

INDIA'S 'MAJOR POWER SYNDROME': INTERPLAY OF THE US AND CHINA FACTOR

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Abstract

The world order is in a constant mode of transformation. There is an aura of fading unilateralism and 'rise of the Rest' viz-a-viz the West in the global setting. Consequently, this shift in power augurs well to the rise of the 'Asian century', hinging majorly on states like India and China. In this regard, pronounced as the largest democracy and rapidly developing country, India has a pressing urge to act 'powerful'. It desires to advance its interface with the world as a 'major' power, in the wake of declining uni-polarity. On the other hand, it seeks to boost its power projection in considerable sectors of the global economic and military indicators. Nonetheless, in these emerging trends, the United States is looking towards a proxy role of India in the region and in that perspective is also seeking to promote India as its 'face'. On the other hand, China as an emerging economic giant is steadily growing and posing threat to the status quo as desired by the Americans. In this scenario, Pakistan, as a neighbour to both India and China and ally to the US, cannot remain in isolation from the emerging trends and its repercussions. This setting indeed has the tendency to fuel an aura of 'strategic competition' amongst these states. In addition, it has also paved way for new power structures and global rebalancing of potential participants. Nonetheless, this paper analyzes as to whether India has eventually achieved status of a 'major' power, capable of influencing the international political arena or otherwise. The central argument rests on the notion: is India a major power or is it a major power in the making? And more importantly, will it be able to achieve this status in the realm of China and US global competition? And finally, how is Pakistan likely to be effected by these aspirations?

Key Words: Major power, strategic competition, regional power structure.

Prelude

Since time immemorial, States have strived to achieve a significant position in the international arena. Similarly, it has been a long-standing desire of the Indian élite to attain the status of a 'major power' in the international system. In fact, this 'major power syndrome' has been pronounced in the policies of every government in office, despite variations of intensity in its ambitions, application of the means to achieve it, and in the willingness to take hardline positions.¹ The country's nuclear program, development in science and technology, space program, emphasis on economic development, desire to emerge as a significant maritime force; all are variables that confirm this syndrome.

Theoretically, in the realm words of Kenneth Waltz, such behaviour of states depicts the desire to rather exercise power to the extent that one affects the others more than they are affected by themselves.² Furthermore, the desire of such nature which is rooted at the domestic level is taken within the ambit of neo-classical realist approach; as, it accepts the domestic level role of the power elite of a state to interpret dictate of the international system in order to articulate the response of a state.

An impetus for the Indian ambitions is provided by the sheer demographic factor, democratic process and institutional continuity and economic growth. It has a desire not only to attain a particular status in the international arena but also be able to influence the international political system for its own interests; a classic benefit obscured by genuine major powers. It may not like to bandwagon with the major powers for eternity and would like to rather join them in the queue. However, it is a fact that, established powers do not like the rise of other powers that would in turn provide challenge to their power circle. In recent history, the confrontation between the US and China is a readily available example. While this is true, conversely, if rising powers rather augment their power position in the international system instead of challenging the position of the already

accomplished ones, they indeed have a chance. India would probably like to work on the lines of the latter argument.

Depicting itself as ‘incredible India’, the country is marred with immense internal issues. There is a large population which falls below the poverty line, increased rural distress, frustrated farmers who were victims of bankruptcy, malnutrition both chronic and endemic, ill treatment with minorities, host to the most significant forms of insurgency-Maoists/Naxalite, and also mass developmental dislocations. Furthermore, its notion of secularism runs contrary to the ethnic and religious conflicts, mass killings and riots.³ In other words, it is an India with a very weak governance system with oppressive manifestations.⁴

However, despite the grim picture, strategic and economic indicators as depicted by India in the international arena, presses on India’s desire to act global. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to address various questions regarding India’s ‘major power syndrome’: can India be actually declared as a ‘major’ power? Or looking at its current power position, can India eventually actualize its dream of being recognized as a ‘major power’? A good deal of response would rest upon the graph of India’s attainment in the ‘Asian Century’ and its capacity to play cards well in relation to mounting rivalry between the US and China. Nonetheless, discussion in the paper has been majorly carried out from the Pakistani perspective, however, as it is also definitional and involves various factors, the scope of the arguments may not be seen in isolation from how the international community, particularly the US and China, think about India.

India’s Domestic Scenario

India continues to face innumerable challenges expressed in terms of mobilizing the masses to achieve significant domestic objectives. India, with 1,270,272,105 (1.27 billion) people is the second most populous country in the world,⁵ The rate of population growth has slowed considerably in recent years, although it is still rapidly growing as compared to its

neighbor China.⁶ However, as population increases, so does the number of heads to feed increase. Over the years, India has suffered from unprecedented issues due to population increase and simultaneous inability of the government to provide an even distribution of wealth in the country; hence, bringing about numerous human security challenges.

Population increase resulted in rapid urbanization. The United Nations predicted India's urban population to be around 40% in the year 2030.⁷ According to preliminary reports from the 2011 Census, India now has 53 cities with over one million inhabitants, roughly as many as the United States. During past decade, 91 million were added to the urban population.⁸ In absolute terms no country in the world has ever witnessed such massive urbanization, with the exception of China. If traditional models hold, India is on the verge of an accelerated phase of urbanization and the pace will be even more rapid in years ahead.⁹(The most urbanized states are in India's southern half: Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and, increasingly, Andhra Pradesh). The fig below indicates the average rate of urbanization in comparison with rural areas till the year 2011.

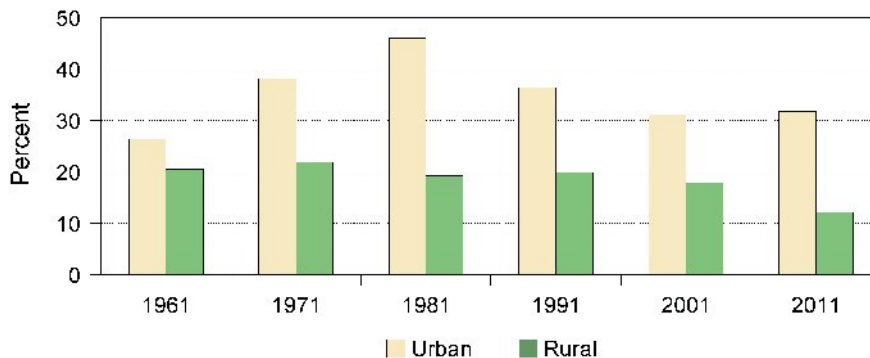


Fig. 1: India's average decadal urban and rural population growth rates for the decades ending 1961–2011 (percentage growth of urban and rural populations). *Source:* Government of India (2011).

Simultaneously, the urbanization trend carried with itself a huge drawback. Urbanization in India was not necessarily consistent with the industrialization process. This resulted in

increased numbers of slums in urban areas and a large population either being unemployed or employed in sectors which do not provide any financial benefits after retirement.¹⁰ Furthermore, no Indian city is in the top 25 on GDP or GDP per capita.¹¹ On the other hand, it also puts forward the tragedy of low productivity from agriculture, where 52 % of the agricultural labor force only provides 17 % of the country's GDP.¹² Hence, a majority of India's rural population faces intense food price inflation of up to 17%.¹³ How India will be able to merge millions of peasants in a desired modern economy is the biggest challenge India is likely to face shortly in near future.

Furthermore, where urbanization has increased the quantity of labor available in India, it will take a lot of effort to utilize this demographic dividend at its best. One challenge is posed in the sector of education. The most urbanized areas provide quality education to the well-off only, creating a supply-demand mismatch in the working class. Simultaneously, there is lesser utilization of the labor force available by the private sector and shortage of adequately skilled labor in other sectors. According to a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Economic Survey of India, the key to achieving faster economic growth is to produce adequate regular employment in addition to self-employment and casual employment. The report suggests that although regular employment has reached a certain level, but the dilemma is that it represents only 15% of the entire employment sector, one of the less productive endeavors.¹⁴

On the other hand, there has been a considerable amount of infrastructure building in India. This includes roads, ports, civil aviation, and telecommunication. However, this development was not corroborated by improvement in the energy sector, railways and irrigation. Hence, it continues to lag behind in social development i.e. education and healthcare and portrays a sorry picture in treatment to minorities. Speaking of minorities, the magnitude and scale of communal violence in the 2002 Gujrat riots and the terribly low number

of fervors expresses a persuasive witness to the fact that minorities in India have always been mishandled.¹⁵ As per the definition given in the UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment for the Crimes of Genocide, India is the only democracy in world which has treated its minorities to not one but four genocide killings in the time span of 18 years. Delhi (84), Bhagalpur (87), Bombay (92), Gujarat (02).¹⁶

Social inequalities had also paved way for fueling one of the most significant insurgencies in South Asia- the Maoists. It affected a vast area throughout eastern and central India, with over 20,000 insurgents.¹⁷ The government declares it to be the most significant internal security threat to the country. The motivation behind such a movement is none other than social deprivation, economic disparity and extreme poverty in these areas.

Nonetheless, India's fragile domestic condition poses challenge to the country's dream of being a 'major' power. However, despite disparities in its internal situation and the image it projects to the outside world, what is the basis of India's aspirations to attain a major power status? Response to such a question lies in understanding the national attributes of the country of which the elite seem cognizant.

Current setting and Strategic Position

At the global footing, India is acknowledged as a rising power by various notions; chief among these being: its current geopolitical status, maintenance of hegemony in the South Asian region and its economic and military perceptions. The table overleaf indicates its projected power potential in the economic and military domains:

Economic		Military	
GDP	US \$ 1.877 Trillion	Defence Budget	US \$ 36.3 billion

Annual GDP Growth	5.5 percent	Weapon Purchases	US \$ 14.93 billion
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Table 1. *the figures indicate India's projected power potential for the year 2014 and beyond.

Source:

<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS>

There is a consistent perception among the Indian elite that the country has the world's most enduring and largest civilization history, which provides an impetus for acquiring a significant leadership role in the world. On the other hand, the Indians also believe that domestically, there will be a time that the issues will be catered for and India will boost its status as the largest and most developed democracy in the world. This desire does not merely rest upon achieving a particular status or protecting the Indian prestige in the international arena. The underlying factors envisage recognition of India's geo-strategic location viz-a-viz South East Asia and a headway of the Indian Ocean.

However, it will be safe to assume at this point that India as a country smacks off opportunism in view of translating its material capabilities in to an increased ability to influence the international world order. In this regard, India's both strengths and weaknesses need to be distinguished based on its traditional foreign policy, and how it is moving on short and long term basis. Pertinent questions arise from the Indian psyche and its posture in the international arena: as, whether India is a power maximizer or a security maximizer? Is it able to do politics through diplomacy? And what is the role of the Indian eagerness and posture towards its economic integration in the international arena?

Consequently, India purses regional strategic objectives with a global agenda. In other words, it desires to maintain pre-eminence in the South Asian region and concurrently uplift its international profile. This it intends to achieve by exploiting its linkages through the Indian Ocean region and

the South China Sea by trade, investments, diplomacy and strategic partnerships. India is host to various multilateral dialogue processes in the respective maritime domains including the biennial MILAN gatherings with countries namely: Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Srilanka and Singapore. This resulted in the formation of an Indian Ocean Naval Symposium – IONS, in which India is the lead organizer.¹⁸ Furthermore, it has actively participated in the anti-piracy naval initiatives taken up by major powers in the waters of Somalia and its off shoots. Particularly, India is focusing on boosting its naval strength by power projection and strategic deployments in the Indian Ocean.

In terms of bilateral trade through the IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association), India's external trade rose to more than eight-fold in the last few years from US \$ 19 billion to US \$ 156.3 billion with India's exports to the region amounting to US\$ 69 billion, and India's imports from the region aggregating US\$ 87.3 billion. India is the third largest contributor to intra-IORA exports, with a 13.4 percent share in intra-exports and the largest contributor to intra-imports, which stood at 17.8 percent of total intra-IORA imports in 2010. India contributed 15.6 percent of total intra-IORA trade in 2010. India's trade balance with the region started experiencing a deficit from 2006 onwards and stood at US\$ 18.4 billion.¹⁹

On the other hand, Indian expeditions are also disturbing the regional security environment. This is in tandem with the fading uni-polar order and peaceful rise of China; where the US views India's potential not only as a large country but also a neutralizer to the growth of China. Similarly, Pakistan as a traditional rival to India, strategically aligns with the Chinese against the evolving situation in the region. Afghanistan imbroglio also provides a playground for these states to ascertain their status in the regional order. Nonetheless, it is the rise of strategic alliances and traditional differences simultaneously.

Although India's powers status is yet to be recognized by other major powers, there are various gauges suggesting it to be a 'power' in the making. The indicators include, the country's ranking as the world's second largest population, fourth largest economy, eighth largest industrial economy, image of 'largest democracy' World's largest pool of scientists and engineers after the US, and Middle class double the size of that of Japan. The country projects the GDP growth rate of 5 to 7 percent, putting it behind only the US and China and ahead of Japan and Germany.

Notwithstanding the above, India has been less integrated into the world system. It somehow depicts the notion of a 'status inconsistent' nation. In saying so, India's uncertain economic growth, socio-political heterogeneity, water and energy crisis, and intra-regional conflicts are the key factors in determining this inconsistency. On the other hand, its eagerness to reach a certain level of attainment has rather turned to be counterproductive for the country's ultimate goal. This is evident in its role as viewed by the United States in acting as a 'proxy' in the region. This comes in wake of the fading uni-polar order and rise of the Asian century, primarily due to the consistent economic rise of China. An analysis of this dimension is imperative to understand the dynamics of this role.

Posture towards China

China will, for the most projected future, stay a major foreign policy and security challenge for India. It is one major power which encroaches directly on India's geopolitical breathing space. May it be the well known border disagreements and skirmishes across the Line of Actual Control-LoAC or the relationship with the United States. The countries have visibly shown inconsistent political relations over the years in the context of evolving regional and global dynamics. Their relationship may be viewed as a mix bag of both interdependence and rivalry. However, from the Chinese perspective, India may not be a threat in itself, but rather a 'swing state' which manages relations with other States in

order to pressurize China. May it be the Indian posture towards China rests upon the notion of forming alliances and network of relations with other major power specifically the US in order to curb Chinese pressure but avoiding to set off threat perceptions in the Chinese camp.

India-China economic relations also present a complex and somewhat ambiguous picture. Bilateral trade is rising rapidly, with \$ 70.59 billion in the recent year, but asymmetrically, with a growing trade surplus in favour of China.²⁰ So where China's trade with South Asian nations touched a whopping US \$ 100 billion, the trade deficit between India and China neared \$ 9 billion in the last few years,²¹ and it may grow larger. For a start, the little manufacturing market of India tends to be quite high-end. As Chinese firms shift to more complex forms of production, the Indian firms are way behind and catching up with them. For example, metal cores of transformers for power grids were once made abundantly in India. However, China is the third largest consumer of the Indian transformer market and is giving locals a tough time.²² Nonetheless, Chinese perceptions about India may generally be of an anti-China camp in the containment syndrome of the US but rather than adopting aggressive policies, China has started to penetrate the Indian market, particularly that of infrastructure.

In the maritime domain, China has emerged as an important player in the Indian Ocean Region. This has not only sent shivers down the spine of the US but also raised concerns amongst the Indians, particularly pertaining to the country's goal of becoming a major naval power and flexing its muscles in the South China Sea. It is a well-known fact that China's economy is sea based. It has to heavily depend upon its linkages across major Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) in order to manage trade and imports of oil. Hence, China has improved its strategic relations across the Indian Ocean region through investments and trade in order to maximize its goals.

India on the other hand, seeks to exploit its geographical location and curb the Chinese influence. It imports about 70 percent of its oil through the Indian Ocean Region to its various ports.²³ As a consequence, it has been enhancing its strategic influence through the use of soft power, by becoming a major foreign investor in regional mining, oil, gas, and infrastructure projects. In addition, India has aggressively expanded its naval presence, reportedly to include the establishment of listening posts in the Seychelles, Madagascar and Mauritius; in late 2009, it successfully co-opted the Maldives as part of its southern naval command. China is often accused of engaging in a String of Pearls strategy to surround India. Judging by India's naval build-up, though, the truth could actually be quite the opposite.²⁴

Despite the disparities, both the countries have not 'ditched' each other. Trade is a tool for interdependence between the two countries. On the political side, their posture towards each other is carefully nuanced and constantly calibrated in response to changing global and regional developments. China is not closing all the options, and as a matter of fact, India may not also like to indulge into a Cold War with a rising economic power just in its neighborhood. India's role as a proxy in the containment syndrome of China is, however, a debatable issue. Can India afford to rather act as a 'face' of the US in order to curb Chinese influence and not benefit from the Chinese rise and simultaneously also reach a major power status?

Posture towards US

It is a popular belief amongst the Americans that by boosting India's power status, China's rise would be balanced off incrementally. A strategic triangle exists when three major powers are important to each other and each fears alignment of the other two against itself and takes measures to counter any such alignment. The United States' National Intelligence Council and the investment banking and securities firm Goldman Sachs predict that, by 2040, the world's largest economies will be China, the United States, India, and

Japan—in that order. Only political disintegration or prolonged economic stagnation or war would be their undoing.²⁵ It would be rather interesting to monitor how the US would like to deal with the economic rise of China. As soon as China emerged on the global arena as an economic giant, the US got signals of envy and rivalry. In order to deal with it, the US thought of rather balancing it off with boosting regional competition in the face of India. India as a matter of fact was also not easy with a Sino-centric region and seemed to be ready to take up this role.

In this regard, India was given a major position in the 'rebalancing' of the US Asia Pivot strategy as ascertained in the year 2012. So the United States started focusing on Pivot Asia but entailed the desire of rather using a proxy, by building India as a regional stand. Hence, US is strengthening its alliance with India by deepening economic, military, political and institutional ties. In doing so, the US desires to make sure that China does not rise in a vacuum. It is paving the way for India in various forums including the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation –APEC, ²⁶which would benefit India's economy to develop rapidly. On the other hand, the US along with India initiated strategic deployments in the Asian region and primarily naval deployments in the Asia Pacific in order to maintain physical presence in these waters. US is also paving way for India's role in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which China opposed vehemently. ²⁷

Concurrently, the New Silk Route concept is yet another dimension which strengthens the Indo-US partnership. The US intends to provide linkages through this route from Calcutta to the Istanbul and thus provide India a dominant role. US in this regard, is also promoting India's east-west connections through Myanmar, Thailand and on to Vietnam, to balance China's north-south connections to South-East Asia.²⁸

Under the strategic umbrella of the US-China relationship, a natural observation is that there is a danger, considering the US getting close with India while China and Pakistan

maintaining their historic relationship, that a two-bloc scenario is emerging i.e the US- India bloc and the China – Pakistan bloc. On the other hand when we see the Pakistan-US relations, they depict a continuous deterioration over the past few years. This is feared despite the strategic competition runs in parallel with economic integration amongst these States. Hence, supposing that a very difficult and ruptured Pak-US relationship emerges, within this four- way relationship context, and the crisis continue to mount, turning into truly hostile and conflictual relationship, this would cause grave concerns within the US and China relationship too, using North Korea analogy.

Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan is bound to be affected by the Indian aspirations of gaining a major power status. This owes not only to the traditional rivalry between the two nuclearized neighbors, and to the major unresolved issues i.e. Kashmir, Sir Creek, and Siachin, but also to the strategic camps both of these states ought to choose in the realm of their competition. India has geared its cooperation with the US in significant sectors of defence, economy and strategy.²⁹ Conversely, Pakistan is enhancing its historic ties with China in order to exploit the strategic benefits of its geo-political disposition. The imperative question is to understand whether this interplay has tendency to change the strategic balance of the region.

Amidst the ‘Global War on terror’, Pak- US relations have remained quite uncertain. Pakistan has lost more than 50,000 lives in the war against terrorism which came in wake of the Pakistan’s ally status with the US.³⁰ While dealing with this scenario, Pakistan has also been cautious about its eastern borders where tensions have risen with India on numerous occasions. In this regard, India’s aspirations to rise as a major power and particularly with the cooperation of the US have made Pakistan quite uncomfortable. As part of this emerging relationship the United States has subsequently held joint military operations with India, encouraging them to actively

patrol the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, and facilitation for the development of India's nuclear program.

In this milieu, Pakistan looked towards reinterpreting its strategic relationship with China. The 'higher than Himalayas and deeper than Oceans' Sino-Pak relations are expected to balance off the very aspirations of the Indo-US camp. This comes in wake of their mutuality of interests in posing India a strategic competition in every sector including the maritime domain and also dealing with irritants such as the Afghan imbroglio. China is holistically enhancing investments in Pakistan and recently boosted economic cooperation under the umbrella of 'Pak-China' economic corridor. Simultaneously, this setting also provides China a window towards dealing with the 'containment syndrome' as posed from the US.

It is then safe to believe at this point that, the current strategic paradigm of the region has tendency to disrupt the traditional power structure altogether. There is the traditional rivalry between India and Pakistan along with US-China global competition. In this scenario, India's aspirations to rise as a major power are infusing instability in the security apparatus of the region. The US not being a neighbor in the region still remains a major player in the process. Will it finally be successful in changing the power status of India?

India: A major power?

In keeping with the above discussion, a key question will be, Can India be considered as a major power? Or rather 'potential power' or 'power in the making'? There are two arguments to these questions, first in the light of what Henry Kissinger predicted that:

In the 21st century six powers will dominate the international system: US, Europe, China, Russia, Japan and India.

Second argument entails suggestion of a Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung that:

India and the European Union are on their way to a super power status. However, there is a major discrepancy found in India's accomplishments and aspirations. It remains less integrated in the international system and is overwhelmingly consumed in domestic issues. This may be the biggest hurdle in its objectives of attaining a giant leap towards a 'major power' status.

No matter, which course of argument is believed, it is pertinent to understand at this point that India's aspirations come in the wake of its history, psyche and self-image at the global level in the garb of secularism. However, internal realities of a country build external perceptions.³¹ India's vulnerable domestic economy, consistent mal-treatment with minorities, inability to settle disputes with neighbors and host to one of the most significant forms of insurgency- the Maoists; all build negative perceptions of the country. In addition, its image as it portrays to be a 'rival' or 'competitor' to China, while openly accepting the ally status of the US, all affect India's global and regional aspirations.

Hence, India is a status 'inconsistent nation' which has been a victim of 'power-politics' due to its eagerness of achieving a major power status. It is a large power in terms of population, rate of urbanization and availability of labor which is a prerequisite for achieving industrial growth. However, it will have to decide that for achieving or rather emerging as a major power, it will have to improve and neutralize its relations with its neighbors as a key factor.³² To be a major power, not only the quantitative indicators including nuclear capability, technological advancements, and military might and economic activities are imperative, on the other hand, the qualitative factors of India that would relate to acceptance of its rules in the international arena are equally important. India still has a long way to go in this regard.

Meanwhile, India remains important for the US aspirations in the Asian century. It is either related to the containment syndrome for China or benefitting from the looking East policy. US has been a hegemon in the international arena since quite a while now. In this regard, in the wake of fading uni-polar order, there is yet again rise of alliance formation, nationalism and resultant formation of new power structures. It is in this scenario, India has been given a significant role by the US. However, the US failed to assume that in doing so; it will disturb the entire power structure of the region having long term repercussions.

Conclusion

India is indeed a big power owing to its demography, democratic process and institutional continuity and economic growth. In the recent history, there has been a greater focus on the military and economic rise of India and the repercussions it carries for the entire South Asian region. India is indeed very swiftly rising as a great power if the statistics are kept in mind. However, the truth is that a steady rise depends upon how it maintains considerable stability in the domestic front, and also that how it crafts its policies towards Pakistan and China along with the US. To a certain level, this raises vagueness about the shape of the emerging international order, and India's own lack of a credible vision of its place in that environment.

Despite, the quest to secure recognition as a major power, India is incapable of establishing a power balance on its own because of its comparatively weak economic base, awkward polity, anxiety at the domestic front, and seemingly obstinate problems with weak and failing states in its immediate neighborhood. Hence, the idea is to assess the gaps whether they widening or narrowing down between the Indian ambitions, its military muscle, and the scale and quality of its economic growth.

To be recognized as a major power, India will have to inspire confidence in the region; neighborhood in particular,

as 'acquiesce' if not allegiance by others, is an essential attribute to assess its status. Concurrently, It will have to make sure a sustained effort towards a balanced growth in multiple and diverse sectors. This also includes a change in policies towards its outlook and neighbors, by adopting a non-engagement policy as China followed in the course of attaining a major power status. Nonetheless, the notion rests upon augmenting India's power status in the international arena and in doing so, India still has a long way to go in achieving a quantum jump.

Notes

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