

however is that great power is not a “systemic position”, but one that reflects “the individual circumstances of different regions” (Lake and Morgan, 1997, p. 7; Kavalski, 2011b). In this respect, many Indian observers have expressed their frustration that “India cannot wait until the rest of the world comes to *its way of seeing things* or at least acknowledges India’s right to *do things its own way*”. The clear implication is that “in *a more perfect world*, New Delhi’s importance would be self-evident because in such a world each great power would act responsibly to keep order and promote justice in *its part of the world*” (Singh, 2006, pp. 50–52, emphasis added; Kavalski and Cho, 2015). In other words, the strategic combination of such aspirational status “would enable India to influence international rule-making in its favour and prevent infringements on its right to make sovereign decisions in its national interest” (Lal, 2006, p. 103; Kavalski, 2014).

Drawing on similar strategic sentiments, Pardesi (2015, p. 12) goes on to uncover three formal criteria for the classification of states as great powers: (i) the state must have either a security or an economic interest in a region outside of its home region; (ii) the state must have the material capabilities to backstop such aspirations; and (iii) the state should be recognized as a great power in the region outside of its home region both by the other great powers and the other relevant actors in that region. Deploying these criteria, Pardesi outlines that India’s strategic footprint extends both over South Asia and Southeast Asia – the twin axles of the Indo-Pacific littoral space. Thus, since New Delhi has projected its national interests beyond its home region validates the claim that “India has already emerged as a great power” – and, therefore, should no longer be treated as a middle power (Pardesi, 2015, p. 23; Kavalski, 2010c).

In this sense, New Delhi’s narrative aspirations for “greatness” in the Indo-Pacific reflect the refusal to acknowledge the “hard facts” of the country’s inadequacies. Yet, the lack of consensus on what such great power status might entail and how it can be achieved has spilled into divisive “history wars” about the nature of Indianness. Gradually, the discussion of the country’s great power has morphed into a project for the homogenization and “nationalization” of the country’s international identity along very narrow and exclusionary religious and ethnic lines (Kavalski, 2010d; Pan and Kavalski, 2022). Hence, the response to the question about what India’s great power is has become associated with the subscription to a particular (increasingly, Hindu) vision of what India is and how it should develop.

6. Conclusion

It seems that the Indo-Pacific label has been deployed by India to validate its great power aspirations. Such operationalization of strategic region-building acknowledges that the positioning of any international actor emerges as a *power in context* – it is not entirely an intrinsic property of an actor but depends on

the kind of interactions it has in specific (temporal and spatial) contexts. This condition is one of the key sources of the awkwardness of India's great power (Kavalski, 2019a). It reflects simultaneously (i) the contested nature of India's standing – jostling between an aspiring great power, a regional South Asian hegemon, and a begrudging middle power; and (ii) the neglect of Indian aspirations (and self-perception) of great civilizational status. As such, the case of India confirms the assumption articulated in the introduction to this volume that it is the complex interactions between contestation and neglect that frames the awkward status of power on the world stage.

Thus, the status of power is not necessarily only about affecting the perceptions of other actors (which offers a rather limited scope of action), but mostly about framing the responses of those other actors. Yet, Indian policymakers have so far failed to develop the social dimensions of their country's power. In other words, the discourse and practices of power are not about the relative capabilities of actors (as scripted by the narratives of “the struggle for power”), but about the kind of relationships they engender in their interactions (in the context of a “nascent struggle for recognition”) (Kavalski, 2016b). In this respect, the patterns of international anarchy seem to be animated by the very status insecurity of international actors. Such insecurity reveals the uncertainty associated with the “constitutive vulnerability” of states in global life – the “unpredictable responses and reactions of others to their power” (Markell, 2003, p. 36; Kavalski, 2002). In other words, recognition becomes the permissive context for an actor's exercise of power.

India has so far failed to develop meaningful means to gain such recognition for its power aspirations. Such recognition tends to be granted when the power-wielding actors deliver deliberate and credible commitments to the intended target (Pan and Kavalski, 2018). Owing to India's idiosyncratic understanding of power and its historical and normative framing, the country's power remains awkwardly placed on the world stage. In this respect, the case of India indicates that the recognition of an actor as a great power rests on the ability to show contextual consideration for the effects of its actions on others. Thus, anarchy is not just “what states make of it”, but what reactions they engender in their struggle for recognition. India seems still quite far from reckoning that the recognition (and legitimacy) of great power is embedded in the practices through which it projects its social purpose in global life. In this regard, the example of the awkwardness of India's great power calls for further exploration into the ways in which such recognition is granted. Therefore rather than an exception, awkward powerdom might be the defining feature of contemporary global life. As such, it is the meaningful attention to the awkwardness of power that will likely frame the debate on the meaning and practices of world politics.

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