Not a Chinese Century, An Indo-American One
By Daniel Twining

China’s three decades of explosive growth and increasing influence on the global stage have often led to talk of the country dominating the 21st century. But Daniel Twining, an Asia specialist at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, argues that democratic values and strategic interests shared by India and the US could upend this expectation as the two countries pull closer together.

THE STRATEGIC ALIENATION of India from the United States was one of the great anomalies of the Cold War. The rapprochement of the world’s biggest democracies from 2000 to the present is one of the key dividends of the new world order that emerged after the end of US-Soviet rivalry and the dawning of the modern era of globalization. India, which will soon have the world’s third-largest economy and its largest population, is increasingly central to the future of the global order; the US National Intelligence Council has called it the decisive “swing state” in the international system. India’s posture is thus central to the long-term position of the US and other democracies.

Yet India was once marginalized from the world order. From independence in 1947 through the end of the Cold War, structural constraints imposed by the US-Soviet global rivalry, India’s pursuit of non-alignment and internal development and security challenges made it difficult for a desperately poor country with an economy growing at only 1-2 percent annually to play a wider international role. India is only now making an impact on world politics after effectively sitting on (or being relegated to) the sidelines. India’s awakening could change the world as profoundly as has the rise of China, and for the better.

FROM LOW PROFILE TO PLAYER
India’s low international profile during the second half of the 20th century was in fact an historical anomaly: during the British colonial period, the Raj was the strategic keystone of a global empire. Under the British Empire, Indian armies served in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and China. Indian wealth — India’s economy was the world’s second largest, after only China’s, until the early 19th century — underwrote Britain’s imperial ambitions and catalyzed British industry in ways that ultimately made it possible for a small island nation to stand down a more powerful Germany in two world wars. Indeed, in the early 1940s, Prime Minister Winston Churchill was convinced that Britain could keep up the fight against the Axis powers even if German forces occupied England — thanks to the manpower, materiel and geopolitical reach of its Indian empire.

India helped the Allies win the Second World War, although the ideals of freedom for which they fought energized the Indian independence struggle. From 1947, independent India pursued its own course of Soviet-style economic centralization at home and non-alignment abroad, which later morphed into a tacit alliance with the Soviet Union as Washington tied up with Indian adversaries Pakistan (from 1954) and China (from 1971). As a result of this, New Delhi pursued foreign policies that isolated it from the world’s developed democracies.

India was further alienated by Western support for a global order that appeared to discriminate against it. Unlike China, India was excluded from membership in the United Nations Security Council. Because China tested nuclear weapons before the international non-proliferation regime took effect while India did not, China’s nuclear arsenal was legitimized, and its right to nuclear weapons and trade affirmed by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). By contrast, India’s later nuclear tests rendered it a “rogue state” under international law, subjecting it to sanctions on technology trade that undercut its security and limited its economic prospects.

China’s supply of advanced nuclear and missile components to Pakistan beginning in the 1980s contravened Beijing’s NPT obligations but the West looked the other way, thus reinforcing Indian perceptions of the great powers’ hypocrisy and hostility to India’s legitimate security requirements. This sentiment was crystallized when US President Bill Clinton and Chinese President Jiang Zemin, meeting in Beijing, jointly condemned India’s 1998 nuclear weapons tests and called for tough international sanctions. That India’s leaders justified the tests with reference to the growing threat they perceived from China, which Clinton’s 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review had identified as a potential peer competitor to the US, only intensified the irony of the American position.

REDRAWING AMERICAN POLICY
Gee US deriving from Washington’s status as the ringleader of what Indians called an international “technology apartheid” designed to keep India down formed the legacy that both countries began working together to overturn a decade ago. New hopes for the relationship were symbolized by former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s declaration that India and America were “natural allies,” a formulation embraced by Clinton in 2000 when he became the first American head of state to visit India since Jimmy Carter. In fact, India’s 1998 nuclear tests awakened Washington to the potential of Indian power, a converging threat assessment of China’s growing strength, and the possibilities for Indo-American cooperation to shape a balance of power that might restrain it.

President George W. Bush assumed office with a view of India as a future world power, a front-line Asian balancer and a pluralistic democracy with which America should naturally cooperate in world affairs. But New Delhi’s exclusion from an international nuclear order that had been constructed by Washington and its allies to contain India stood in the way of normal relations.
An Indian boy in Bangalore celebrates Barack Obama's inauguration in January 2009 as the new president of India's democratic world ... After too long a period of estrangement, India and the United States have agreed to take a new course in their relationship.7 By enacting the nuclear deal, they argued, India would finally assume its seat at the top table of world politics — and for the future of the world. 7 By enacting the nuclear deal, they argued, India would finally assume its seat at the top table of world politics — and for the future of the world.

The world has benefited from the example of India’s democracy, and now the world needs India’s leadership in freedom’s cause. As a global power, India has an historic duty to support democracy around the world... As the world’s young democracies take shape, India offers a compelling example of how to preserve a country’s unique culture and history while guaranteeing the universal freedoms that are the foundation of genuine democracies... India’s leadership is needed in a world that is hungry for freedom.

From George W. Bush’s address to the Indian parliament, March 3:

People in both our countries have asked: What’s next? How can we build on this progress and realize the full potential of our partnership? That’s what I want to address today — the future that the United States seeks in an interconnected world, and why I believe that India is indispensable to this vision; how we can forge a truly global partnership, not just in one or two areas, but across many; not just for our mutual benefits, but for the benefit of the world.

I stand before you today because I am convinced that the interests of the United States — and the interests we share with India — are best advanced in partnership. I believe that.

Hence the Bush administration’s revolutionary campaign from 2005 to 2008 to end four decades of Western policy and integrate India into the international nuclear club, with its ensuing rights and responsibilities. India’s normalization as a nuclear power gave it access to the international trade in civilian nuclear components. It promised to substantially boost India’s energy production in ways that would fuel long-term economic development. It also made possible dramatically expanded high-tech trade and cooperation with the US.

Although often difficult to work with, India proved itself worthy of this sea change in its relations with America and the world. To overcome parliamentary opposition to the nuclear deal, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh submitted his government to a high-stakes confidence vote — the first time an Indian government had put its survival on the line over a question of foreign policy, no less involving a strategic partnership of a relationship with New Delhi that had proved itself worthy of this sea change in its relations with America and the world. To overcome parliamentary opposition to the nuclear deal, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh submitted his government to a high-stakes confidence vote — the first time an Indian government had put its survival on the line over a question of foreign policy, no less involving a strategic partnership...7 By enacting the nuclear deal, they argued, India would finally assume its seat at the top table of world politics — and for the benefit of the world.

After a difficult first year and a half in office, President Barack Obama ultimately followed in the footsteps of Presidents Clinton and Bush in embracing India as an indispensable American partner in an emerging multipolar world. During his November 2010 trip to New Delhi, Obama put to bed a notion that had held sway earlier in his administration that a US-China “G-2” could jointly manage Asia and the world; he rejected a re-phenomenon of Indo-Pakistani relations that many misguided had urged on him; and he took ownership of a relationship with New Delhi that had been on the rocks since he took office.

Obama’s vision of a transformative partnership with India — to manage global diplomatic and security challenges, enhance prosperity in both countries and promote good governance in Asia and beyond — was bracing. It helped mitigate concerns in Washington that Obama does not care about the balance of power in Asia. His administration clearly does — thanks largely to China’s new assertiveness in relation to the US and its friends in Asia. Obama’s passage to India also underlined a historic, bipartisan American belief that democracies make the best allies in world affairs.

In New Delhi, Obama made a strong case for the exceptionalism of Indo-US ties — and for a far-reaching partnership that would help chart the course of the 21st century: “Now, India is not the only emerging power in the world. But the relationship between our countries is unique ... We are two great republics dedicated to the liberty and justice and equality of all people. And we are two free-market economies where people have the freedom to pursue ideas and innovation that can change the world. And that’s why I believe that India and America are indispensable partners in meeting the challenges of our time.”8

This statement made Obama the third successive US president to express America’s core interest in India’s rise and success as a future democratic superpower.

SURPASSING CHINA

What is the American interest in India’s ascendance? There are several answers. With a growing middle class already the size of the entire US population, India will likely become the single most important overseas market for American goods, services and foreign investment over the long term, as its population and trend rate of economic growth surpass those of China. This effect will be reinforced by India’s “demographic divi-
Forget the hardening of a new global ‘Beijing consensus’ of authoritarian development that puts the community of democracies on the defensive.

If the US can help India shape the kind of future it envisions, the emerging international order will be one in which America and its friends can thrive and prosper.

The US military now exercises more with India than with the armed forces of any other country, and India has procured US naval vessels, transport aircraft, and other platforms with growing enthusiasm. This process should reach a new zenith if New Delhi decides to buy American fifth-generation multi-role combat aircraft, with the effect of integrating air force training, doctrine and procurement along the lines that have already occurred between the US and Indian navies.

Beyond expanded bilateral training and military equipment, the next stage in rapidly growing defense ties is to broaden Indo-US security cooperation with other strategic partners of the two countries, including Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Australia, Thailand, Singapore and NATO. Perhaps most important in the long term is deepening US-Japan-India trilateral cooperation, given the countries’ vast combined capabilities, technological complementarities and shared concern for freedom of the Indo-Pacific maritime commons. In 2011, Washington, Tokyo and New Delhi will launch a high-level trilateral security dialogue that could evolve into a critical bulwark of strategic stability in Asia.

A fourth area for collaboration is the promotion of good governance abroad. Indian leaders are beginning to understand that democracy within states is a source of security among states.

This strategic calculus has led New Delhi to invest heavily in building the institutions of good governance in Afghanistan, as well as to help forge democratic outcomes to intractable civil conflicts in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. The US and India have cooperated to assist transitional democracies through the United Nations Democracy Fund, the Partnership for Democratic Governance, the Asia-Pacific Democracy Partnership and other multilateral activities. Washington and New Delhi may also find common cause in working together — or independently toward similar ends — to lay the foundations for democratic consolidation in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa following the historic Arab awakening of 2011.

India and the US may find that cooperation to improve human rights and the rule of law in third countries becomes an increasingly important pillar of bilateral relations, building on their agreement in the 2010 Obama-Singh summit to jointly promote open government in countries that ask for the assistance of the world’s most important developed and developing democracies. The instinct would reinforce a liberal international order that was shaped in important ways by the US in a previous era and that, looking ahead, should have a strong champion in a rising India. Forget the Chinese century: if both countries play their cards right, an Indo-American century awaits.

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