



India's Stake and Role in the U.S.-China Strategic Competition

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Abstract: This article analyzes India's stake and role in the context of the renewed confrontational relationship between Washington and Beijing. The examination of India's strategic vision, along with the changing dynamics of its bilateral ties with the United States, China, and Russia, demonstrates that New Delhi's foreign policy toward Washington has been shaped by events in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, as well as by the dynamics of America's evolving relationships with key Asian powers. India has assumed a prominent role in the United States' efforts to enforce a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. Both nations have leveraged shared values to deepen their engagement, also driven by pragmatic considerations. At the same time, maintaining close relations with the United States has become a strategic necessity for India. The partnership between India and the United States has been reinforced by their increasingly adversarial relationships with China. India has shown a noticeable shift in its approach to the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, driven by New Delhi's changing threat perception of China – from a partner to a security threat.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Global South, Quad, strategic rivalry, military-technical partnership, Russia-Ukraine war.

Introduction

India gained independence from Britain in 1947 with the Partition of the Indian subcontinent into two sovereign political entities. Like many post-colonial countries, India adopted a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy and has become a great success story in institutionalizing and consolidating democracy. Though rooted in Hindu civilizational ethos, India is constitutionally secular and

remains a multicultural, multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious society. It also has the second-largest Muslim population in the world, after Indonesia – a fact often highlighted by the country's top political leaders.¹ In 2023, India emerged as the world's most populous country, overtaking China. According to reliable projections, India is expected to achieve growth of more than 6 percent over the next five years and become the world's third-largest economy by 2030.²

The rise of the U.S.-China strategic rivalry has posed an increasing challenge for Asia's middle powers, including India, as the great power competition forces them to reveal their strategic choices between Washington and Beijing. While many countries are unwilling to take sides, India's changing threat perception has led New Delhi to lean toward Washington over Beijing on important geo-strategic issues. India has strengthened its bilateral and multilateral ties with the United States and its key allies to counter the China challenge. As global trade relationships deteriorate, India is also implementing policies aimed at boosting domestic manufacturing. The subsequent sections of this article explore how India's evolving strategy has profound implications for the U.S.-China competition and Asia's geopolitical landscape.

India's Strategic Vision

The British Raj has provided independent India with a geopolitical frame of reference. It is undeniable that India's political geography is inherited from the colonial experiments of the British Indian Empire. The British Raj was one of the most successful centralizing political entities, able to integrate and rule India for more than two hundred years. This success was primarily made possible through various geopolitical instruments, such as partnerships with native ruling elites, shrewd management of local political affairs to counter divisive tendencies, and the expansion of economic networks throughout the empire as well as in neighboring and peripheral regions. The British also demonstrated skill in controlling turbulent frontiers within the subcontinent and creating institutional structures for governance, diplomacy, and security.³ Notwithstanding the Indian nationalist movement's emphatic rejection of this imperial edifice, its realpolitik essence has greatly influenced independent India's geopolitical outlook and continues to guide its strategic vision. The British Raj's efforts to expand economic influence while preventing European interference in the subcontinent left a lasting legacy

¹ "India Home to Second Largest Population of Muslims in World: President Murmu," *Outlook*, July 12, 2023, www.outlookindia.com/national/india-home-to-second-largest-population-of-muslims-in-world-president-murmu-news-302281.

² Florian Zandt, "Which Countries Have the Highest GDP Growth Rate?" *Statista*, January 17, 2024, www.statista.com/chart/31587/real-gdp-growth-top-6-economies/.

³ C. Raja Mohan, "Securing India's Rise," in Ashley J. Tellis and C. Raja Mohan, *The Strategic Rationale for Deeper U.S.-Indian Economic Ties: American and Indian Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2015/08/the-strategic-rationale-for-deeper-us-indian-economic-ties>.

of India's centrality in the British imperial system, particularly in the Indian Ocean region. Unsurprisingly, this legacy continues to guide Indian strategic planning.

At the same time, the humiliating experience of being a British colony for two hundred years shaped core ideas of Indian foreign policy, particularly the doctrine of "non-alignment." Non-alignment was used to keep India out of Cold War military entanglements with either the United States or the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the Cold War severely undermined India's focus on economic, social, and political development, effectively splitting the international order into two antagonistic ideological camps.

When Pakistan joined military alliances led or sponsored by the United States against the USSR,⁴ India felt compelled to divert vital resources intended for economic development into military competition. As a result, the Soviet connection became invaluable for India, particularly when Pakistan sought to counterbalance India with the help of American arms and military aid. Though the resulting Indo-Soviet partnership was criticized as a compromise of India's non-aligned stance, it was, in reality, the pragmatic response to policies or pressures from the Western camp during the Cold War.

Moreover, India's relations with the USSR were devoid of any ideological considerations as shared geopolitical interests firmed them up.⁵ Following the Sino-U.S. rapprochement in the early 1970s, Washington had little incentive to help build Indian military defenses against China, making India more dependent on the Soviet Union.⁶ Gradually, the Soviet Union not only became India's leading source of weapon systems but also facilitated the licensed production of Soviet-designed aircraft and tanks in India, creating a decades-long dependency.

Though the notion of Asian solidarity could not withstand the fierce Chinese realism of the 1960s, non-alignment is still acknowledged as one of the cornerstones of India's foreign policy. While the term "non-alignment" lost much of its practical relevance after the end of the Cold War, its underlying principles have been revived in a new mantra known as "strategic autonomy."⁷

Despite being a rising power, India remains a strong proponent of a territorial *status quo* and has not engaged in offensive wars against its neighbors—Pakistan and China—unless provoked. Having participated continuously and actively in

⁴ Pakistan signed the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with the United States in 1954. Later, Pakistan became a member of the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), either led or sponsored by the United States to contain communism.

⁵ Rajan Menon, "India and Russia: The Anatomy and Evolution of a Relationship," in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, ed. David M. Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198743538.013.37>.

⁶ Tanvi Madan, *Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped U.S.-India Relations during the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Rowman & Littlefield/ Brookings Institution Press, 2020).

⁷ Rahul Mishra, "From Non-alignment to Multi-alignment: Assessing India's Foreign Policy Shift," *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 112, no. 1 (2023): 43-56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2165367>.

the UN system and other multilateral forums, India is generally comfortable with the post-war international order, provided it is granted a respectable decision-making role. India is no longer the strategic lightweight it was during most of the Cold War, so its foreign policy behavior is under close scrutiny. The current Indian leadership is adopting a more assertive stance in regional and global politics. By the middle of this century, India will likely emerge as the only geopolitical peer to the United States and China. With these two powers locked in strategic competition, India's strategic outlook seems clear: China is viewed as the most formidable security threat, while the United States is seen as the most promising partner.

India's support for Western objectives in maintaining the rules-based international order will continue to be driven by New Delhi's overall strategic vision. In contrast to the Western emphasis on the "rules-based international order" and Russia and China's inclination toward a "multipolar" world, India would prefer a "multipolar" rules-based international order in which it is one of the poles.

Major Threats and Challenges

India faces a complex set of challenges on the strategic front. The foremost concern is the threat to its territorial integrity, both in terms of maritime and land borders, with China emerging as the most serious national security threat.⁸ Similarly, Pakistan continues to be a strategic nuisance, as maintaining hostility toward India forms the core of Pakistan's national identity.⁹ Thus, the potential threat of a two-front war with China and Pakistan looms large. In addition to these external threats, maritime security in the Indian Ocean region has taken center stage in the present-day geopolitical and geostrategic competition between an authoritarian China, with its historical concept of the Silk Road, and the Quad member countries advocating for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." The growing menace of terrorism and radicalization, with groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS, and various Pakistan-based/sponsored terrorist organizations posing a threat, further complicates the situation. An additional factor is the escalating anti-India activities of some Sikh separatists based in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, adding an international dimension to India's national security

⁸ "China the Biggest Security Threat: Chief of Defence Staff General Rawat," *Business Standard*, Bloomberg, November 13, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/china-the-biggest-security-threat-chief-of-defence-staff-general-rawat-121111300026_1.html; Michael Kugelman, "China Has Become India's Greatest Threat," *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/19/india-china-military-threat-security-pakistan/>.

⁹ Karl-Heinz Kamp, "The Case for a Coherent South Asia Strategy: No Zero-Sum Choice between India and Pakistan," *Security Policy Working Paper* No. 11/2018, Federal Academy for Security Policy, 2018, <https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2018/the-case-for-a-coherent-south-asia-strategy-no-zero-sum-choice-between-india-and>.

concerns. Internally, small pockets of the country continue to grapple with long-term insurgencies, necessitating a delicate balance in the military response.

Significant steps have been taken to speed up India's military modernization, but the challenge lies in reducing foreign military dependence and ensuring the establishment of a self-sufficient defense manufacturing hub. The United States has emerged as India's most important partner in the economic, technological, geopolitical, and defense domains, contributing to several of India's national security objectives. On the other hand, defense cooperation remains the most crucial pillar of the India-Russia strategic partnership. Over the years, the New Delhi-Moscow military cooperation has evolved from a buyer-seller relationship to joint development and production of new military platforms. Although Russia remains a major supplier of weapons to India, it faces stiff competition from Western countries, including France, Israel, and the United States.

Despite being a significant power in the current international order, India's regional and global outreach has been somewhat constrained due to its limited financial resources, particularly when compared to China's growing "debt-trap diplomacy" in India's immediate neighborhood. Therefore, New Delhi must focus on two priorities: first, countering Beijing's growing financial clout in the region, and second, addressing the increasingly multifaceted security challenges both within and outside India.

Relations with Major Powers

America

The relationship between India and the United States has transitioned from being "adversarial" during the Cold War to that of a "natural ally" in the era of emerging strategic confrontation between Washington and Beijing. This shift is primarily due to India's policy of strategic autonomy, which is currently evolving into a multi-alignment approach. The end of the Cold War created fertile ground for a qualitative transformation in the nature of India-U.S. relations, even though Washington remained critical of India's nuclear program and its stance on human rights issues in Kashmir. However, the breakthrough came when the United States, faced with the terrorist threat, reconsidered its strategic priorities and began to look toward India. Both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations went on to emphasize that America's relations with India would shape the twenty-first century.¹⁰ The contemporary transformation in bilateral ties is underpinned by America's strategic bet on India to counter China, as well as by India's democratic credentials, economic potential, and the extent of its soft power approach in international relations. As India emerges as a crucial developmental partner across Asia and Africa, the United States increasingly views it as an alternative to China.

¹⁰ Varghese K. George, *Open Embrace: India-US Ties in the Age of Modi and Trump* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2018).

The United States envisions securing stronger ties with an India that has access to energy, investment, and markets. Furthermore, there is a growing willingness on the part of the United States to “co-produce and co-develop major security systems” together¹¹ and even grant sophisticated defense technology to India. Both India and the United States have enhanced their partnership on multilateral platforms, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, which has emerged as an important forum for discussing critical challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. Though India is not a formal alliance partner of the United States, their bilateral relations have acquired the flavor, although not the substance, of ties between allies. India is confident in pursuing a closer partnership with the United States by deftly applying its multi-alignment strategy. While various alignments are being utilized to address the shortfalls of a formal alliance, the functional nature of these alignments allows India to pursue security cooperation both in concert with the United States and independently of it. India's ties with the United States certainly represent a sophisticated stage in the evolution of its multi-alignment approach and are, therefore, significant.

During the G20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was unveiled to supplement existing maritime and road transport routes connecting India to Europe. Washington appears to be promoting IMEC as a counter to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and it may also be viewed as the continuation of the Abraham Accords, which sought to normalize relations between Israel and the Gulf states.¹² It should be noted that the I2U2 multilateral between India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States also showcases the depth of India-U.S. cooperation.

American willingness to strengthen India's military capabilities and support its potential leadership role in the Indo-Pacific marks a significant moment in Washington's relations with New Delhi. However, alongside increasing cooperation and coordination, some friction points between India and America persist. First, India's reluctance to align with America's strategy of isolating Russia and Iran on the global front remains an irritant. Second, the way in which the United States manages India-Pakistan tensions remains a point of contention. Finally, the West holds differing views on the contentious political issue of minority rights and democratic dissent in India, an issue that has long been debated in liberal Western media. It is often overlooked, however, that despite both being liberal democracies that share many political beliefs and institutions, Indian and

¹¹ David Vergun, “U.S., India Rapidly Expand Their Military Cooperation,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3433245/us-india-rapidly-expand-their-military-cooperation/>.

¹² Jean-Loup Samaan, “The India-Middle East Corridor: a Biden Road Initiative?,” *Atlantic Council*, October 6, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/the-india-middle-east-corridor-a-biden-road-initiative/>.

Western societies interpret certain political values rather differently. For instance, while both value freedom of speech, the social boundaries of this freedom show a contrasting image in India and the United States.

In essence, it can be argued that the India-U.S. relationship is characterized by a delicate balance between shared strategic interests and divergent perceptions. This balance will depend heavily on how the China problem is perceived and handled by the national security establishments in New Delhi and Washington, as China remains the primary driver in promoting strategic convergence between the two nations. As long as Washington remains convinced that the United States must build a stronger partnership with India—not only because India is the world’s largest democratic polity but also because this partnership is the sole credible military balancer against China in the current international order—India-U.S. ties will overcome all normative challenges.

China

The India-China relationship is characterized by a historical chain of conflicting events, which has taken on a new dimension amidst recent geopolitical tensions between the two countries. The long-standing boundary dispute intensified with India’s defeat in the 1962 war, resulting in China’s occupation of Aksai Chin. After several decades, it seemed possible to envision Sino-Indian tensions evolving into a more amicable state of affairs. However, in recent years, India has emerged as a more assertive player when it comes to countering the growing Chinese interference in the Indian Ocean region. This is evident in its opposition to the Belt and Road Initiative, its more active role in the Quad, and its withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2017.

As India’s External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, has pointed out, India-China relations have been in an “abnormal state” since the 2020 Galwan military clashes.¹³ The sudden military incursion by Chinese forces shattered the hope of ensuring long-term peace along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. This became a major event, as there had been no combat fatalities on the India-China border since 1975.¹⁴ While China urged the Indian government that the settlement of the contentious boundary issue should not influence bilateral trade ties,¹⁵ New Delhi repeatedly clarified that relations

¹³ PTI, “India’s Ties with China ‘Abnormal’ Due to Violation of Border Management Agreements by Beijing: Jaishankar,” *The Hindu*, April 29, 2023, www.thehindu.com/news/national/indias-ties-with-china-abnormal-due-to-violation-of-border-management-agreements-by-beijing-jaishankar/article66792248.ece.

¹⁴ Ananth Krishnan, “Torture, Not Firing, behind China Border Deaths in 1975, Recalls Veteran,” *The Hindu*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/torture-not-firing-behind-china-border-deaths-in-1975-recalls-veteran/article32654100.ece>.

¹⁵ PTI, “Boundary Settlement Process Should Not Stall Ties with India: China,” *The Economic Times*, January 19, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/boundary-settlement-process-should-not-stall-ties-with-india-china/article-show/106996296.cms>.

with China could not return to normal as long as Beijing continues to build up forces along the border with India. Essentially, India has emphasized the principle of “linkage” – the idea that there can be no progress on issues of interest to China unless there is progress on issues of interest to India, including the peaceful resolution of the boundary dispute. India has begun to convey unambiguously that Xi Jinping cannot expect to reap the advantages of booming economic relations with India while seeking to take advantage of military tensions on the border.

Beijing has leveraged its ties with Islamabad, utilizing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as part of President Xi Jinping’s dream project—the Belt and Road Initiative—to secure access to the Indian Ocean. The increasing military presence of Chinese naval ships in the Indian Ocean poses a critical threat to India. China continues to deepen its influence in India’s neighborhood by exerting political pressure on Bhutan and building closer ties with sections of the political elites in Nepal, Myanmar, and the Maldives.¹⁶ India’s Foreign Minister has recently acknowledged China’s attempts to influence India’s neighboring countries by deploying additional resources to shape regional dynamics in its favor but advised India not to “be scared of competition” because “global politics is a competitive game” in which one should be prepared to outwit the competitor.¹⁷

Struggle for Leadership of Global South

The G20 summit in New Delhi, held in 2023 under India’s chairmanship, demonstrated New Delhi’s ambition to emerge as a leader of the Global South. The term “Global South” refers to the vast majority of developing countries, primarily located in South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America – the geographical South. Adopting different strategies and approaches, India and China consider themselves leaders of the Global South and have long competed for influence over these nations.¹⁸ The primary motivating force behind India’s involvement in BRICS was to generate pressure for the democratization of the global economic architecture. However, this objective is increasingly under strain as China seeks to position BRICS as an alternative to the U.S.-led political and economic institutions. Despite India’s reservations about BRICS’ recent expansion, China

¹⁶ Deep Pal, “China’s Influence in South Asia: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 13, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/13/china-s-influence-in-south-asia-vulnerabilities-and-resilience-in-four-countries-pub-85552>.

¹⁷ “China Will Influence Our Neighbourhood, India Shouldn’t Be Scared of Competition: EAM Jaishankar,” *The Telegraph online*, January 30, 2024, www.telegraphindia.com/world/china-will-influence-our-neighbourhood-india-shouldnt-be-scared-of-competition-external-affairs-minister-s-jaishankar/cid/1997218.

¹⁸ Andrew F. Cooper, “China, India and the Pattern of G20/BRICS Engagement: Differentiated Ambivalence between ‘Rising’ Power Status and Solidarity with the Global South,” *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 9 (2021): 1945-1962, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1829464>.

has been working on a strategy to make BRICS geopolitically anti-Western in outlook.¹⁹

India is particularly concerned about China's potential dominance within BRICS and its tactical maneuvers to secure a prominent global platform for advancing Beijing's ambitions. Furthermore, China has persistently opposed India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and has resisted India's calls for the expansion of the United Nations Security Council.²⁰ Given these dynamics, it would be advantageous for the United States and the G7 to support India in its role as the leader of the Global South.

Implications of Ukraine War: The Russia Factor

A cornerstone of Indian foreign policy is that the country's leadership cannot be dictated by major powers when defining its national interests. India has often accorded great priority to maintaining strong political relations with Russia. There is still considerable goodwill in India regarding the crucial role played by the Soviet Union during the India-Pakistan war of 1971 when New Delhi desperately needed protection against China's potential military intervention on behalf of Pakistan. The Soviet Union helped India by deterring China and providing much-needed military supplies while using its veto power in favor of India at the UN Security Council.²¹ As a result, India's pursuit of a friendly relationship with Russia was initially driven by a shared rivalry with China. In the post-Cold War era, as Russia began to normalize relations with China, India found it difficult to reduce its dependence on Russia to balance against China. This continued dependence is one of the key factors driving India's Russia dilemma.

Even today, the Cold War legacy of a deeper India-Soviet defense partnership remains evident. India's refusal to compromise its strategic partnership with Russia over the war in Ukraine should be seen as a continuation of its foundational non-aligned vision, now rebranded as "strategic autonomy." While India's steadily closer relations with the United States over the last two decades have significantly undermined the enthusiasm of those attached to the dogmatism of "non-alignment," there remains a group of die-hard Indian conservatives who believe that the Indo-U.S. joint pursuit of a new Asian balance of power would

¹⁹ Neil Melvin, "Building Up the BRICS: An Emerging Counter-West Order?" *The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/building-brics-emerging-counter-west-order>; Joseph Cotterill, James Kynge, and Michael Pooler, "China Urges BRICS to Become Geopolitical Rival to G7," *Financial Times*, August 20, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/40f7cd4d-66f2-4e4d-876d-a0c7aa7097e1>.

²⁰ Geeta Mohan, "China Blocked India's Bid for Membership at UN Security Council, NSG: S Jaishankar," *India Today*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-blocked-india-s-bid-for-membership-at-un-security-council-nsg-s-jaishankar-1763679-2021-01-28>.

²¹ Nivedita Kapoor and Tanvi Madan, "Why India Cares about China-Russia Relations," *Brookings*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-india-cares-about-china-russia-relations/>.

severely damage India's "strategic autonomy," implying its long-standing partnership with Russia. Meanwhile, India's freedom to simultaneously maintain friendly ties with both Russia and the United States has grown increasingly constrained amid the escalating tensions between Washington and Moscow. For example, during the Trump presidency, the U.S. administration even contemplated imposing sanctions on India for its purchase of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia, though this idea was ultimately abandoned.²²

Many in the West are displeased with India for taking advantage of Western sanctions on Russia by increasing its purchase of Russian oil. Some Western leaders have misinterpreted this as India indirectly financing Russia's war against Ukraine,²³ overlooking the crucial fact that India lacks the financial resources to compete with the West's ability to pay higher prices for energy. As the world's third-largest energy consumer, India heavily depends on imports for most of its energy needs. This pragmatic pursuit of self-interest, a characteristic feature of Indian foreign policy, has led New Delhi to remain neutral on the war in Ukraine, refraining from directly condemning Russia.

Since the war began in March 2022, New Delhi has abstained from almost every UN resolution related to Ukraine. While India has not explicitly criticized the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has condemned the Bucha massacre²⁴ and also expressed concern over the nuclear rhetoric from Russian leaders. Many in the West are unaware of the extent of India's military dependence on Russian weapons, nor do they fully understand India's desire to avoid Russia's isolation in the international system. These complex factors have discouraged India from alienating Russia.

India relies on Russia for essential components of many weapons systems, including fighter aircraft, nuclear submarines, and land warfare platforms, continuing its dependence on Russian technology and maintenance. However, Russia's share in India's arsenal has decreased as New Delhi has expanded arms trade with the United States and France while investing heavily in domestic arms production.²⁵ The war in Ukraine has further prompted India to diversify its sources of weapons, as Russia struggles to meet its own requirements due to the punitive sanctions. The Indian military is reportedly disappointed with Russia's military performance on the Ukrainian battlefields. Long delays in the delivery of critical military supplies from Russia have also become a significant issue for all

²² Raj Verma, "India-US-Russia Dynamics in the Trump Era," *India Review* 22, no. 2 (2023): 172-183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2023.2180920>.

²³ Chintamani Mahapatra, "India's Approach to the War in Ukraine," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 16, no. 2 (2021): 95-108.

²⁴ Krishna N. Das, "India Condemns Killings in Ukraine's Bucha in Apparent Hardening of Stance," *Reuters*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india-condemns-killings-ukraines-bucha-apparent-hardening-stance-2022-04-05/>.

²⁵ Krishn Kaushik, "India Pivots Away from Russian Arms, but Will Retain Strong Ties," *Reuters*, January 29, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-pivots-away-russian-arms-will-retain-strong-ties-2024-01-28/>.

branches of the Indian military. In particular, the delivery of the indigenous, licensed manufacture of Russian Kalashnikov AK-203 rifles is now delayed beyond March 2024.²⁶ To explore alternatives, India's Ministry of Defense approved the procurement of 73,000 Sig Sauer assault rifles from the United States in December 2023. Similarly, the delivery of two Project 1135.6M Admiral Grigorovich-class guided missile frigates and the leasing of a follow-on Project 971 Akula (Schuka-B)-class nuclear-powered submarine for the Indian Navy have been postponed from early 2024 to early 2025.

New Delhi and Moscow hold an annual summit at the highest political level, with alternating visits of the Indian Prime Minister and the Russian President. However, following the war in Ukraine, Putin did not travel to New Delhi for the annual summit in 2022. Citing a "busy schedule," Putin also skipped the G20 Summit in New Delhi, with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov attending the summit on his behalf. In December 2023, it was the Indian Prime Minister's turn to visit Russia for the annual summit. Yet, Modi did not undertake the visit, resulting in the summit's cancellation for the second consecutive year. Instead, Foreign Minister Jaishankar was sent on a five-day visit to Moscow to meet with Russian leaders.

While Modi's decision to forgo the visit to Russia signals to the West that India is mindful of their concerns, Jaishankar's trip may have been viewed as a message to Moscow that India has not abandoned its traditional strategic partner under Western pressure. After his party's victory in the 2024 general elections, Modi resumed office as Prime Minister. In a surprisingly bold move, he made a high-profile visit to Moscow in July to hold the 22nd India-Russia annual summit, raising eyebrows in the West. During his talks with Putin, Modi remarked that a solution to the Ukraine conflict was not possible on the battlefield, as peace cannot be reached amidst bombs, guns, and bullets.²⁷ From Moscow, Modi proceeded directly to Austria, which reflected India's extraordinary diplomatic efforts to position itself as a genuine peacemaker.

India's desire to preserve its ties with Russia cannot be interpreted as indifference to the violence in Ukraine. After famously reminding President Putin on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in September 2022 that "today's era is not the era for war,"²⁸ Prime Minister Modi assured Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky during the G7 Summit in May 2023 that

²⁶ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India's Russia Defense Gambit," *The Diplomat*, January 5, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/indias-russia-defense-gambit/>.

²⁷ Hindu Bureau, "Modi in Russia Highlights: PM Departs for Austria after Fruitful Two-day Visit," *The Hindu*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-narendra-modi-russia-visit-putin-talks-live-updates-july-9-2024/article68383655.ece>.

²⁸ Dan Bilefsky and Mujib Mashal, "Russian Invasion of Ukraine: India's Leader Tells Putin That Now Is Not an Era for War," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/09/16/world/ukraine-russia-war>.

India would do “everything it can” to help bring peace to Ukraine.²⁹ In August 2024, Modi undertook a historic visit to Kyiv, the first by an Indian Prime Minister since Ukraine became a sovereign country in 1991. Modi’s long train journey from Warsaw to Kyiv to meet President Zelensky has been regarded as extraordinary. It inserted India into Europe’s quest for peace, demonstrated India’s determination to play an active role in reshaping the global order following the Ukraine war, and revived India’s lost bonds with Ukraine.³⁰

From the Western point of view, India’s strong ties with Russia position New Delhi as an honest peace broker between Russia and Ukraine, primarily due to deep-rooted Western mistrust towards China and Russia’s hostile attitude towards the United States. However, regardless of the role New Delhi chooses in a peace effort, it can be argued that India would continue to frustrate Western capitals in their attempts to persuade New Delhi to join the anti-Russia coalition. As Foreign Minister Jaishankar pointed out, “I would still like to see a more rules-based world, but when people start pressing you in the name of a rules-based order to give up, to compromise on what are very deep interests, at that stage, I’m afraid it’s important to contest that.”³¹

As previously mentioned, India’s relationship with China has been tense, particularly because of China’s occupation of significant Indian territory and occasional border clashes intended to pressure Indian leadership. New Delhi needs its friendship with Moscow as a counterbalance to Beijing, and thus, India’s core national interest lies in rejecting Russia’s complete international isolation, which could drive Moscow even closer to Beijing. Moreover, India would like to see Russia’s position as a great power more or less intact, as this may facilitate New Delhi’s push for a more multipolar international order.

However, India’s task of managing these dynamics is likely becoming considerably more complicated. If New Delhi’s unwillingness to dilute or downgrade its traditional partnership with Moscow dampens American enthusiasm to invest more political capital to court India, it would directly embolden China to pursue expansionist ambitions in the region without fear of being jointly countered by the United States and India. Therefore, while India and Russia may strive to maintain closer ties, their geopolitical priorities will continue to evolve in different directions. A key factor that could loosen their political ties is the absence of a common threat; India has no common adversary with Russia.

²⁹ Happymon Jacob, “Can India Bring Russia and Ukraine to the Table? What New Delhi’s Diplomacy Can and Cannot Achieve,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 2, 2023, www.foreignaffairs.com/india/can-india-bring-russia-and-ukraine-table.

³⁰ C. Raja Mohan, “Why Modi’s Visit to Ukraine Marks Three New Roads: India in Europe, Diplomatic Space, and Delhi-Kyiv Revival,” *The Indian Express*, August 24, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/modi-visit-ukraine-9529875/>.

³¹ Roger Cohen, “Russia’s War Could Make It India’s World,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/31/world/asia/india-ukraine-russia.html>.

India's Stance on U.S.-China Strategic Competitions

Taken together, trends such as India-China boundary tensions, North Korea's military muscle-flexing, a looming trade war between the United States and China, China's maritime disputes with the Philippines, Vietnam, and Japan, as well as Beijing's increased land reclamation efforts in the South China Sea and the construction of military installations, point in a troublesome direction.³² Different countries in South and Southeast Asia view China from various perspectives, shaped by factors such as geography, history, and trade ties. However, the multiplicity of India's bilateral relationships in the region also has the potential to contribute positively to India-U.S. ties.

India has been on the receiving end of China's attempts to suppress its will to defend its territory and safeguard its economic interests. As India's foreign minister has repeatedly articulated, ensuring economic prosperity at home, maintaining peace on the borders, and enhancing India's influence abroad are among the most important strategic priorities for Indian policymakers. The United States plays a key role in all levels of India's strategy. Geopolitically, India shares a common interest with the United States in limiting China's aggressiveness. Over the years, India has increasingly viewed the United States as indispensable in building its strategic capabilities and maintaining a balance of power in Asia. It is worth noting that the current level of Indo-U.S. friendliness has emerged against three key developments: rising tensions between the United States and China, growing alignment between Russia and China, and the tightening embrace between China and Pakistan.

Therefore, India's strategic coordination with the United States in the Indo-Pacific is set to increase. Similarly, growing outreach from many European countries to India is seen as beneficial in terms of building sustainable partnerships in defense, technology, trade, and investment. Moreover, India will continue to resist attempts by China and Russia to turn BRICS into an anti-Western geopolitical grouping. However, if strategic competition is framed in overly ideological terms, India has little to offer to the West. While it is understandable that Washington needs to emphasize the ideological nature of the conflict between Western and Chinese political values, the American worldview of liberal democracy has limited appeal in New Delhi.

The decline of U.S. supremacy, coupled with the gradual abdication of its global leadership, presents many disadvantages for India. The twin failures of the United States in state-building projects in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the widespread perception of its disengagement from parts of West and Central Asia, may have created an impression of Washington's inability or unwillingness to intervene on India's behalf in a potential boundary crisis with China. In a zero-sum, anarchical system, China's assertive rise triggers strategic anxieties in both

³² Center for Preventive Action, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," Council on Foreign Relations, updated September 17, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

Washington and New Delhi. Unsurprisingly, existing coalitions are being repurposed, and new ones are being formed to contain China's quest for Asian dominance, even though the variety of interests, preferences, and strategies among various foreign policy actors pose obstacles to the emergence of a cohesive multilateral security architecture.

New Delhi may still acquire certain strategic advantages in the emerging multipolar world. Before the Biden administration sought to restore a semblance of normalcy in transatlantic ties, the Trump administration had shaken the confidence of many American allies by adopting a more transactional approach to international diplomacy. Since India has never been a treaty partner of the United States, New Delhi appears comfortable doing business with the United States on transactional terms. Consequently, Trump's potential return to the White House could provide India with greater leverage over American strategic priorities. New Delhi, eager to benefit from the advanced U.S. military hardware without compromising its strategic autonomy, will likely welcome a request to shoulder more burdens with Japan and Australia in maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Partnering with the United States holds immense promise for India's security interests, particularly in New Delhi's strategy to counter China's economic and military rise in its vicinity. Without fully aligning with the American agenda vis-à-vis China, India has been working to ensure a strong and sustainable U.S. presence in Asia. It is also important to understand that if India's military edge over China along the Himalayan borders erodes due to China's deployment of similar Russian-made weapon systems, New Delhi will likely intensify its search for more technologically advanced weapon systems from Western countries. This could lead to a deeper military-technical partnership between India and the United States in the long term.

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