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Key Developments in Global Affairs

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CHAPTER 4

How India Navigates a World in Transition

Boas Lieberherr

India's foreign policy seeks to avoid overdependence on any country while leveraging diverse partnerships in a quest for security and status as an emerging major power. The current international balance of power and closer cooperation with the US and its allies increase India's global influence, while significant differences about ideas of order remain. At the national and regional levels, India faces major challenges. Its first foreign policy objective – and limitation – remains economic and social development.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks at a news conference during the German-Indian government consultations on May 2, 2022 in Berlin, Germany. *Lisi Niesner / Reuters*



The economic, political, and strategic weight of India is growing. India is expected to become the world's most populous country in 2023, and according to some forecasts, the world's third-largest economy in the next decade. It is a nuclear weapon state and not a party to any military alliance. In 2023, India takes over the G20 presidency. It seeks to use this historic opportunity to raise its leadership profile and act as a "bridging power" between East, South, and West. In the same year, India chairs the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and will host Eurasian heads of states, likely including Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. New Delhi also assumes a central role in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – an Indo-Pacific cooperation format with the United States, Australia, and Japan that aims to develop alternatives to a possible Sinocentric regional order.¹ And as Europe intends to diversify its relations in Asia beyond China, India is increasingly viewed from a geostrategic perspective rather than just an economic one. As a result, India's political and strategic influence and agency at the global level are likely to further increase in the years ahead, including when it comes to negotiating new forms of order in the Indo-Pacific.

India's abstention from various UN votes to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised questions about

New Delhi's foreign policy direction. The remarkable strategic convergence between India and the US and its allies over the past decade might have suggested a different voting pattern. India has become the US' counterweight of choice against China, as well as an indispensable partner in European Indo-Pacific strategies. At the same time, however, New Delhi continues to maintain close relations with Russia, cooperates with Moscow and Beijing in formats such as the SCO and the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) dialogue, and China remains its second most important trading partner despite a structural rupture in bilateral relations. The flood of diplomatic visits to New Delhi following the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine from the US, China, Russia, and Europe illustrates how various actors are bidding for India's support. India's diversified bilateral and multilateral relationships seem to break the logic of simple dichotomies. It is difficult to assign India to a specific "side."

The future of the global balance of power hinges on events in Asia. Therefore, it is important for Europe to better understand the foreign policy of one of Asia's most significant powers and an increasingly important bilateral partner, India. It was only 30 years ago, at the end of the Cold War, that India underwent a drastic



domestic transformation. The demise of its longtime ally, the Soviet Union, and a severe balance of payments crisis forced New Delhi to adapt its foreign policy. India pursued a strategy of non-alignment from independence until 1991, but it has since moved to an approach known as strategic autonomy or multi-alignment. While the former was an attempt to minimize costs and risks associated with being a weak power, the latter is a quest for security and status as an emerging major power.² Non-alignment was designed to maintain equidistance between the great powers, whereas the new approach aims at avoiding too great a dependence on any major power.³

In the last decade, again, not only has India's external environment changed significantly with the rise of China, but so has the domestic political environment with the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014. The latter event brought an end to 25 years of weak coalition governments and marked the first time in India's history that a right-wing party had a clear majority in Parliament. The new prime minister has injected new energy and greater visibility into the conduct of foreign relations and has successfully used it for domestic political purposes. Unlike previous governments, the BJP's ideology and the

language in which its foreign policy is embedded follow a religious narrative of a Hindu nation rather than a secular vision of an Indian civilization.

Three factors particularly shape India's current foreign policy. Despite the recurring enthusiasm about the "rise of India," its greatest strategic challenge – and limitation – remains domestic economic and social development. First and foremost, India seeks partners to achieve this goal. Second, China's rise complicates New Delhi's strategic environment on various levels – on the disputed border, in India's neighborhood, and in the Indian Ocean. Growing competition between the US and China and a new balancing behavior by states around the world, however, seem to provide India with levers to better address these challenges. In this context, finally, India is moving closer to the US, while continuing to diversify its external partnerships with countries such as Australia, France, Iran, Israel, Japan, and Saudi Arabia.

Today, India's foreign policy may once again be at an inflection point. On the one hand, the alignment between India and the US and its allies could become even closer. The war in Ukraine and the resulting weakening of Russia, China's more muscular approach toward India, and the Sino-Russian



“no limits” partnership put India in a difficult strategic position. With India facing the prospect of a unipolar Asia, the role of the US and its allies as balancers vis-à-vis China and its potential junior partner, Russia, will become increasingly important. On the other hand, India’s conceptions of global order are in various ways closer to those of China and Russia than to those of the US and its allies. In theory, this could contribute to New Delhi’s ability to act as a “bridging power.” However, in conjunction with domestic trends of democratic erosion and growing illiberalism, this also adds uncertainty to India’s foreign policy trajectory.

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on the various facets of India’s foreign policy – the ends, the means, and the internal and external environment in which it operates. The next section looks at the origins of the concept of non-alignment that guided India’s foreign policy in the past, as well as the transformative changes the country underwent just 30 years ago. The foreign policy of the Modi government is then examined in more detail and placed in a national, regional, and international context. What follows is an outlook on how the key trends that characterize India’s current foreign policy may evolve in the medium term and how this may affect the future order in the Indo-Pacific.

From Isolation to Integration

To better understand India’s foreign policy today, it is important to look at its past. Non-alignment, strategic autonomy, and multi-alignment are the concepts often used to describe the strategies that have guided Indian foreign policy since independence in 1947. It is only 30 years since India underwent major political and economic transformations. After the Cold War, a socialist India ventured into partial economic liberalization and integration into the world economy, increasingly shed its anti-Western attitudes, and began to see itself as an emerging major power. India deepened engagement with the US, pursued rapprochement with China, and sought to overcome its strategic isolation in the neighborhood. The associated discourse about the new direction of India’s foreign policy still reverberates today.

India’s foreign policy from independence until the end of the Cold War was characterized by the strategy of non-alignment. In 1947, after a century of colonial occupation, India was facing tremendous social and economic challenges. Jawaharlal Nehru – India’s first prime minister and foreign policy architect – did not want to risk India’s hard-won independence by moving into the ambit of the US or the Soviet Union. He described non-alignment



as an intention “to keep away from the power politics of groups aligned against one another, which have led in the past to world wars and which may again lead to disasters on an even vaster scale.”⁴ Nehru’s thinking was driven by the conviction that India should set an example that other countries, especially in Asia and Africa, might emulate. India became a forerunner of the Non-Aligned Movement and a vocal advocate for disarmament, decolonization, and anti-racism. Economically, India turned inward and sought self-reliance, characterized by central planning and ambitious infrastructure projects.

In practice, non-alignment did not necessarily mean equidistance between the great powers. In the second half of the Cold War, India moved closer to the Soviet Union. New Delhi also emerged “as the most articulate opponent of the Western world view,” and the concept of non-alignment “acquired a decisively anti-Western orientation.”⁵ While other states in Asia liberalized, India’s economy remained mixed. Relations with the US became increasingly strained, reinforced by Pakistan’s emergence as a pivotal US ally. On the eve of the Indo-Pakistani war in 1971, India and the Soviet Union signed the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in response to growing Pakistani ties with the US and China. While India was a champion of

non-intervention on the global stage, it became more interventionist in its immediate neighborhood, reflecting New Delhi’s perception of South Asia as its sphere of influence and its attempt to affirm its primacy in the subcontinent.

In 1991, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, India’s long-term ally, as well as the transformation of the global order and a balance of payments crisis forced New Delhi to make drastic policy changes. With the prospect of a unipolar world dominated by the US, non-alignment was gradually replaced by strategic autonomy as the guiding principle of Indian foreign policy.⁶ This policy became less ideological, less anti-Western, and more pragmatic. India attempted “to pursue its national interests and adopt its preferred foreign policy without being constrained in any manner by other states.”⁷ Instead of seeking to avoid involvement in the great-power system, India now began to aspire to a prominent place in it.⁸ New Delhi ended its autarky at home and partially liberalized its economy. This involved deregulation of key sectors, dropping investment controls, raising foreign direct investment caps, and initiating the process of privatizing state-owned enterprises.⁹ This period also marked the end of the absolute dominance of the Indian National Congress (INC). Weaker coalition



governments followed one-party rule. This led to a more competitive and diverse political environment with new stakeholders entering India's foreign policy discourse, such as businesses and think tanks.

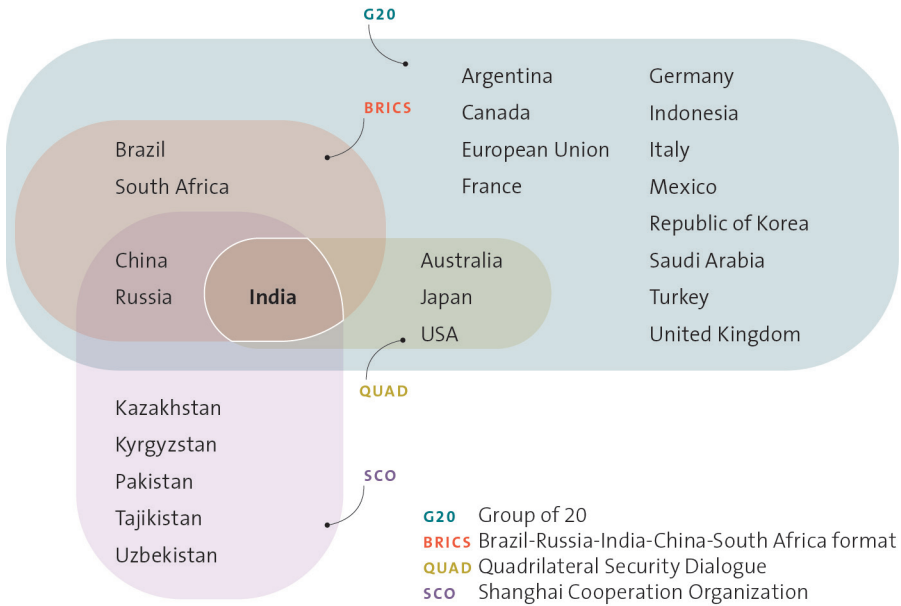
India also started to engage in diplomatic outreach with its long-neglected immediate and extended neighborhood, as well as with the US. The "Look East" policy was launched to find partners in Southeast Asia that might provide finance and know-how, as well as opportunities to boost trade. It was only in 1992 that India established relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). India also adopted a more benign and generous approach toward South Asian countries, which meant that it would make greater concessions in conflicts with its smaller neighbors. In 1998, India conducted five nuclear tests to demonstrate its nuclear capabilities and establish itself as a nuclear power. The tests were a reaction to perceived security threats, an assertion of India's military might, and a demonstration of India's scientific and technological capabilities. India subsequently faced strong international criticism and sanctions. At the same time, the tests also opened up space for diplomacy and led to intensive engagement with the US. Three years after the seminal bilateral civilian nuclear agreement

with Washington in 2005, New Delhi received a waiver from the Nuclear Suppliers Group. This allowed for sustained close bilateral engagement with Washington. The US also lifted India-specific export restrictions on dual-use technologies, enabling defense and technology cooperation that otherwise would not have been possible.

After the turn of the millennium, India started to seek cooperation with other major and emerging powers such as Russia and China on various global issues in order to mitigate the negative effects that could come with the US unipolar moment. The countries founded the Russia-India-China (RIC) forum, collaborated on the BRICS, established a new development bank and eventually other institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the SCO.¹⁰ Manmohan Singh, prime minister from 2004 until 2014, continued to pursue a foreign policy with strong emphasis on economic development. By the end of 2014, India had signed 30 partnership agreements and had established stable relationships with the major powers. This marked the beginning of India's multi-alignment foreign policy.¹¹ India remained critical of Western-dominated forms of global governance, continued to express doubts about democracy



India's Membership in Selected Multilateral Formats



promotion in international relations, and tried to prevent the introduction of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which altered the basic norms of sovereignty and non-interference in humanitarian emergencies.¹² Toward the end of Singh's term, relations with the US again experienced some setbacks, and economic growth began to slow.

Modi-fied Foreign Policy?

Since 2014, India's external and internal environments have again undergone substantial changes. While a more ambitious and aggressive China has tended to complicate India's strategic

environment, this has also led to an increase in India's strategic importance in global politics. Domestically, for the first time in India's history, a right-wing party commands a clear majority in the Indian parliament. For nearly a decade now, India is led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP. This also marked the end of a 25-year period of weak coalition governments. The BJP managed to further increase its vote share in 2019. Sustained high approval ratings for Modi and the weak state of the opposition could enable him to win a third term in the next general election in 2024.



Rarely has an Indian prime minister sparked such debate about to what extent his foreign policy differs from that of his predecessors. His approach has been described as “transformative” and associated with “seminal” changes.¹³ In the view of other observers, however, Modi’s foreign policy “picks up from where his predecessors left off and is characterized by essential continuity.”¹⁴ As an intermediate position, Modi’s foreign policy of multi-alignment could be described as a “natural evolution” of Singh’s policy, as he has offered a clearer definition of Indian strategic interests, has pushed forward the bilateral relationship with the US, and has framed strategic partnerships as something that enables rather than restricts autonomy.¹⁵

Since the 2000s, the basic tenets of India’s foreign policy have remained relatively constant.¹⁶ India’s foremost priority has been to advance its economic and social development. This is followed by improving India’s national security, which concerns internal challenges, such as the Maoist insurgency in parts of the country, threats emanating from Pakistan, a secure periphery, as well as ensuring a regional balance of power. India also wants to boost its status and enhance its role as a “leading power” in international relations, and, finally, promote its political and social ideals and values beyond its borders. India’s External Affairs Minister

Subrahmanyam Jaishankar echoed these goals in a speech in 2019: “greater prosperity at home, peace on the borders, protection of our people and enhancing influence abroad.”¹⁷ In recent years, however, the role that the US and its allies play in New Delhi’s strategic calculus to achieve these goals has further increased due to mounting challenges from China.

As with his predecessors, Modi’s foreign policy has made economic engagement a priority in order to set India on the path of rapid economic growth. After some turbulent years, Modi has succeeded in restoring a degree of confidence in India’s economy.¹⁸ Reforms of the foreign direct investment (FDI) regime, for instance, along with external factors, led to an increase in foreign investment in India during his first term.¹⁹ India also jumped from 140th rank (2014) to 63rd (2022) in the ease of doing business index. At the same time, the new prime minister sought to deepen India’s ties with a wide range of countries, including the US and China. By re-branding the earlier “Look East” policy into “Act East,” Modi aimed to boost not only economic but also political and military engagement with states in Southeast and East Asia, partly in response to the rise of China. One aspect was to pay more attention to the security dimension



of India's presence in the Indo-Pacific. The "Neighborhood First" policy also represents a continuation of earlier initiatives that sought to build better relations with neighbors in South Asia.

Undoubtedly, Modi has brought new energy and visibility to India's foreign policy and has articulated India's interests more clearly and assertively than his predecessors. He devoted a considerable amount of his attention to foreign relations. Modi has made as many official trips abroad in his first term as his predecessor did in a decade, and he established personal relationships with foreign leaders such as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. Modi also successfully focused on the Indian diaspora, which he managed to "electrify."²⁰ Despite the increased focus on foreign policy at the highest levels, limited resources place relatively tight constraints on the implementation of India's foreign policy ambitions. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs is severely underfunded and understaffed.²¹ The Indian Foreign Service operates with approximately 900 diplomats, about the same number as Portugal or New Zealand. In contrast, Brazil has 2,500 diplomats, China 4,000, and Japan 5,700.²²

In a departure from previous governments, Modi's BJP has promised to base India's foreign policy on a set of principles more consistent with what it views

as India's traditions.²³ Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, is an important aspect of the BJP's party program. This ideology aims to create a Hindu nation based on language, history, culture, geography, and ancestry.²⁴ In the context of foreign policy, new narratives have been crafted that reflect Hindu nationalist understandings of the world and replace older ones. Modi has focused on cultural and religious diplomacy and has stressed certain elements such as yoga. In the future, India could increasingly base its foreign policy aspirations on a religious civilizational narrative of a Hindu nation, in addition to general criteria such as demographic size, economic performance, and military clout, as opposed to a secular narrative of an Indian civilization as in the past.²⁵

Modi's energetic approach to foreign policy, the new language in which to describe it, and its repeated emphasis on a "new India" are also likely directed at a domestic audience. Compared to his predecessors, Modi and the BJP have successfully used foreign policy for domestic political purposes. His numerous trips abroad were widely reported in the national media. Modi is portrayed as a globally well-respected leader who is contributing to India's growing international prestige. The mega-event being organized around India's G20 presidency in 2023 – just ahead of the general elections in early



2024 – is likely to further support this narrative. At the same time, nationalist attitudes in India have continued to rise in recent years from an already high level. In a representative survey in 2022, 90 per cent strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement “India is a better country than most other countries,” up from 82 per cent in 2013.²⁶ Negative attitudes toward India’s neighbors Pakistan and China are also high among respondents, at 67 and 65 per cent, respectively. Those with greater levels of baseline support for Modi are more likely to have a negative opinion of Pakistan and China. Under these circumstances, the Indian public is unlikely to see much reason for compromise in political crises with its two large neighbors.

The remainder of this chapter places India’s foreign policy in a national, regional, and international context. The focus is on the challenges that India is currently facing and how the Indian government is trying to navigate the complex strategic environment in which it finds itself.

Domestic Context – Challenges and Optimism

India’s foremost foreign policy objective – and limitation – is economic and social development. This has evolved from a focus on basic survival after independence to a much broader set of

growth and development objectives, encompassing human capital, the economy, natural resources, and security. While there has been significant progress on several development indicators in the past few decades, India is still categorized as a lower-middle income country with a per capita income of 2,257 USD.²⁷ The country faces huge challenges in terms of education, poverty, employment, and health. The poor state of the health care system, for instance, became apparent in spring 2021, when the coronavirus pandemic led to its de facto collapse. Despite successes in poverty reduction, the World Bank estimates that 45 per cent of the population in India still lived below the poverty line of 3.65 USD per day in 2019.²⁸ India is also home to a large number of illiterate people, with over 22 per cent of the population still uneducated.²⁹ Against this backdrop, one of the reasons given by the Indian government for increasing its oil imports from Russia at reduced prices following Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine was that the majority of the Indian population could not afford rising prices. India’s domestic circumstances can contribute to its vulnerability in times of crisis and limit its room for maneuver.

Despite major economic policy challenges, India is a promising growth market. The International Monetary



Facts and Figures about India



Population

2022

1,417,000,000

Global rank: **2/196**

Human Development Index

2022

0.633

Global rank: **132/191**

GDP

in USD, 2021

3,176 bn

Global rank: **5/196**

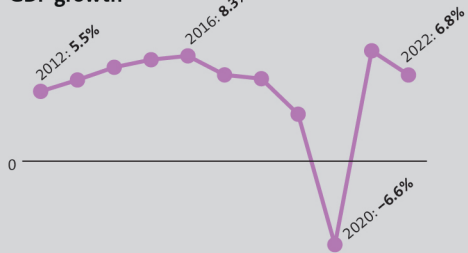
GDP per capita

in USD, 2021

2,257

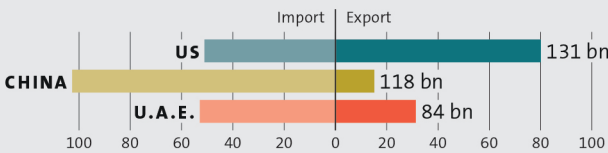
Global rank: **153/196**

GDP growth



Most important trading partners

in USD, 2022



Military spending

in USD, 2021

76.6 bn
(2.7% of GDP)

Global rank: **3/196**

Nuclear warheads

(estimate)

160

Sources: World Bank; United Nations Development Programme; Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry; SIPRI



Fund forecasts that India will be one of the fastest-growing economies in the next two years, with projected GDP growth of 6.1 per cent in 2023 and 6.8 per cent in 2024. According to some estimates, India may become the world's third-largest economy by 2030, while in terms of GDP per capita it would remain at the lower end of the scale.³⁰ However, even though the Indian economy in absolute terms has recovered to a higher level than before the pandemic and grew at 6.8 per cent in 2022, GDP growth was slowing before the pandemic. Observers saw part of the reason for this in poorly implemented national policies such as the currency demonetization in 2016.³¹ With its young population, India also hopes to benefit from the “demographic dividend.” However, the provision of jobs for the millions of young people flooding into the labor market each year will be a challenge. For instance, the Modi government promised to increase the share of manufacturing in GDP to 25 per cent.³² Since 2014, however, the figure has stagnated at around 14 per cent. So far, the international competitiveness of Indian industry has been limited, with large trade deficits every year.

Following the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, Modi launched the concept of “Atmanirbhar Bharat” – self-reliant India. The policy seeks to

increase India's self-sufficiency by promoting the domestic industry and reducing reliance on foreign suppliers and imported goods. It also aims to privatize state-owned enterprises and build up national champions, for example in the technology sector.³³ The bureaucratic rules introduced as a result could complicate market access, especially for foreign medium-sized companies.³⁴ India is also looking to benefit from the global push to diversify supply chains. The Indian government supports such efforts with huge subsidies and has relaxed investment requirements for foreigners. FDI in India as a share of GDP has surpassed that in China in recent years. Global manufacturers such as Apple, which today has a tiny share of the Indian market, are expanding their production in India. Apple has previously used its local manufacturing facilities in India to assemble older generations of iPhones. Last year, however, the latest iPhone 14 was also manufactured in India, just shortly after production began in China.

The Indian Armed Forces also face challenges. Eighty per cent of Indian military platforms are currently designated as “vintage.”³⁵ While India's defense expenditures in nominal terms have been steadily increasing, about half of the resources are used for salaries and pensions and only about 23



per cent for the modernization of the armed forces. Due to a poorly developed defense industry, India was the world's largest importer of defense equipment from 2012 to 2021.³⁶ During the Cold War, India developed a strong dependence on Russian defense equipment that continues to this day. The Modi government has initiated reforms to address some of the related issues such as the long-awaited introduction of the post of Chief of Defense Staff to improve coordination among the three services and the procurement process, a new recruitment program that could reduce India's spending on salaries and pensions in the long run, and the build-up of the national defense sector under the self-reliant India campaign. However, the need for long-term modernization of the armed forces and the incentive for quick wins for "Atmanirbhar Bharat" in the defense industry may potentially conflict with each other.³⁷

Since Modi took office, there has been increasing debate in and outside India about the state of Indian democracy. In 2020, the Swedish Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute downgraded India from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy.³⁸ The 23-percentage point drop in the index between 2013 and 2020 represents one of the most dramatic shifts among all countries in the world during this

time period. The World Bank's Voice and Accountability Index, which tracks, among other things, the right to freedom of expression and free media, also shows a steady and significant deterioration in India since 2016.³⁹ Although these indices have their own weaknesses, they point to a negative trend regarding civil liberties in India. The Modi government has used laws on sedition, defamation, and counterterrorism to push back against its critics, and is making it more difficult for civil society organizations to operate in India.⁴⁰ It has also extended its influence on institutions that were previously considered independent, such as the central bank.⁴¹ Other policies have elicited the criticism that they are directed against the Muslim minority – more than 200 million people – in India. In 2019, the Indian government stripped the only Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir of its partial autonomy and brought it under direct federal rule. The 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) provides an expedited pathway to Indian citizenship for persecuted religious minorities such as Hindus and Buddhists from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, but not for Muslims. Combined with the planned National Register of Citizens, which would document legal citizens and identify illegal immigrants, this would complicate the



situation for Muslims, who are not offered the same protection under the CAA as people of other religions.

The Neighborhood – It’s Complicated

China’s growing strategic presence in and engagement with countries in South Asia and the larger Indian Ocean region – not only economic but also politically and militarily – complicates India’s management of relations with its neighborhood at various levels. New Delhi is losing influence in the region vis-à-vis China. India is surrounded by several smaller countries, including Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, and large ones with which it has adversarial relations, namely Pakistan and China. India’s immediate environment has always been difficult to manage and relatively unstable. South Asia is one of the most poorly integrated regions in the world, due in large part to the conflict-ridden relationship between India and Pakistan. India’s trade and connectivity linkages with its smaller neighbors have only begun to grow in recent decades, with India’s “strategic culture of insulation” during the Cold War still reverberating today.⁴² The current government, in a continuation of policies since the 1990s, has stepped up diplomatic engagement, as well as financial and humanitarian assistance, and has accelerated the work

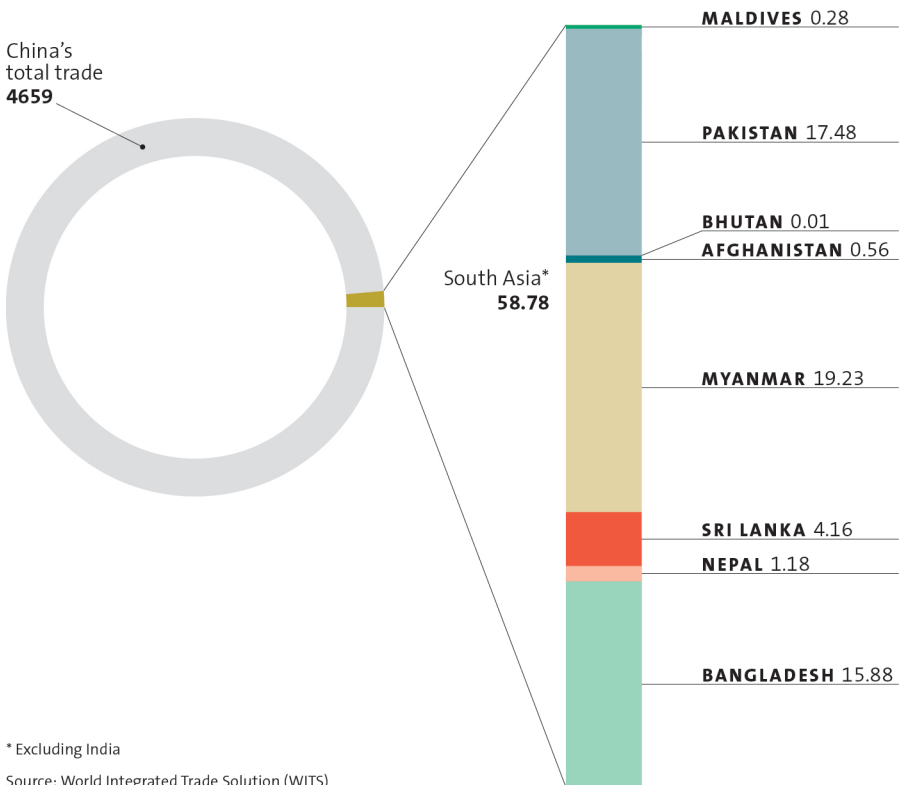
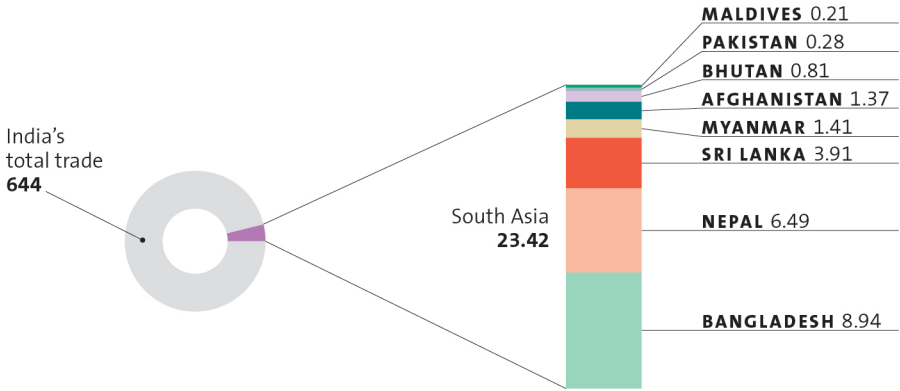
on connectivity. In absolute terms, India is doing more than ever before, but with competition from China, expectations and demands are rising as well.⁴³ Since India’s relations with its smaller neighbors have been characterized by a large disparity in size and power, growing Chinese involvement also offers those countries the opportunity to break free from New Delhi’s sometimes tight grip, along with economic benefits. Other factors such as financial constraints, slow bureaucracy, and a poor implementation record also limit India’s ambitions and competitiveness. Against this backdrop – and in contrast to the past – India is seeking the support of external powers by building partnerships to counter China’s growing influence in the region. The growing competition between the US and China, as well as India’s important role in the Indo-Pacific, offer New Delhi levers in the form of partnerships and access to funding to better address some of these negative trends.

A central preoccupation for India since 1947 has been to manage competition with Pakistan. The two countries have fought four wars, the last in 1999. Pakistan’s support of terrorist groups against India after the 1980s, terrorist attacks against Indian urban centers such as the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and subsequent attacks on



India and China's Trade with South Asia

in billions of USD, 2020



* Excluding India

Source: World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS)



military and police units stationed along the India-Pakistan border have contributed to a strained bilateral relationship. Since the 1990s, this challenge has also been linked to nuclear deterrence as Pakistan has developed and tested its own nuclear weapons with crucial support from China. The close bilateral ties between Pakistan and China add another layer of complexity to this dyad. In recent years, Pakistan-China relations have expanded from strong defense ties to significant Chinese investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that runs through Kashmir. In contrast to earlier governments' "characteristic restraint," Modi has shown more appetite for risk-taking and more willingness to escalate militarily with Islamabad, both after terrorist attacks in 2016 and three years later.⁴⁴ In 2019, a vehicle-borne suicide bomber attacked an Indian Central Reserve Police Force convoy in Kashmir, killing 40 personnel. The militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), a banned terrorist outfit from Pakistan, claimed responsibility for the blast. In response, India carried out air strikes in Pakistani territory – for the first time since 1971 – resulting in air skirmishes between the two air forces. During the campaign for the general election, which took place a month and a half later, the Modi government used the incident to distinguish

its strong response to Pakistan from the "weaker" behavior of previous INC governments. In relative terms, however, the "Pakistan challenge" has diminished since the 2000s.⁴⁵ Following the 2020 border skirmishes with China, reports emerged that the Indian Army will reorient two infantry divisions from the Pakistani border to the Chinese border and further strengthen other deployments along the Northern borders. Since February 2021, the ceasefire with Pakistan along the Line of Control in Kashmir, which had been violated daily for years, has remained stable.

In the extended neighborhood, now also referred to as the Indo-Pacific, India has expanded its geopolitical radius and has gained influence in recent years, particularly in the area of security. In this context, too, New Delhi's limited material resources constrain its growing ambitions. In the Indian Ocean, India has stepped up its power projection. It sees itself as a security provider and first responder and has increased security cooperation with states in the region such as Mauritius, Seychelles, and the Maldives. Southeast Asia is recognized as the heart of the Indo-Pacific. India's main partners are Singapore and Vietnam, with which security cooperation has increased from a modest base, focusing on maritime capacity building



and exercises. Closer bilateral cooperation with Japan and Australia, as well as within the Quad on a wide range of issues, has also contributed to India's sharper security profile in the Indo-Pacific. In terms of economic integration, however, Modi's "Act East" policy has so far been only moderately successful. India remains skeptical of multilateral trade agreements, reflecting its long-standing hesitant attitude toward globalization. New Delhi is not part of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), it withdrew at the last minute from the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) because it feared an even larger trade deficit with China, and it is participating in negotiations on only three of four pillars – barring the one on trade – of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). While the Modi government has long refrained from signing bilateral free trade agreements, it made a U-turn in 2021. In doing so, India aims to gain access to new export markets, diversify supply chains, reduce dependence on the Chinese market, and complement closer political cooperation with key partners by means of stronger economic engagement. India has since signed agreements with Mauritius, Australia, and the United Arab Emirates, and is in negotiations with the UK, the EU, and Canada, among others.

The Wider World – Sweet Spot or Caught in Between?

From an Indian perspective, the international environment with its many cleavages is at the same time difficult to navigate but also offers opportunities if Delhi plays its cards well. In the current balance of power, India is often ascribed the role of a "swing state," which means that India's positioning with respect to various issues could become increasingly important. However, this is also a delicate balancing act that, depending on developments, could prove detrimental to Delhi's position and interests.

India's relations with China have become increasingly complicated in light of the growing power differential and China's rising ambitions and aggressive behavior. Going forward, New Delhi will have to find effective ways to address this, which will likely include a combination of both internal and external balancing, accommodation, and competition. The 2020 China-India border clashes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas resulting in fatalities for the first time in more than 40 years marked a watershed moment in the bilateral relationship, at least from India's perspective. While India has tried to reassure China in the past despite closer ties with Washington, New Delhi has shed its



reluctance to take a more confrontational stance toward Beijing since the border incident. It has taken economic retaliatory measures, such as new rules restricting Chinese direct investment and banning nearly 60 Chinese apps. Shedding past reservations, India also stepped up its engagement with the Quad. While Beijing argues that relations should move forward despite heightened tensions along the LAC, New Delhi takes the opposite view that progress in relations cannot be separated from the border issue. Domestically, the Modi government has tended to downplay the situation on the border and has been reluctant to share respective information with the public. While this might follow the logic of a risk management strategy, it also gives China space to manipulate India's denial and reinforce gray zone tactics.⁴⁶

The situation along the border remains tense. There is currently no solution in sight at the tactical or strategic level. Both countries have built permanent infrastructures in high-altitude terrain and have deployed some 55,000 troops each, stationed in close proximity. This also places an additional burden on India's already limited military budget. More financial resources are urgently needed for military modernization and the development of maritime capabilities. The maritime

domain has only more recently assumed a more prominent role in New Delhi's security considerations.⁴⁷ Compared to India's land borders, the maritime environment offers strategic advantages over China because of India's geographical position. But the reach of the Indian Navy remains relatively limited at present. As India and China vie for security and influence in Asia, competition in the Indian Ocean will likely intensify. Their respective capabilities to project military force across the ocean and establish a lasting strategic presence will also influence the Asian balance of power.⁴⁸

Notwithstanding these various points of friction, China's economic importance to India remains crucial. In 2022, Beijing was New Delhi's second-largest trading partner and the bilateral trade balance reached a new high – with a large trade deficit for India. It is telling that India, despite the current confrontation along the disputed border, is the only country in the Quad that remains uncomfortable with the security aspects of the grouping. The Quad focuses instead on softer issues such as technology development and vaccines. Despite New Delhi's more confrontational rhetoric, its willingness or ability to distance itself further from Beijing seems to have certain limits.



India's relations with the US have been on a clear upward trajectory for over 20 years. While bilateral relations will continue to experience ups and downs, they are more comprehensive than ever and underpinned by growing mutual trust. Since the George W. Bush administration, India has been cultivated in Washington as a strategic partner whose hard power is to be strengthened to counterbalance China.⁴⁹ The Obama administration has designated India as "major defense partner." The Defense Department said the move sought to elevate India's position "at par with that of the United States' closest allies and partners."⁵⁰ During the Trump presidency, the two countries signed two foundational defense agreements, building upon one that was already signed in 2016. These allow for mutual logistical support, give India access to geospatial and GSI data, and enable intelligence sharing between the two militaries. These agreements were stalled by previous Indian governments, while Modi has been willing to push them through relatively quickly. In 2018, India and the US held the first 2+2 dialogue of their foreign and defense ministers. Modi also developed strong personal ties with Trump, as evidenced by Modi's rock star reception at the "Howdy Modi" event in Houston in 2019 and the "Namaste Trump" visit to Ahmedabad in 2020. The escalation on the China-India border in 2020 led

to a further strengthening of US-India cooperation, for example through the Quad. From India's point of view, it was also seen as positive that the different strategic positions on the Russian war in Ukraine did not lead to bilateral distortions. US government officials have expressed their understanding of India's "distinct" relationship with Russia.

Although the US and India have grown closer in light of the challenges posed by China, they are far from aligning on all issues. Major differences exist, for example, on trade in the areas of market access, intellectual property and unfair competition, and immigration, as well as on larger strategic issues. From India's perspective, US support for an Indian permanent seat on the UN Security Council is often little more than rhetoric.⁵¹ India also believes that the current international order is skewed in favor of the US and its allies. Modi stated in an address to the US Congress in 2016, that "the effectiveness of [US-India] cooperation would increase if international institutions framed with the mindset of the 20th century were to reflect the realities of today."⁵²

Russia's invasion of Ukraine forced India to perform a difficult balancing act between its longtime strategic partner Russia and its increasingly important



relationships with the US and its allies. Russia and India share a “Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership” dating back to the Cold War.⁵³ This relationship is underpinned by a mutual “geopolitical understanding,” stated the Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar in 2020.⁵⁴ The Indian population’s perception of Russia remains relatively positive one year after the outbreak of war.⁵⁵ However, Russia’s importance in India’s strategic calculations has steadily declined since the end of the Cold War. The war in Ukraine and the associated economic, political, and military weakening of Russia are likely to reinforce this trend. Due to strong defense dependencies and strategic considerations, however, India will not want – and would not be able – to give up its close ties with Moscow so quickly. The most important aspect of the bilateral relationship is defense cooperation. About 75 per cent of India’s current military inventory is of Russian or Soviet origin. Unlike Western partners, Moscow develops and produces strategically important technologies such as the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile jointly with India. However, India has managed to reduce its dependence on Russian arms imports significantly. Whereas ten years ago India sourced more than 80 per cent of its annual arms imports from Russia, by 2021 the share had dropped to 40 per cent.

India has turned to the US, France, and Israel, among others, to diversify its imports. While trade relations with Moscow are generally moderate, India has dramatically increased its imports of discounted Russian oil since Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. Since February 2022, Russia has gone from being a marginal crude oil supplier to India’s main supplier.

Significant reductions of Russian defense equipment in the Indian military inventory will not only take decades but will also require the willingness of other countries to support India in closing the emerging gaps in key areas. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, India canceled some previously agreed purchases of defense equipment such as the MiG-29 fighter aircraft. It has been argued, however, that these cancellations were planned prior to the invasion to promote the use of indigenous capabilities in the context of the “self-reliant India” campaign.⁵⁶ India is holding on to strategically important procurements such as the Russian S-400 air defense system. The US-India Critical and Emerging Technology initiative (iCET), launched in May 2022, can be seen as a US attempt to support Indian diversification efforts. Under the initiative, the two countries seek closer cooperation on munition-related technologies, maritime security,



semiconductors, quantum computing, and Artificial Intelligence (AI). At the first bilateral meeting under the initiative in January 2023, the US said that it was evaluating a proposal from General Electric for joint production of jet engines for Indian warplanes.

New Delhi also fears an uncontrolled Russia-China axis if it were to distance itself further from Moscow. Last year, China and Russia declared a partnership “without limits” and “with no forbidden areas.” Although this bilateral relationship will be limited by several factors, closer alignment between India’s main defense supplier, Moscow, on which it depends to meet the military challenge from China, and its main adversary, Beijing, which can increase military pressure along the disputed border at will, could seriously complicate New Delhi’s strategic environment. The more pressing this challenge becomes, the more New Delhi will align itself with the US and its allies.

In the context of India’s vision of a multipolar world and its search for partners to build the country’s internal capacity and resilience, Europe – the EU and its individual member states – is also assuming a more prominent place in New Delhi’s strategic thinking. India’s Foreign Minister Jaishankar stated in 2021 that India is making an effort to “engage with all 27

European states and with Europe as a collective.”⁵⁷ India has significantly increased its senior-level interactions with Europe in recent years. From the perspective of Europe, increasing tensions with China and, in this context, the rise of the Indo-Pacific have contributed to a change in the perception of India and its role in Asia. This has created previously nonexistent overlaps in foreign policy objectives. There are, however, different speeds at which the various relationships develop. France has been India’s most important strategic partner in Europe by far for decades and also plays an important role globally. India sees this relationship as complementary to the one with the US, as it helps to diversify New Delhi’s options.⁵⁸ A key aspect of this relationship is the area of defense as well as security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, where France has overseas territories. Between 2017 and 2021, Paris was the second-largest exporter of defense platforms to New Delhi. The two countries also conduct an annual strategic dialogue and joint military exercises.

Over the past decade, EU-India relations have expanded both in terms of the number of interactions and the scope of the partnership. According to Garima Mohan, the 2018 EU strategy on cooperation with India marked a significant departure from the EU’s



previous approach.⁵⁹ India was no longer viewed only through the lens of trade, the strategy went beyond bilateral cooperation by addressing larger geopolitical developments, and foreign and security policy cooperation played a more important role. The EU invited Modi for a summit with all 27 EU heads of state in 2021, a format previously offered only to the US president. In 2022, the EU and India also launched a trade and technology council and resumed negotiations on a free trade agreement after a gap of about nine years.

Germany is India's largest trade partner in the EU, and the tenth-largest foreign investor globally. Unlike France, however, Germany is interested in an expanded agenda with India for the purpose of diversification rather than balancing China.⁶⁰ The most important pillar of bilateral relations is economic cooperation, followed by science and technology and security and defense. The "Zeitenwende" envisaged by Germany could, however, also lead to closer security cooperation with India in the future. Despite an increase in high-level exchanges, Germany's interactions with India rank far behind those with China. New Delhi has also increased its engagement with other countries in Europe, some of which were visited by an Indian prime minister for the first time in decades,

for example Portugal in 2017.⁶¹ In 2018, India and the Nordic countries also held their first summit and met again in 2022.

The difficult discussions between India and Europe following Russia's invasion of Ukraine have also added a new complexity to the relationship and have contributed to a better understanding of each other's positions and dependencies.⁶² However, even though India's relations with Europe have grown considerably compared to 20 years ago, there remains a great amount of untapped potential.

An Ambivalent Partner?

India's foreign policy has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War. After decades of strategic isolation, New Delhi has since sought integration into the global economy, proactively engaged its neighborhood, and improved its relations with the US and its allies. Also in response to external developments, certain trends seem to have accelerated under the Modi government, such as the growing importance of the security partnership with the US and its allies and the articulation of a balance of power approach in the Indo-Pacific. Leveraging bilateral and minilateral relationships with a diverse range of countries in a quest for national security and status as an emerging major



power while seeking to avoid overdependence on any country characterizes India's current foreign policy. This approach is reflective of New Delhi's greater aspirations at the global level. India envisions both a multipolar Asia in which China can be kept in check and a multipolar world in which US power is not overbearing.⁶³ What has remained unchanged since independence is the flexibility to tilt selectively toward a major power depending on external circumstances.⁶⁴ The current international upheavals present challenges and opportunities for India's aspiration to remain an independent, self-reliant pole in a changing world order.

India's influence at the global level seems to be increasing, even if navigating between the many international cleavages often represents a difficult balancing act. The record at the national and regional levels is mixed. Despite discussions about "India's rise," New Delhi continues to face major social and economic challenges. This remains its foremost foreign policy preoccupation and limitation. How successful India will be in building its domestic material capabilities will determine the extent to which New Delhi will be able to shape the regional and international environment and achieve its foreign policy ambitions. An important factor in this equation

is the cooperation with financially strong partners such as the US and European countries. From the perspective of European countries, India will be a key partner in raising their profile in the Indo-Pacific and diversifying their relationships in Asia. Global efforts to diversify supply chains and India's aspiration to attract foreign investment offer a window of opportunity for closer engagement between Europe and India. Investing in India's long-term potential to increase its manufacturing capacity could benefit countries looking to reduce their dependence on China. With the prospect of closer relations between India and Europe, however, domestic political developments in India could reemerge as a contentious issue and potentially endanger the sustainability of progress in bilateral relations. Bilateral exchanges on these issues on an equal footing could represent a way to reduce this risk.

Besides economic development, China's rise and closer ties with the US and its allies are the other key factors shaping India's current foreign policy. India's relations with China have reached a low point, and Beijing's increasing clout in South Asia and the military pressure on the disputed border are difficult for New Delhi to manage. However, India's role in the Indo-Pacific as a counterweight



to China and associated closer cooperation with various states help New Delhi to offset certain negative effects. Therefore, India might not necessarily be interested in weakening Sino-US competition. A detrimental effect of India's closer engagement with the US and its allies is that China increasingly sees India in the context of its own bilateral competition with Washington. Beijing could use India's closer alignment with the US and its involvement in the Quad as a pretext for further aggression, which could have been a reason for the escalation of the border crisis in 2020 in the first place. While during the Cold War the absence of a direct threat from any of the major powers gave India greater room for maneuver, the current geopolitical situation is likely to impose certain limits on India's multi-alignment strategy. India's balancing behavior toward China carries certain risks that are difficult for New Delhi to calculate. Given these strategic considerations and China's economic weight, India may eventually soften its stance toward Beijing once the current crisis can be resolved.⁶⁵ However, this would not lead to a sustainable rapprochement based on mutual trust, and New Delhi would continue to pursue diversified balancing strategies vis-à-vis China.

India's relations with the US are better than ever before. Cooperation between

New Delhi and Washington has reached a level and density such that it will be less dependent on personalities in the future. The broader trajectory of the relationship seems to be well established. If China maintains its current course toward India, closer alignment with Washington will be the defining feature of India's foreign policy in the medium term. Nevertheless, as much as India will remain wary of Chinese coercion, it will continue to be skeptical of excessive US power. While there is currently a wide range of shared bilateral strategic interests between Washington and New Delhi, these overlaps would be much smaller without China's aggressive behavior. This is also reflected in the fact that India seems to be more closely aligned with Russia and China than with the US and its allies on various aspects of ideas of order. India calls for a multipolar world, for reform of the UN Security Council, and better representation in institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It also opposes unilateral action and sanctions outside the UN Security Council and shares similar reservations with China on freedom of navigation, a key aspect of order in the Indo-Pacific. Variation in worldviews between India and the US and its allies need not be an obstacle to closer bilateral engagement but rather the basis for managing expectations.



India's growing strategic importance and its decisive role in the Quad illustrates how economic, political, and military weight is shifting toward Asia. India is likely to play an important role in negotiating the future framework for a "free and open" Indo-Pacific, with its ideas of order gaining more influence. In this regard, New Delhi may also be able to mediate between certain diverging interests of the US, Asia, Europe, and Africa. For now, this will enable India to remain a relatively independent pole and benefit from growing international cleavages. India's constraining factors remain its limited material capabilities and the prospect of a more aggressive China forcing New Delhi to make greater concessions on its autonomy.

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