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## India: The Incredible and the Vulnerable

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**NEW DELHI**—It's tempting to dismiss as excessive the Indian government's efforts to protect the Olympic torch run last week from Tibetans protesting the Chinese crackdown in their homeland—sealing off much of the historic heart of this city, shrouding the relay in a veil of secrecy and surrounding the flame with 15,000 police and soldiers.

Likewise, it's easy to brand New Delhi's muted response to the repression as "overcautious," as did the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader. For merely saying it was "distressed," the Indian government is accused of sacrificing its moral authority as the world's largest democracy to avoid upsetting China, now its largest trade partner.

A more accurate reading of New Delhi's stance, however, reveals a far more complex picture, one that stretches beyond Tibet and trade.

In virtually every direction, India faces what national security advisor M.K. Narayanan tells me are "existential threats"—failed or fragile states that claim Indian territory, support anti-Indian insurgencies or threaten the very idea of India as a secular, multi-ethnic, pluralist democracy.

Indeed, alongside the tourism campaign proclaiming "Incredible India," there's also a sense of Vulnerable India. A quick 360-degree tour of India's neighborhood reveals how this Asian giant—with its roaring economy and rising global profile—faces a tyranny of geography.

To the west lies historic nemesis Pakistan and, beyond that, Afghanistan—two Muslim nations in the grips of Al Qaeda and Taliban terror, whose collapse could send waves of refugees and violence into Hindu-majority India.

After three wars, contested Kashmir remains a tinderbox, and the loss of Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state, could ignite a chain reaction of separatism among India's kaleidoscopic regions, races, religions and languages.

To the north, it's China—and territory, not trade—that unnerves Indians. It wasn't geography but guns—China's 1950 invasion of Tibet—that first made these two Asian powers next-door neighbors.

"The Humiliation"—India's defeat in its 1962 border war with China—remains etched in the Indian psyche. To New Delhi's eternal frustration, China still occupies the Aksai Chin region in the western Himalayas and claims the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which Beijing refers to as "lower Tibet."

Indeed, it was China's nuclear arsenal, not Pakistan, that Indian leaders say justified their nuclear tests a decade ago. Indian officials speak openly of being "encircled" by China, with its new deep-water navy and naval facilities stretching from Pakistan to Bangladesh to Burma—a "string of pearls" that could turn the Indian Ocean into the Chinese Ocean.

In tiny Nepal, also to India's north, New Delhi fears that this month's election victory of former Maoist rebels could energize the Maoist revolt raging across rural India that has killed thousands. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has called it "the single biggest security challenge" India has ever faced.

To the east, Bhutan, Burma and Bangladesh have served at times as sanctuaries for the dozens of ethnic, tribal and separatist groups in northeastern India that have killed more than 50,000 people during decades of resistance to Indian rule. Thus New Delhi's controversial aid to Burma's junta, which returns the favor by attacking anti-Indian insurgents.

Finally, to the south, Sri Lanka's 25-year civil war is the headache that won't go away—in memories of the Indian military intervention that led Tamil militants to assassinate Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 and in fears that any independent Tamil state would stoke separatist passions among the 60 million Tamils living in southern India.

"India's neighbors use all these cards in an attempt to keep India in check and it constrains our foreign policy options," says Brahma Chellaney, a leading strategic analyst. "Given the looming threat that neighbors could step up their claims or interference, India has to follow a fine balance."

As a result, India faces a paradox of proximity. New Delhi enjoys strategic relationships with Russia, the European Union, the United States (including a tentative nuclear pact) and Japan and signs major arms and trade deals with partners from Brazil to Nigeria and Israel to Indonesia. Meanwhile, South Asia accounts for an estimated two percent of Indian trade.

To its credit, New Delhi has undertaken what Shyam Saran, the prime minister's special envoy, tells me is a "steady rethink" toward its neighbors—a realization that it can neither insulate itself from them nor achieve India's full economic potential "unless we can ensure a relatively peaceful and stable periphery."

Farooq Sobhan, a former Bangladesh high commissioner to India who heads the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, credits this recent "turnaround in India's thinking" for turning India from a skeptic to a champion of regional economic and political integration. "We are poised to build a new and better relationship," he said.

After Burma's military regime crushed democracy protests 20 years ago, a Western diplomat confessed that a far-away America, with "very little strategic interest" in Burma, had "the luxury of living up to its principles" and condemning the crackdown.

For now, with so many claims on its territory, Vulnerable India has no such luxury with Tibet. That comes later, when, free of today's existential threats, Incredible India can act more confidently in both its interests and its ideals.

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