



China's President Xi Jinping and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a signing ceremony during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Qingdao in June 2018.

# India's 'multipolar Asia' approach and China

JAGANNATH PANDA

**F**ACTORING China into the formulation of New Delhi's foreign policy and managing its relationship with Beijing is not just a strategic choice for India. It is a strategic necessity. A complex bilateral and geographical environment, competing foreign policy interests and China's rise as an influential actor in global policymaking undergird this fact. But an ongoing boundary dispute means that New Delhi remains guarded towards any Chinese overtures.

Despite difficulties, envisioning a stable relationship with China has been a prime objective in India's foreign policy in the post-Cold War period. This engagement has created both opportunities and obstacles for India in Asia, raising complementarities and contradictions that are partly structural and partly systemic in a changing regional order.

Most recently, the 'Wuhan Consensus'—stemming from an informal summit meeting between Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping—endorses this design. As Prime Minister Modi is now in his second

consecutive term, engagement with China should be a priority in his foreign policy 2.0.

India envisions a 'multipolar Asia' and advocates a shared regional leadership where major and minor powers will have equal standing in the decision-making process. This is based on the rationale that China's rise in Asia is unbalancing the regional power structure and eroding India's strategic choices. In the Indian conception, a multipolar Asia is a universal proposition, not just a regional one.

As reflected in Modi's speech at the second Raisina Dialogue in January

2017, India contends that the world has rapidly accepted multipolarity. The essence of a multipolar Asia rests on an equal distribution of power and responsibility which will be conducive to India's rise in Asia and beyond, with an increasingly dominant China.

Presently, India's stake in a complex world structure is to secure its economic and security interests while pursuing a greater role for itself. China's economic and military prominence in Asia is affecting India more than any other country, except perhaps Japan. Beijing's stronger commercial contacts and growing political understanding in South Asia is continuously denting India's authority in this region.

Amid all the scepticism, Xi's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is fast becoming the preferred package for infrastructure investment and connectivity initiatives. The establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the New Development Bank (NDB) exemplify China's stature in the world.

By advocating a multipolar Asia, India visualises a greater role for itself in the diffusion of power and seeks to better position its security interest vis-a-vis China. This complements India's multi-aligned foreign policy approach that allows it to stay connected with a variety of countries and regional groupings such as the United States, Russia, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN and the European Union.

India's support for a multipolar Asia rests on three critical elements.

First, the diffusion of power interlinks Asian—specifically Indian—security with global security. It strengthens India's standing internationally, primarily at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), as

an emerging economy and a vibrant Asian democracy.

Second, minor and major powers in Asia must have a shared role in the collective decision-making process, facilitating Indian interests. India's support for an ASEAN-centred regional architecture confirms New Delhi's preference for a consultative mechanism for regional economic integration, as does India joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

Third, inclusivity should be the order in Asia, rather than exclusivity, to allow space for an external power like the United States to contribute to the evolving regional security architecture. Such openness allows India to maintain strong connections with the two biggest global powers, the United States and China. In Asia, it allows India to promote a regional paradigm of 'shared leadership' among the three major Asian powers: India, China and Japan.

In contrast, the Chinese conception of Asia threatens an overhaul of the security structure that aims to weaken

---

India's advocacy of a multipolar Asia is based on a more democratic and pluralistic proposition with the aim of making global governance architecture more equitable and representative

the US-led security architecture prevalent in the region. This was evident in Xi's speech at the Fourth Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia in 2014, where he endorsed the rising status of Asia in world affairs but advanced the concept of 'Asia for Asians'. This proposition places the region's security undertakings primarily in the hands of Asians.

While it remains unclear how prevalent the 'Asia for Asians' proposition is in Chinese thinking at present, Beijing's 'new era' foreign policy under Xi undoubtedly has a much greater global reach. But Asia is significant in Chinese foreign policy and all calculus of China's global reach runs through it. Xi's speech at the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations on 15 May 2019 in Beijing confirms this. He stressed the regional aspiration of living and working in 'contentment and security, free from fear' to raise a level of confidence among the Asian countries represented at the conference. In the Chinese assessment, an Asian security balance still accommodates American interests and most US-led partnerships such as those with Japan and India. But, for China, a tilt towards an Asian framework for regional security cooperation is necessary.

As the newly released 2019 Belt and Road Forum report indicates, China would like to focus more on a global strategy with a soft-power approach to promote its external economic engagement across the world via Asia. Yet the Chinese conception of Asian security, unlike that of India, is based on empowering Asia as a region where Chinese ascendancy to power in global affairs will be obvious.

Chinese ambitions have prompted Indian caution and its visualisation of Asia through a multipolar lens.



On the holiday in October 2018 celebrating Mahatma Gandhi's birthday, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres throws flower petals over the national memorial to the independence leader at the Raj Ghat in Delhi. India is a charter member of the UN. Achieving power parity with China in global decision-making bodies, including permanent membership of the Security Council, 'has always been India's underlying objective'.

From New Delhi's perspective, if the United States is excluded from Asia, the Chinese proposition of 'Asia for Asians' could be realised as an 'Asia for the Chinese'.

India's advocacy of a multipolar Asia is based on a more democratic and pluralistic proposition with the aim of making global governance architecture more equitable and representative. Beijing has long enjoyed the structural advantage of being a permanent member of the UNSC. Achieving power parity with China in global decision-making bodies, primarily at the UNSC, has always been India's underlying objective. A pluralistic Asia enables it to expedite this ambition. More representation at the UNSC will

enhance the council's 'credibility' and 'legitimacy'. A multipolar Asia corroborates India's desire to reform the UNSC. This proposition looks to build India's strength globally and support from China for it is a strategic necessity.

New Delhi's G4 association with Japan (along with Germany and Brazil) validates a multipolar approach. In India's contention, the UNSC must have better continental representation from across the world—mainly from Asia and the developing world—to build a more representative and equitable global decision-making framework. This finds strategic dissonance with the Chinese worldview. Beijing is not in favour of having more representation from Asia

that would diminish its prominence as the sole Asian representative at the UNSC. Nor does it want to offer any strategic mileage to Asian competitors like Japan and India, which it perceives as strategically closer to the United States.

Chinese opposition to Japan's UN Security Council candidature is more direct—Tokyo's financial contribution to the UN budget is not sufficient cause for its candidature and Japan does not qualify to represent the voices of developing countries. Beijing also questions whether Japan's historical baggage of wartime atrocities is contradictory to the UN spirit.

But China's reservation about India's permanent candidature is more ambivalent, exhibiting shades

of Beijing's undemocratic character and its preference to maintain the status quo in the UNSC. Beijing has not fundamentally opposed India's candidature but has avoided openly supporting anything. It is taking advantage of the structural deficiency within the UN system that hinders a broader consensus on reform, denying a greater voice to Asia.

Regionally, the notion of a multipolar Asia strengthens India's stake in a maritime Asia. China is fast emerging as a strategic concern, or even as a threat, to India's maritime interests in the Indian Ocean region. A maritime dispute may not be inevitable between the two since they do not have a disputed maritime zone, but India's commercial presence in the South China Sea, including joint oil exploration with Vietnam, troubles China. India's growing security and maritime understanding with Japan to enhance a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' is also perceived adversely. The revival of the Quadrilateral (Quad 2.0) consultative grouping—Australia, India, Japan and the United States—has only strengthened the decade-old Chinese misperception of a rising 'Asian NATO'.

Likewise, India has been troubled by repeated Chinese submarine adventures across the Sri Lankan coast. Beijing's maritime infrastructure building across the Indian Ocean through its maritime silk road has raised eyebrows in Indian strategic circles. India's maritime contestation with China is not territorial. Rather, it is about gaining space and influence to protect its energy and economic interests in maritime Asia, primarily in the South China Sea, which facilitates almost half of India's trade and commerce and more of China's.

India has long stressed the significance of international law in



Then US Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, and then Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, signing the 2+2 Dialogue agreement in Delhi on 6 September 2018. The agreement is seen as strengthening ties with the United States, although that 'does not imply India's unwillingness to nurture its relationship with China'.

its maritime diplomacy. The Indian thrust towards a multipolar Asia complements New Delhi's notion of a maritime Asia with emphasis on a democratic rules-based order—one that promotes freedom of navigation and overflight, leading to protection of its commercial interests. This also strengthens India's advocacy of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) in the Indo-Pacific.

By supporting a multipolar view of Asia, New Delhi endeavours to put pre-emptive pressure on China to address the maritime security demands of many countries. Beijing has established coercive maritime influence, mainly in the South and East China Sea. Beijing's grey-zone strategy appears more and more coercive and many find it difficult to challenge—meaning a more broad-based consensus on a 'free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific' has arrived. A multipolar maritime Asia would support a flexible strategic environment for India to operate in trilateral and quadrilateral formats. It

would complement a concerted effort across the Indo-Pacific to balance the projection of China's growing power.

India's foreign policy outreach to China would be strengthened in a multipolar Asia. If a 'multi-aligned' policy strategy based on 'strategic autonomy' emerged as the defining feature of Indian foreign policy, it would help in part to accommodate China as a strategic partner in the region. Strategic autonomy offers space to position India's strategic interests in a systemic calculus. Such a multi-aligned policy framework provides multiple engagement structures through regional and global institutions. This allows India to better position its interests within and outside China-backed and US-backed institutions without subscribing to either of their respective visions.

While India has welcomed most China-backed multilateral institutions or bodies such as the AIIB, NDB and SCO it opposed the BRI from the beginning. New Delhi always perceived the AIIB as an Asian

multilateral institution that would facilitate the accumulation of national and international infrastructure. It is the AIIB's second-largest shareholder. Joining the AIIB was seen as a historic opportunity to occupy a greater role in the governance of multilateral institutions, though it perceived it as primarily an 'Asian exercise'.

In contrast, New Delhi has always had strong reservations about the BRI. Its response to the Chinese invitation to join the BRI was diplomatically stout and resolute. India questions the BRI's legitimacy as a connectivity initiative and has stated that such initiatives must be based on 'universally recognised international norms, including good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality'.

India's stance stresses the significance of the 'sovereignty' and 'territorial integrity' of other countries. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor under the BRI, for example, is a large-scale strategic hindrance to India since it ignores India's sensitivities to territorial integrity. India, like other countries, has also stated that a connectivity project must adopt principles of financial responsibility to avoid debt burdens and be environmentally sustainable. The fundamental difference between the AIIB and the BRI, in India's perception, is the contested norms of universalism and unilateralism, respectively.

Likewise, a 'global strategic partnership' between India and the United States is undeniably strengthening the democratic framework of understanding in the Indo-Pacific. India signed the 'Communication, Compatibility, Security Agreement' (COMCASA) with the United States during the first 2+2 Dialogue in September 2018. If

the civil nuclear agreement signed in 2008 marked a new beginning, both the 2016 Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement and the 2018 COMCASA strengthened that narrative further. India appears to anticipate the United States becoming a stronger partner, both militarily and strategically, while not entirely endorsing a US-led order. Improving its relationship with the United States does not imply India's unwillingness to nurture its relationship with China.

India realises that China's discontent has less to do with the global order and more to do with the international institutional system such as the Bretton Woods institutions. India has seen an opportunity to cooperate with China to reform institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the World Trade Organization. No matter how visible revisionist tendencies are in Chinese foreign policy under Xi, Beijing's displeasure is primarily with US predominance in these institutions. In order to have a less Western

---

India has seen an opportunity to cooperate with China to reform institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the World Trade Organization

dominated international system, China is continuously promoting new sets of institutions to shape the future global order. India is seen as a prospective partner in this Chinese conception of the international order.

By promoting multipolarity and advocating democracy in the international system, China has displayed confidence while also advocating for a Chinese model of economic development and security. To this effect, India has responded positively—primarily in working with China to exert pressure to reform the Bretton Woods institutions. Beijing has, therefore, started acknowledging New Delhi's significance by including it in the SCO as a full member and making it a founding member of the AIIB and the NDB. In other words, India is seen as a partner in China's 'Global South' framework.

If this growing association with China in bilateral and multilateral mechanisms has made New Delhi more open to Beijing's engagement, the rise of China and its strategic urge to dominate has also made New Delhi cautious about engagement.

India's sustained economic growth along with a stronger strategic outreach across Asia—through its Act East policy, Link West policy, Connect Central Asia policy and SAGAR—has led to its embrace of a multipolar Asia where New Delhi has a greater role in regional affairs. An alignment with China is an important feature of this conception as it will both protect and enhance India's rise without contesting China's rise. 

*Jagannath Panda is a Research Fellow and Centre Coordinator for East Asia at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. He is the Series Editor for Routledge Studies on Think Asia.*