

## Great Power Competition, Stillborn Democracies and the Rise of Neo-Authoritarians: The Case of India

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*The Cult of the Nation is the professionalism of the people. This cult is becoming their greatest danger, because it is bringing them enormous success, making them impatient of the claims of higher ideals. The greater the amount of success, the stronger are the conflicts of interest and jealousy and hatred which are aroused in men's minds, thereby making it more and more necessary for other peoples to stiffen into nations. With the growth of nationalism, man has become the greatest menace to man. Therefore the continual presence of panic goads that very nationalism into ever-increasing menace.*

– Rabindranath Tagore, 1917

## The Scourge of Nationalism

At the high noon of anti-colonial nationalism in India, one man stood vocally apart from the national mood. Rabindranath Tagore, India's—and Asia's—first Nobel laureate, considered the idea of “nationalism” gripping the country a parochial abstraction alien to India's civilisational tradition of syncretism.

His conviction in the inherently divisive and destructive nature of what he considered the European notion of nationalism was strengthened by the First World War in 1914, and over time he grew progressively more concerned with the narrowness of “selfish nationalism” and the “carnival of materialism” that such nationalism entailed.

Touring Japan right after the war, Tagore warned that “political civilization” is “based upon exclusiveness”, is intrinsically “carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies”, “always afraid of other races achieving eminence” and forever trying to “thwart all symptoms of greatness outside its own boundaries.”<sup>1</sup> Japan once inspired Tagore as an Asian nation reinventing and regenerating itself as a global power, but it began to worry him that the mode of Japan's transformation was similar to that of the European powers that became prosperous and went on to take the road of aggressive nationalism. To Tagore, informed by his experience of colonialism, national quests for economic success seemed to be closely linked to fundamentalist patriotism. By 1916, Tagore was warning of the dangers of a new, toxic nationalism taking hold of Japan and its rise as the new imperialist on the block.

Such radical universalism and critique of what he considered a spiritually hollow movement against the British based on an imported and alien brand of western nationalism put Tagore at odds with Gandhi, leader of the Indian National Congress, which was leading the independence movement. “The poet lives in a magnificent world of his own creation—his world of ideas,” Gandhi said once to Tagore's critique of nationalism.

But nearly a century on, as we stand in this age of polycrisis and witness the world hurtling down the path of illiberalism and climate calamity, with an international system helpless in moderating either the capitalist imperative of growth or ruinous interstate competition creating endless wars, Tagore's warnings and ideas appear increasingly prescient. Re-reading Tagore becomes ever more urgent in the context of India's own downward trajectory as well as the world's.

“The ideal of the social man is unselfishness, but the ideal of the Nation, like that of the professional man, is selfishness. This is why selfishness in the individual is condemned, while in the nation it is extolled, which leads to hopeless moral blindness.” This collective moral blindness to the quest for national power, he warned, is a potent instrument in the hand of the “rulers of men” who are “bent upon turning their peoples into machines of

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<sup>1</sup> *Nationalism*, Rabindranath Tagore, Penguin Random House India, 2009

power” and “hold it to be their duty to foster in the popular mind universal panic, unreasoning pride in their own race, and hatred of others.”<sup>2</sup>

Tagore was equally prescient in his foreboding on how toxic nationalism plays into the pantomime of power in the international system. In an address at Carnegie Hall in 1930 during one of his many trips to America, Tagore deplored the failure of America to recognise India’s appeal to be independent but respond to Japan’s power play. “Our appeal does not reach you, because you respond only to the appeal of power. Japan appealed to you and you answered because she was able to prove she could make herself as obnoxious as you can,” he said, reportedly to much applause, according to a New York Times report from the time.<sup>3</sup>

Implicit in Tagore’s grievance was a commentary on how the international system is driven—to doom—by the conventional understanding of national power.

While the leaders of the Indian National Congress may not have always seen eye to eye with Tagore on the mode of struggle against the British or the kind of post-colonial state and society they sought for India, the two world wars and the imperialism they were fighting also made them wary of the dangers of extreme nationalism and the risks of destructive competition ingrained in the Westphalian nation system.

This is one reason—it’s more or less forgotten now—why the Congress party was open to the idea of a world federation as a path to securing independence. This was a time when intellectuals like Clarence Streit were arguing against equating sovereign democratic peoples with sovereign states and advocating a federal union of Western democracies (including their colonies) on the American model of federalism, representing both the states and their people to protect the interest of the latter from the tyranny of state-defined “national interest.” Anything short of this, argued “world federalists”—which included the likes of Einstein, Kurt Vonnegut, Walter Cronkite, H. G. Wells, Peter Ustinov, Dorothy Thompson and future Vice-President Hubert Humphrey,<sup>4</sup> among others—would result in self-destructive interstate competition at the cost of individual freedom. Streit’s seminal book “Union Now” was an urgent call to action to rebuild a world order in a way that represented people’s interest as well as states, to avoid the abject failure of the League of Nations.

In India, the language of the political elite leading the independence struggle imbibed the language of global solidarity. Launching the “Quit India” movement in 1942, the Congress party declared that the immediate ending of British rule in India was an “urgent necessity both for the sake of India and for the success of the cause of the United Nations” as it would “bring all subject and oppressed humanity on the side of the United Nations.”<sup>5</sup> The party took a much more expansive view of the “United Nations” than what that body came to

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<sup>2</sup> Tagore’s [essay on nationalism](#), 1917

<sup>3</sup> [New York Times](#), 2 December 1930, available on [Times Machine](#) (last accessed 2 June 2023)

<sup>4</sup> [What Happened to the Idea of World Government](#), Thomas G. Weiss, *International Studies Quarterly*, 3 June 2009

<sup>5</sup> ‘Gandhi and World Peace: A Federation of the World’, Klaus Schlichtmann, available at <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/gandhi-and-world-peace.html> (last accessed on 2 June 2023)

represent. These were, after all, the formative years of the United Nations, and there was no one agreed view on how it ought to be structured.

## The Geopolitics of Jawaharlal Nehru

In the run-up to independence in August 1947, senior Congress leaders, in particular Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister and the architect of the country's lasting foreign policy foundation, repeatedly spoke of a politically united world. Replying to a letter in 1940 by Samuel C. Felding of the Federal Unionists on what he thought of Streit's "Union Now", Nehru writes: "The whole basis of the Indian national movement has been a democratic one. We want independence for India but we have laid emphasis on the fact that there can be and should be no absolute independence of any nation in the future as this independence leads to conflicts and a cutting up of the world. More and more we have stood for some kind of world union. Nationalism in the west... has become a terribly reactionary force... There is a strong desire among the politically conscious people in India for a world union of which India should be an equal member."<sup>6</sup>

Nehru, deeply informed by his [anti-imperialist internationalism](#) by way of his association with internationalist organisations like the League against Imperialism (LAI) and the overlapping and flexible solidarities of anti-imperialist collaborations in the inter-war years, was interested in the "larger questions" beyond political independence.<sup>7</sup>

We wish for peace. We do not want to fight any nation if we can help it. The only possible real objective that we, in common with other nations, can have is the objective of cooperating in building up some kind of world structure, call it One World, call it what you like. The beginnings of this world structure have been laid in the United Nations Organization. It is still feeble; it has many defects; nevertheless, it is the beginning of the world structure. And India has pledged herself to cooperate in its work,

Nehru said in January 1947.<sup>8</sup> Post-independence, touring the US in late 1948, at a speech before the Chicago Chamber of Commerce and the Foreign Policy Association, Nehru declared: "World government must come... The alternative to a world government is a disaster of unprecedented magnitude."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Roger N Baldwin Papers, Box 6, folder 18, Federal Union of Democracies, 1939-40, Mudd Library, Princeton

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Zachariah, quoted in Sandip Roy, "Freeing Nehru from the Gandhis: A 50th Anniversary Tribute," **Firstpost**, May 27, 2014. Available at [www.firstpost.com/politics/freeing-nehru-from-the-gandhis-a-50th-anniversary-tribute-1544599.html](http://www.firstpost.com/politics/freeing-nehru-from-the-gandhis-a-50th-anniversary-tribute-1544599.html) (last accessed on 2 June 2023)

<sup>8</sup> Debate on the Objectives Resolution in the Constituent Assembly. Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, p. 21, cited in ['Gandhi and World Peace: A Federation of the World'](#)

<sup>9</sup> 'Pandit Nehru's Discovery of America', foreword by Eleanor ROOSEVELT, Madras, The Indian Press Publications (1950), p. 56, cited by [Gandhi and World Peace: A Federation of the World](#)

## Bad Start

His words proved prophetic. Post-independence, India's colonial experience and civilisational pride meant it wanted to steer clear of any alliance with any big power in a way that would curtail its freedom of action. So, steering a new post-colonial democracy, Nehru sought a global order where states would commit to peace and avoid power competition, allowing states like India to deploy their extremely limited resources to social and economic development, instead.

It wasn't to be. As the U.S. focused on its strategy to contain the Soviet Union, Cold War came to India when Pakistan was enlisted as a major American ally. In 1954, the U.S. embarked on a program of military aid to Pakistan, followed by a formal defence assistance agreement and Pakistan's entry as a member into the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the American-sponsored Baghdad Pact.<sup>10</sup>

Having fought the first war against Pakistan in 1947 over the disputed territory of Kashmir within months of gaining independence in August 1947, India was already locked into a long-term border dispute with its neighbour. With the adversary suddenly placed in one of the two geopolitical camps, India was now willy-nilly a part of the big-power rivalry that it tried so hard to avoid with its embrace of the Non-Aligned Movement. Despite Nehru's leadership of the movement and piloting of the Asian Relations Conference to forge [decolonial solidarity](#),<sup>11</sup> the geopolitical powerplay that the new nation so dreaded was here to haunt it.

The Indian leadership's fears of a global system plagued by inherent interstate rivalries and Great Power alignments were affirmed early on in the life of the new republic by its experience in the United Nations, where western democracies sided with Pakistan in disputing Kashmir's accession to India. Nehru's confidence that the UN would force Pakistan to vacate the part of Kashmir that Pakistan had annexed through a military-backed raid by Pashtun tribesmen was dashed by geopolitical manoeuvrings. Western democracies again came together to try to prevent India from forcibly absorbing the Portuguese colony of Goa in 1961. A [Soviet veto](#) in favour of India finally saved the day for New Delhi. The world's largest democracy thus began to drift toward the Soviet camp, forging close relations with the likes of Tito's neo-Stalinist Yugoslavia while increasing its distance from western democracies.

Cold War continued to push India further away from Western democracies in the decades from the 50s through the 90s, shaping a foreign policy momentum that still afflicts India's relations with the West. Relations with the Soviets grew progressively warmer and relations with the US progressively more hostile. When in the early 1970s, Pakistan was

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<sup>10</sup> 'United States Cold War Strategy in South Asia: Making a Military Commitment to Pakistan', 1947-1954; Robert J. McMahon; *The Journal of American History*; Vol. 75, No. 3 (Dec., 1988), pp. 812-840; Oxford University Press

<sup>11</sup> 'An Asian Drama: The Asian Relations Conference, 1947', Vineet Thakur, *The International History Review* Volume 41, 2019 - Issue 3; online at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07075332.2018.1434809> (last accessed on 2 June 2023)

plunged into civil war that ended with a war between India and Pakistan and the creation of the new country of Bangladesh, the United States sided with Pakistan's military dictators, who were then its partner in the rapprochement with China. India scrapped its non-alignment policy by signing a 20-year Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union.

Tensions with the United States festered after India—which in the 1950s under Nehru campaigned vigorously against nuclear tests, paving the way for a partial ban on testing in 1963—itself exploded its first nuclear device in May 1974, the first country to do so outside the UN Security Council. The turning point in India's relation to Western democracies, and to the United States in particular, came only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that is, only after great power rivalry seemingly ended.

## Guns and Butter

It is argued that the Cold War impaired the interests of the working class in the United States. Neoliberal prescriptions for managing the economy led to a weak welfare state, strengthened corporate power and privatised public goods and services. It created a pattern of federal spending in which "[guns necessarily came at the expense of butter](#)".<sup>12</sup> While defence spending averaged 7.6% of GDP, education spending took up just 3% between 1946 and 1960.

The neglect of social spending in the name of protecting "national interest" had a particularly devastating effect on a freshly post-colonial state like India already festering in poverty and held down by centuries of social injustices and imperialism. Faced with a hostile external environment from its early days as a result of an ongoing global geopolitical contest, India had to prioritise military expenditure. Social spending took a beating as a result.

India's new rulers could not afford to universalise primary education or healthcare that was so necessary to flatten the millennia-old caste-based hierarchy and ensure social justice for one and all. The Indian welfare state thus remained a fine promise in its Constitution as the state failed to guarantee the kind of dignified life that aids the development of substantive democracy, the lack of which leads to the emergence of strongman politics.<sup>13</sup> India to this day continues to be among the lowest spenders on social benefits among major economies.<sup>14</sup> It has a third of the world's stunted children caused by malnutrition,<sup>15</sup> while

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<sup>12</sup> 'Great-Power Competition Is Bad for Democracy', Michael Brenes and Van Jackson, 14 July 2022, *Foreign Affairs*

<sup>13</sup> 'To Kill A Democracy: India's Passage to Despotism', Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane, OUP/Pan Macmillan, 2021

<sup>14</sup> 'Social sector expenditure as portion of GDP grows at a snail pace: Eco Survey', Nanda, Prashant K., LiveMint, 31 January 2020. Available online at <https://www.livemint.com/budget/economic-survey/social-sector-expenditure-as-portion-of-gdp-grows-at-a-snail-pace-eco-survey-11580489661656.html>, last accessed on 2 June 2023

<sup>15</sup> Karlsson, O., Kim, R., Sarwal, R. et al. 'Trends in underweight, stunting, and wasting prevalence and inequality among children under three in Indian states', 1993–2016. *Sci Rep* 11, 14137 (2021)

also being the [world's largest arms importer](#), accounting for [11%](#) of the global arms imports.<sup>16</sup>

### Liberty, Unity and Democracy

In *Union Now*, Streit details how a state-centric international system undermines democracy by subordinating individual freedom to the freedom of the state. Streit cites Lord Acton's 1862 essay "Nationality" in which he observes that the theory of nationalism had come to cover two opposing ideas that he called the theory of unity and the theory of liberty.<sup>17</sup> He equated the idea of liberty with a democratic or individualist conception of the nation, and the idea of unity to the Nazi or absolutist conception of the nation.

Because of the circumstances under which India was born—with uncertainty hanging on its geographical integrity (hundreds of princely states had yet to join the union at the time of independence), the union of multiple linguistic groups in a new federation, and the raging Hindu-Muslim civil war in the wake of the partition of the Indian subcontinent—, "unity" already took precedence over "liberty" as political priority in the new nation. Much of the colonial administrative mechanisms were retained as India set out as a free nation. Thus, even as India embarked on the journey as the world's largest democracy, its national security architecture remained primed for accentuating state power over individual rights.

The anxieties over the state-centric international system added to the security-focused statist policy choices. These, combined with low social spending, continue to this day to impair the pursuit of substantive democracy. Narendra Modi has effectively weaponised the inherent centralism of the Indian state to curb individual freedoms, while tapping a rich pool of resentments—as a result of the state's failure to deliver dignified life by its failure to create life-equalising opportunities—to his advantage. And like demagogues the world over, he has used the fear of the "other" to smokescreen his concentration of power and repression.

Streit had argued that ever since states organised themselves as a league of nations, each of the democracies had been driven to strengthen the state against the citizen to strengthen itself against other states. As more and more nationalism centralised more and more power in the respective national governments, "rampant nationalism" led us to "the dogma of the divine right of the nation which Hitler preaches," he said.

Streit could almost be mistaken for Tagore here. In one of his lectures in the US in 1917, Tagore declared: "The idea of the Nation is one of the most powerful anesthetics that man has invented. Under the influence of its fumes the whole people can carry out its systematic

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<sup>16</sup> 'India remains world's top arms importer: SIPRI report', [PTI](#), 13 March 2023, Online at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-remains-worlds-top-arms-importer-sipri-report/articleshow/98612489.cms>, last accessed on 2 June 2023

<sup>17</sup> Available online at <http://panarchy.org/acton/nationality.html>, last accessed on 2 June 2023



program of the most virulent self-seeking without being in the least aware of its moral perversion.”<sup>18</sup>

Both Streit and Tagore represented a powerful and persuasive school of thought in their time, which may have sounded outlandish then but appears increasingly prophetic in the time we live in. While India and many other democracies grapple with the rising tide of ultra-nationalism that has thrown up demagogues, and the world is at a loss to prevent an inter-state competition that is destroying the planet, we are forced to revisit long-discarded ideas of political organisation of nations outside the now-familiar parameters of the nation state.

India’s case is instructive in understanding how a state-oriented world organisation fuels geopolitical competition, impedes the goal of achieving substantive democracy and facilitates the rise of neo-authoritarians. It’s a pattern that’s, depressingly, becoming familiar everywhere. Could the answer lie in an alternative world system?

And, if a world federation sounds too impossibly amorphous, does the answer lie in at least an overhaul of the U.N. system that goes beyond the familiar—and perennial—reforms chatter? Countries like India and Brazil have long argued for a U.N. system that is more accountable, diverse, transparent and democratic. The Summit of the Future, which takes place in about a year, promises to do just that, aiming for greater collectivity with a “New Agenda for Peace”<sup>19</sup> that will supposedly revitalise the collective security system and multilateral action for peace. On the reforms agenda is meaningfully diversifying the UN Security Council beyond its elite club of five, a longstanding demand of India. But it is also aiming at a complete abolition of nuclear weapons, and bury interventionism in favour of conflict prevention by national governments – the same governments, like in India, whose repressive and divisive policies themselves are the biggest cause of internal conflict. A world federation seems more practicable in comparison.

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<sup>18</sup> *Nationalism*, Rabindranath Tagore, page 61, Penguin Random House India, 2009

<sup>19</sup> [A New Agenda for Peace](#), July 2023, UN



## The Author

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