

India Is Creating A New World Order

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(Reprinted from IAI News on May 3, 2022)

The West claims that Putin's war against Ukraine means that Russia is now isolated by the international community. But in fact, the exact opposite is happening. Most of the world is either pro-Russia or neutral with regards to the war in Ukraine. India's neutral stance is critical to this international balance of power. And while India's historical ties with Russia go a long way to explain the current situation, it is also India's vision for the future that's informing its attitude. Along with China and Russia, India is aiming to bring about an end to western global hegemony, and usher in a new era of a multipolar international order, argues Chris Ogden.

While it may seem from the Western perspective that Russia is turning into an isolated, pariah state due to its invasion of Ukraine, nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, the majority of the world, in terms of population, remains either neutral or pro-Russia concerning the conflict. India, with a population of over 1.38 billion people, accounts for a big proportion of that population balance. Moreover, New Delhi's refusal to condemn Moscow's military action reveals a significant shift in the global balance of power, which now appears to be tilting away from the once dominant Western powers.

New Delhi's stance contradicted western strategic assumptions that India was a natural part of a pro-democracy bloc. Instead, India has shown itself to be a wily chameleon on the world stage that is able to foster positive relations with a range of countries that are often in competition with each other. It also underscored a lack of western knowledge concerning Indian diplomacy and strategy, in particular its multipolar vision of the future.

This future envisages an international system where a number of different major powers compete for influence in the global sphere, rather than the world being dominated by one country (as is the mainstay

of the current international order under the US). Such a system would be politically pluralistic with neither democratic nor authoritarian regimes being wholly dominant. It would fundamentally signal the end of western hegemony in global affairs and a much more complex and unpredictable form of international politics, which would irrevocably disrupt the balance of power that the West has relied upon.

At its heart, such a future would be characteristic of India's desire for strategic flexibility and autonomy, whereby New Delhi does not wish to be constrained by longstanding alliances but instead seeks multiple cooperative partnerships simultaneously, even if they are counter-intuitive in terms of strategic alignment. A wider multipolar order would normalise such complexity and seemingly erratic policies, and also mitigate against India ever being totally placed within the sphere of influence of powers such as the US or the UK. With other key major actors – including Russia and China – also vying for a post-hegemonic, post-western, multipolar future, such an outlook will be further formalised, which would allow India - and other major countries - to continue such chameleon tactics.

India's relationship with Russia runs deep

India and Russia have enjoyed a deep-rooted, enduring and resilient relationship dating from the 1950s. Stemming from the initial socialist orientation of Indian domestic politics, sizeable amounts of Soviet aid helped India to develop an autonomous heavy-industry and technological base. From this time, New Delhi also received Soviet military cooperation, and diplomatic support within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Crucially, the Soviet Union remained neutral during the 1962 India-China war, due to shared sentiments concerning Chinese intentions. Prior

to the 1971 East Pakistan War (which led to the creation of Bangladesh), the two sides signed the Twenty-Year Peace, Friendship and Cooperation Treaty which protected India from UN censure and balanced against an emergent Islamabad–Beijing–Washington triple entente. New Delhi’s success in the conflict cemented foundations of trust with Moscow for the rest of the Cold War.

After the end of the Cold War, close relations continued. India continued to gain a “strategic edge” from these relations concerning military arms supplies, with Moscow supplying New Delhi with over \$44 billion worth of weapons from 1992 to 2021, 65% of all India’s military imports during this period. For India, these links are variously aimed at redressing strategic imbalances with China, ensuring superiority over Pakistan and projecting an image as a great power. All domains of the Indian military are supplied by Russia, particularly the navy (destroyers, frigates, submarines, aircraft carriers) but also the army (tanks, artillery, armoured vehicles) and air force (fighter jets, radar, missiles).

Beyond the military domain, Russia’s diplomatic protection via the UNSC bolsters Indian claims in Kashmir and her primacy in South Asia, while Russia is a leading supplier of hydrocarbons to India and a major investor in multiple nuclear-reactor projects. The relationship has also involved joint military operations and technological (especially military and space) cooperation. In 2010, Russia-India relations were upgraded to be “special and privileged”, making it New Delhi’s foremost important global strategic partnership.

Towards a multipolar international order

Clear strategic synergies are visible in the continued convergence of Indian and Russian worldviews regarding the promotion of a multipolar, balanced, stable and non-hegemonic international order. Such a multipolar order would not be clearly led by one particular country and would not signal the simple replacement of the US by China. Nor would it involve a power struggle solely between Beijing and Washington but would encompass a wider and protracted skirmish for influence involving other big actors such as New Delhi, Moscow, Tokyo and Brussels. In practice, such a multipolar order would

be complicated and convoluted with leading actors cooperating in certain domains yet clashing in others, as their strategic interests interlocked with ever greater intricacy.

Advocacy of such an outlook matches their membership of groupings such as BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa) and the Russia–India–China triangle. It is also buoyed by common ambitions regarding becoming great powers, promoting development and equality (in terms of achieving parity with other leading powers, such as the United States) and seeking non-intervention (i.e. rejecting criticism of anything seen as being an internal issue of any other country, not just Russia or India, which for Moscow includes Ukraine, for India includes Kashmir and for China includes Taiwan).

Notably, the formation of the BRICS grouping in 2010 declared that ‘the world is undergoing major and swift changes that highlight the need for corresponding transformations in global governance in all relevant areas’. Its members also argued that their collective command of major portions of the world’s population (41% of the total in 2021) and economic production (31% of the total in 2021) demanded such a renovation. Together, China, India and Russia also spent 18% of all military expenditure in 2021.

These arguments have been replicated regarding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a security organisation, which was originally founded in 1996. Now consisting of China, Russia, the Central Asian states and India and Pakistan (who joined as full members in 2017), it is now the world’s largest multilateral regime of its kind. Moreover, in the economic sphere, in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, in 2021 China had the most overall voting power with 26.57%, followed by India (7.60%) and Russia (5.98%), which again underscored the power of these states in concert versus western institutions.

The emergence of these new groupings are acting to challenge the dominance of the western international order. It is also notable that, despite American thinkers proclaiming the irresistible triumph of the West’s liberal international order as marking “the end of history”, there is now a

successful alternative to such a vision. If dominated by China, Russia and India, such an alternative would be more authoritarian and illiberal in nature, with no presumption for the universality of democracy or associated liberal values. Authoritarianism would not be actively promoted within such a vision – contrary to how the US has often energetically promoted democracy - but would be tacitly accepted, which would be to the overall detriment of democratic forces globally.

Such Western claims have also entailed elements of presumption, as not all the world – including China, India, the former Soviet bloc, much of the Islamic world and many developing countries – had been subsumed into such a concept, either during the Cold War or indeed in the present era. A post-western order would reject such presumption and invoke a system that was much more representative of global political realities.

That India is also displaying increasing authoritarian proclivities further suggests that this New Delhi's strategic distance from the democratic West is not a phenomenon purely linked to Cold War dynamics but is one that is currently acquiring a new life of its own. In 2016, according to the Economist's Democracy Index, India was considered to be a "flawed democracy", and "partly free" by Freedom House in 2021 concerning political and human rights. Moreover, increasing attacks upon political opponents, as well as towards its Muslim population, are resulting in a modern-day India that is increasingly characterised by the country's "intolerance of the media and free speech, tolerance of hate speech and religious polarisation, secrecy, lack of transparency and lack of communication".

India's stance towards the war in Ukraine is thus appearing to bear the hallmarks of a major inflection point in international affairs. Not only have the strategic assumptions of the West been rejected but the overall global balance of power now appears to be tilting away from western democracies. Vitaly, India has emerged as a leading country that is either neutral or Russian-leaning regarding the war in Ukraine, which is a position shared by many across Asia and Africa and could typify a post-liberal international order. It may also result in the West

becoming highly isolated from the such a neutrality-minded bloc.

Such Western isolation would have both economic and diplomatic repercussions, as countries within such a bloc would actively seek out non-Western partners who are not openly critical of their domestic or foreign policies. In the longer-term, such developments would create an ever-deepening schism between "democratic" and "authoritarian" regimes. It would add greater legitimacy to the latter, especially if major actors such as China, Russia and – as we have seen – India remain influential globally. Stronger links – even if in very context specific ways – between New Delhi and Moscow and between Moscow and Beijing would only accelerate such a new balance of power. If India and China resolved their – especially territorially – disputes, then an even greater "grand Eurasian power concert" could emerge, signalling the demise of Western power.

Given the deep historical and contemporary strategic ties between New Delhi and Moscow, it is unlikely that India will change its position concerning the war in Ukraine. Equally, India will not signal that it is explicitly on the West's side concerning this conflict. Given the West's ever-greater need for India to balance against China in the Indo-Pacific – of which New Delhi is ever-more cognisant – there is little that the US and others can do to pressure India to change its attitude towards Russia. It also heralds a new multipolar era in global affairs that will be increasingly messy and unpredictable.