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2023

Xavier, C. (2023). India's optimism for a new regional order. RSIS Commentaries, 016-23.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/165486>

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India's Optimism for a New Regional Order

By Constantino Xavier

SYNOPSIS

The global pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war have had a dual structural impact that accelerated Asia's regional transition, which has been slowly evolving amidst rising US-China competition. India sees the ongoing disruption as a challenge, but also as an opportunity to realize its role as a bridging power to shape a new regional order through global partnerships.

COMMENTARY

Asia's rapidly evolving security context brings a myriad of challenges, but India's eye is also set on exploring the horizon of opportunities that this brings. India's overall positive outlook is premised on the understanding that its capabilities and bridging power assume indispensable utility in times of global volatility. For India, the risks of today's systemic transition are real, but the current fog of uncertainty is not necessarily a source of anxiety.

Unlike many of their Western and fellow Asian counterparts, New Delhi's decision-makers tend to perceive the rapidly evolving environment more optimistically as an opportunity. Recent policies manifest how New Delhi has worked to sustain its balancing act. It recalibrated its China policy by engaging the Quad and other middle powers but also sustained its ties with Russia and continued to champion the developmental causes of the Global South.

Persistent Challenges

There is rarely a calm period in India's strategic environment, but the last two years have been particularly challenging. Most importantly, relations with China were disrupted after decades of gradual convergence since the 1962 war. The 2020 military

confrontation between the two neighbours in the Himalayas, the first deadly one in 45 years, marked an irreversible downturn.

While the conflict was local, focused on the territorial dispute, it had major economic and political repercussions, freezing the relationship at almost all levels. Beijing is keen to return to the status quo and normalize despite holding on to newly acquired territory, while New Delhi is adamant about the need for a hard reset. For the first time in several decades, there is no political capital left in New Delhi to invest in engaging and trusting China.

Similarly, an increasingly assertive China has also been encroaching on India's traditional sphere of influence in South Asia. China is now a deeply entrenched player across the region, often at the expense of Indian interests, whether it is the formation of coalition governments in Nepal, military modernization in Bangladesh, or the economic future of Sri Lanka.

To the west, backchannel talks with Pakistan have achieved no progress since the 2021 cease-fire. India remains a concerned spectator to Pakistan's cyclical civil-military tensions, its deteriorating financial health, and its rising reliance on China. India's regional security environment has also suffered a setback with the fall of Kabul to the Taliban and a medley of terrorist groups that Pakistan has often played as proxies to target Indian interests.

At the global level, Russia's Ukraine invasion has posed the toughest test to India. It is unlikely that there is any Indian decision-maker left under the illusion that Russia will reverse its inevitable structural decline. But Moscow is still seen as a structural pole that India cannot afford to ignore or upset, which explains New Delhi's subdued reaction to the invasion and its consequent abstentions at the United Nations (UN).

Despite American and European pressures, India has stuck to its position for two different sets of reasons. Tangible tactical interests include Russia's predominant role as a reliable defence partner, source of energy, and Moscow's veto power at the UN Security Council. More abstract strategic and signaling interests include India's efforts to reduce Russia's growing dependence on China and New Delhi's intent to portray itself diplomatically as an independent actor, able to withstand American pressure and lead the silent majority of "third block" countries in Asia and Africa that have refused to take sides.

Exploring Opportunities

For India, all these challenges and risks are real, but the current fog of systemic uncertainty is not necessarily a source of strategic threat or anxiety. Instead, Indian responses often indicate a curiously positive approach to the growing state of disorder. This permeates what India's foreign minister S. Jaishankar has termed "strategies for an uncertain world" in his recent book describing the "India way" to international politics. India's recent policies indicate four such paths.

First, in New Delhi's perspective, China's growing centrality and influence have paradoxically triggered a new balancing behaviour by states across the region and beyond. For example, after an initial enthusiasm with the Belt and Road Initiative

whose investments have now largely dried up, several South and Southeast Asian countries are now pursuing strategic diversification by seeking an alternative in India, whether by intensifying trade relations or pushing for closer defence cooperation. The Indian Navy has been in high demand for joint exercises and much of Asia has still not given up hope on India eventually joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to mitigate China's growing centrality.

The Quad has been another preferred instrument for India to respond to a growing demand from countries seeking to reduce their strategic dependence on China. Together with the United States, Japan and Australia, India has played a leading role in reviving the Quad since 2017 despite China's vocal opposition. Beijing is particularly worried about India's participation because it undermines its narrative about the Quad as a West-dominated "Asian NATO" anchored in a security treaty relationship led by the United States. China's concerns were most recently on display when its top diplomat in Dhaka warned Bangladesh against engaging the Quad in any way.

Unperturbed by such admonitions and pressures, India has been playing an important role in recasting the Quad in a more civilian form, moderating its initial emphasis as a military and defence instrument. New Delhi is actively contributing to the Quad's agenda for coordinated provision of public goods in Asia, including on vaccine production and distribution, resilient supply chains, open telecom architectures, maritime domain awareness and infrastructure financing.

Second, India has also been pursuing the opportunity of trilateral engagements with other middle powers in Asia. This includes a growing collaboration on transportation infrastructure with Japan in the Bay of Bengal region, the strategic heart of the Indo-Pacific. New Delhi and Tokyo have been topping up their maritime security convergence with a growing geoeconomic agenda for a "free and open" Indo-Pacific, from sea lines of communication to exploring new defence partnerships.

The France-India-Australia trilateral is a further example of Delhi's strategic optimism, open to think out of its traditionally limited menu of alignment options. The three countries are now working in tandem, including by dividing labour towards coordinated naval patrols and capacity building programmes for the Indian Ocean littoral and small island states. On its own, India is continuing to extend its out of area power projection capabilities, including through the induction of a new aircraft carrier, a defence pact with the Maldives, and upgrading its military installations on the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago.

Third, India's front footedness has also been manifest in its ability to accelerate the European Union's Indo-Pacific reorientation. While the Russia-Ukraine war has momentarily diverted much of Europe's political attention away from Asia, India has been playing a silent but important role in pushing Brussels, as well as Berlin and other European capitals, to recognize that the future global balance of power hinges on what happens in Asia. New Delhi has been positioning itself as the coordinating actor of a constellation of middle powers, a first among equals that share a common interest not to let China become a hegemonic power.

Finally, while India remains concerned about policy paralysis and continued institutional inequalities at the United Nations, it has also positively embraced

alternative agendas to foster multilateralism and cooperation. Two of its recent institutional innovations include the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. The United States, Japan and Bangladesh are members of both, but China is conspicuously absent. India's G20 presidency is expected to further signal India's balancing act, with a developmental focus on inclusive financial, digital, health and climate governance solutions.

Shaping the Future Balance

The idea of India as a swing power or structural bridge should not be equated with policy abstention or neutrality, nor confused as a reflection of a naïve and ideological vision. As former Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan recently noted, even when India adopts a passive posture of inaction, it continues to matter for the rest of the continent through its "sheer existence."

While optimism is no substitute for sound policy, it permeates India's outlook of the rapidly changing security environment and explains the country's proactive posture to explore opportunities arising from the current uncertainty that can help shape the future order. New Delhi faces significant challenges, but it also recognizes that this is the time to deploy its bridging power between different actors to craft a new balance.

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