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India/Europe: Strategies for Reciprocal Knowledge

Third Thematic Session: The Political Debate

COPING WITH HEGEMONY: IS THERE AN INDIAN WAY?

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Why the global reality is neither Empire nor Universality

We are not living today in a moment of Empire. In order to maintain an alien rule over an extended territorial expanse over an extended period of time, empires necessarily have to create a network of physical and legal infrastructure and an overarching semblance of order. The best empires in history have emphasised not just elements of order in imperial governance but also a modicum of justice and welfare.

Since the processes of cultural domination, incorporation and exclusion are intrinsic to the project of empire, all empires are essentially fragile. Nevertheless, Empire is Utopia by another name; the best empires are missed long after they have passed away into the mists of history. The *chakravartin*, the virtuous and conquering ruler, is romanticised in classical Indian thought. In the popular imagining, the Magadha and Mughal empires are valued as moments of coherence in the fragmented and transitory logic of Indian history. Who can exclude the possibility that a future generation of Indians, in the afterglow of centennial Republican confidence in 2050, will not view the British Raj in a similar light?

The global reality today is, by these standards, far removed from Empire. But it does not approximate cosmopolitan Universality either. As human individuals, many of us may have—or at least aspire to have—both roots and wings, *pace* Ulrich Beck. Nevertheless, we all still imagine our political community in far less expansive terms: the cosmos is not yet our polis. Globalisation does create, as Jan Pieterse would put it, a subjective sense of globality. But that is not quite Universality, at least not in the classical Indian sense of *vasudhaiva katumbakam*: the world is my family.

If neither Empire nor Universality describes our existential reality, what does? Perhaps a provisional answer could be Hegemony. This is a concept worthy of further exploration.

Why Hegemony has different meanings for different people

In its original, Hellenic sense, Hegemony implies the leadership or predominance of one state. Its etymology lies in classical Greek, and was used to denote the preponderant position of Athens *vis-à-vis* the other city states of ancient Greece, as so powerfully portrayed in the Melian dialogue: ‘since you know as well as we do that right, as the world

goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.’

The second notion of Hegemony emerges from the ‘hegemonic stability theory’ of Charles Kindleberger. The central contention here is that ‘an open liberal world economy requires the existence of a hegemon or dominant power’. The hegemon must possess both the ability and the desire to establish certain norms for order and must sustain the global structure. Thus, the Kindlebergerian sense of hegemony is about the provision of global public goods such as sea lanes of communication (SLOCs): without keeping the SLOCs open, free trade in an open economy would not be possible.

The most prevalent meaning of hegemony is the one given by Antonio Gramsci, denoting the ascendancy of a class not only in the economic sphere, as emphasised in classical Marxist analysis, but also in the social, political and particularly *ideological* spheres. Thus, the Gramscian notion of hegemony is about ‘manufacturing consent’. Adapted to the field of world politics or international relations, hegemony in the Gramscian sense suggests that a dominant power deploys not just military but also and, more importantly, ideological resources to structure the choices/behaviour of competing and lesser powers in ways that favour the interests of the most powerful state, in particular its desire to remain the pre-eminent actor

To sharpen our argument, we suggest that contemporary American hegemony is based not just on hard power (military predominance) but also on structural power (provision of global public goods) and soft power (manufacturing consent). The US spends more on its military capability than the next 12 powers combined, but in the economic realm it faces significant competitors (see the accompanying charts).

Why multipolarity is desirable and multilateralism possible

Following from the above, it seems clear that multipolarity can emerge only as the relative distribution of capabilities in the interstate system shifts. Discussing the matter in conferences and seminars does no actual harm, as long as we do not delude ourselves that multipolarity is not going to magically or alchemically emerge just because we crave longingly for it—any more than ‘algebra equations can be solved by chewing gum’ (as a sage on the Internet put it some years ago). This is what makes Jacques Chirac’s miscalculation in 2002-03 such a terribly damaging one, not just for France but for all of us. In the long term, of course, another great power (or group of great powers) will rise to challenge and balance the hegemonic power. This is the lesson of history and the logic of politics, as Christopher Layne has shown so convincingly.

If multipolarity is best seen as an aspiration for the future, multilateralism is an instrument for the present. Theorists of multilateralism such as John Ruggie and James Caporaso draw our attention to the organising principles of indivisibility, reciprocity and universality. The indivisibility principle requires that there are shared expectations and interests among the actors, with the costs of system maintenance being borne equally by all: the one for all, all for one approach. For multilateralism to succeed, reciprocity must be diffused over time and issue-areas and not involve a specific *quid pro quo* in each and every situation. The

principle of universality is embedded in the belief that the more inclusive the regime, institution, order or arrangement is, the better. These are clearly very rigorous organising principles, and they do suggest that multilateralism is not, in many cases, the least costly—and hence most rational—policy instrumentality to adopt.

Multilateralism in a moment of hegemony is even more problematic. What incentives does the hegemon have to go down the multilateral route instead of resorting to unilateral action? Here, the very real concerns of multilateralism *a la carte* ('multilateralism when possible, unilateralism when necessary') come to the fore. These concerns are not easily resolved.

One way in which the hegemon can be nudged away from its unilateral impulse and inclination is to raise the costs of unilateral action. We therefore need to be open to the possibility that resistance to American hegemony will most probably not come from other states, which are essentially powerless to confront the US today, but rather from other social locations. These challenges to American hegemony will emerge in the economic and cultural realms, and will involve civil society both in its local and global manifestations.

Why Asia is not Europe

In Asia, we have not escaped the state and its aspirations and pretensions of omnipresence and omnipotence. This reality needs to be heard above the bewitching siren call of European post-modernity. The inspired experiment that has resulted in the impressive institutional, policy and even cultural architecture of the European Union is not, and perhaps never will be, the political norm for organising social life at local, national, regional or global levels. Most of the world is still in the throes of modernity: the state retains the lead role in the social drama. The project of political modernity is about the state perfecting its sovereign territoriality, which Europe alone has seemingly transcended.

Thus, in the light of the European experience, we could almost say that different continents are currently passing through very different historical moments. The logic of politics across Asia and the Americas remains the logic of modernity. Africa appears to be mimicking European post-modernity at the discursive level, but the logic of politics in Africa seems to be sliding back to pre-modernity (a concept not to be confused with primordial, primitive or primeval): we need only contrast the bloodshed over Biafra in the late 1960s—an unambiguous moment of political modernity—with the contemporary disaster of state failure and social chaos in Darfur.

Indeed, the future of European post-modernity should itself be problematised. The failure of the European experiment would surely imply the re-emergence of the logic of sovereign territoriality on the continent. However, even if the European experiment were to succeed, what will emerge at the end of the protracted process will probably be a European *state*; a large, continent-wide, federalist, pluralist state in all likelihood, but nevertheless recognisably a state. Thus, in the fullness of time we may come to regard European post-modernity as an essential artifice, a carefully designed and constructed bridge that connected Europe's past—a Europe of states—to the European state of the future. The basic point being made here is that the project of political modernity, though increasingly

frayed, remains intact: the sovereign territorial state is not going to wither away any time soon.

Why Europe's past could be Asia's future

For perhaps the first time in Asian history, certainly for the first time since European colonialism, a security architecture that is continent-wide in character is finally arriving in the Asia-Pacific. This continent-wide security interdependence, which is converting the continent or landmass called Asia into a region, is linked quite clearly to the rise of China. In other words, if a rising China didn't exist, there would be no Asia—in geopolitical terms. However, the unvarnished fact is that China *is* rising, and every single one of China's neighbours has to make this fact an integral part of their own policy calculus.

How will the rest of Asia—and India in particular—respond to the rise of China? China is working hard to signal to its neighbours that its rise is 'peaceful,' the odyssey of a large country on the road to development rather than the onward march of a rising power. Would China succeed in convincing its neighbours that its rise is not the twenty-first century version of Wilhelmine Germany seeking its place in the sun? That would depend not only on China's behaviour, but also on how countries like the US, Japan, India—and Indonesia, Vietnam and Australia—respond to China's rise.

But should we even analyse Asian responses to China's rise in balancing terms? Many Asian scholars, such as Kishore Mahbubani, argue that Europe's past will not be Asia's future: the rise of China would merely indicate reversion to a pre-modern and pre-European Asian order based on notions of hierarchy and tributary relationship with China that all Asians recognize and understand. If deep historical memory of Chinese ascendancy truly exists in much of Asia, India does not share that memory: the Himalayas stood in the way. Between the world historic transmission of Buddhism from India to China and the planting of tea in the Himalayan foothills, interaction between China and India was sparse across the centuries, limited largely to merchant caravans, itinerant pilgrims and cultural miscegenation in Indo-China. China and India met when Zhou Enlai and Jawaharlal Nehru met; in other words, the first real encounter between the two countries was as sovereign territorial postcolonial states.

Thus, Asia does have to take a cue from the historical processes that over time wrought a region out of the European continent. Without aping or mimicking Europe, what can we learn from European history that is relevant to Asia? Three moments in European history are interesting: the Peace of Westphalia, the Congress of Vienna and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) at Helsinki. Broadly speaking, three security futures could be envisaged for Asia: a region of opposing axes and balances (the logic of Westphalia), a region managed by a *directoire* of great powers (*a la* the Concert of Europe that emerged from the Congress of Vienna), or a region enmeshed in a cooperative security arrangement (the Helsinki process). Obviously, from a normative perspective the third future is preferable.

Why is the above relevant to the problematising of Hegemony? For a very simple reason: India is unlikely to trade in American global hegemony for Chinese continental hegemony.

Thus, an Asian Helsinki process makes sense for India not just normatively but pragmatically.

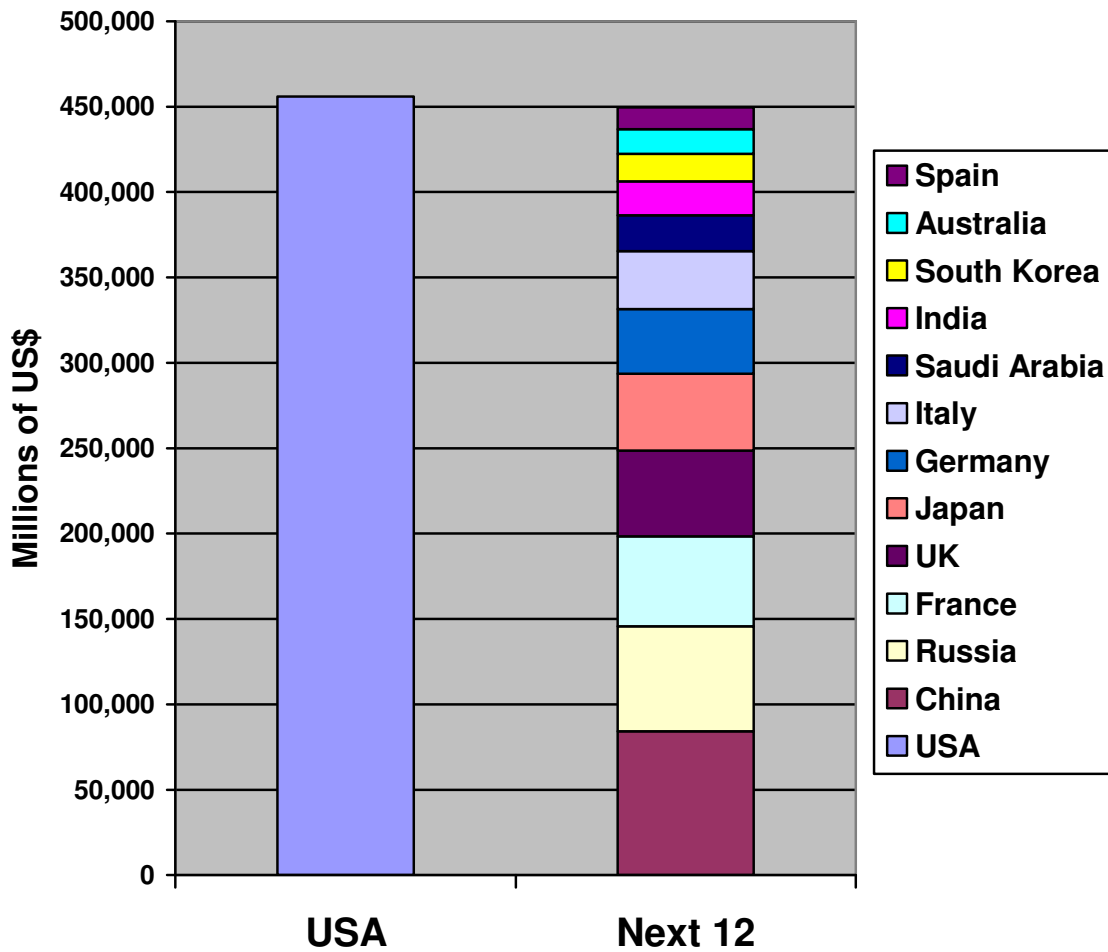
Why Gandhi's idea of trusteeship is gaining fresh relevance, and could be an Indian contribution to world politics

As India emerges and becomes a state with system-shaping capabilities and intentions, the world is entitled to ask a straightforward question: What would India bring to the table? In other words, would India the great power be any different from any other great power? China has already seized the idea that it must signal its difference from previous great powers in history; hence, its unremitting campaign to project itself as a developing country mindful of the needs of other developing countries. Many countries in Africa look to China to protect their interests. Why should any other country welcome India's emergence for any reason other than balance of power calculations?

This is where the Gandhian idea of trusteeship comes in. Developed by Gandhi to smoothen the rough edges of capitalism, trusteeship is admittedly difficult to put into practice. Nevertheless, it holds the key to some of the most pressing global commons concerns in the contemporary world. A central notion in Gandhian trusteeship is the value of non-possession. This goes hand-in-hand with the notion that we, as individuals, institutions and groups, are embedded in something larger than ourselves. The fragile global ecosystem is crying for a new world politics based in part upon the idea of trusteeship. Operationalising trusteeship is where India could have a distinct voice in the future.

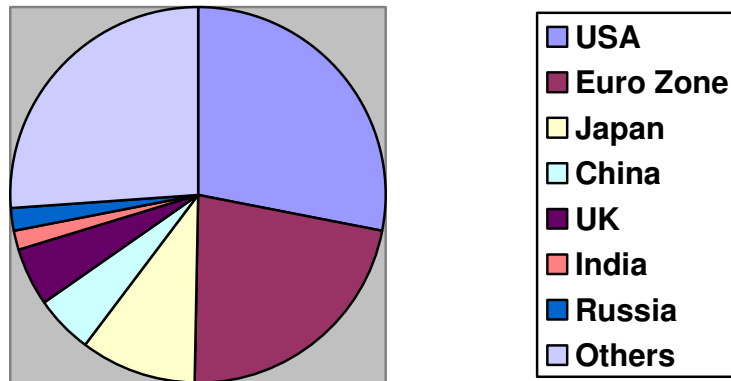
FIGURES

Figure 1
Annual Defence Expenditure, 2004



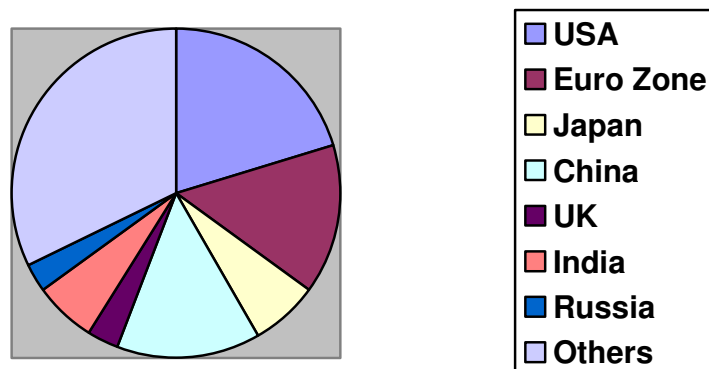
Source: *The Military Balance 2006* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies/Routledge, 2006), pp. 398-403 (Table 44: Comparative Defence Expenditure and Military Manpower, 2002-2004).

Figure 2
Gross Domestic Product 2005



Source: World Development Indicators database, World Bank, 1 July, 2006, accessed from <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GDP.pdf>.

Figure 3
Gross Domestic Product 2005
(Purchasing Power Parity)



Source: World Development Indicators database, World Bank, 1 July, 2006, accessed from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GDP_PPP.pdf.

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