

Between the BRICS and the Quad: India's New Internationalism

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Summary

India's international identity, once defined by 'non-alignment', has acquired a more complex character in the post-Cold War era amidst New Delhi's active participation in a range of forums – some of which are at each other's throats. Appreciating India's new internationalism demands transcending the old ideological frameworks that shaped the discourse on its foreign policy.

A series of recent international meetings that India participated in – the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also called the Quad) forum in May 2022, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit in June 2022, and the Commonwealth Summit and the G-7 meetings in June 2022 – provided an important opportunity to review the changing nature of India's internationalism.

To some, India's participation in these diverse forums – several of which are at loggerheads with each other – might suggest the enduring power of non-alignment in defining India's global orientation. Others, however, see India's participation in the Quad forum, along with the United States (US), Japan and Australia, and the BRICS summit as symbolic of India's new 'multi-alignment' rather than 'non-alignment'. If multi-alignment is about playing all sides, non-alignment was supposed to keep away from all of them.

Analysing Indian foreign policy through the prism of 'alignment', however, tends to downplay the significant variation in India's relations with the major powers since independence. The continuous calibration of India's great power relations was not driven by abstract notions of non-alignment but in responding to concrete conditions confronting it.

India's decision to join the Russian-led strategic coalition in the 1990s was an important departure from the traditional policy of non-alignment. During the Cold War, India stayed away from the military blocs led by the US and the Soviet Union. Despite its steadily increasing bilateral partnership with the Soviet Union through the Cold War, India refused to join any plurilateral or regional security arrangements led by Moscow.

After the Cold War, India signalled that it was now willing to join great power coalitions rather than keep them at arm's length. The fear of an American unipolar moment saw India hedge against the potential threats from US actions – especially on the question of the Kashmir dispute and its nuclear weapons programme. Delhi chose to join the Russian initiative for the so-called 'strategic triangle' with China that eventually became the BRICS forum, along with Brazil and South Africa.

India's immediate priority was to cope with the unipolar moment by promoting a multipolar world in partnership with Russia and China. At the same time, India devoted considerable energies to improving ties with the US. This effort gained traction in the 2000s, as India and the US overcame the traditional contention over Kashmir and nuclear issues and built a comprehensive partnership. Yet, India went along with the steady expansion of the BRICS' activities under the leadership of Russia and China.

However, an important change occurred as Delhi's worries about Beijing rose in the 2010s amidst mounting border military tensions and the fear of a rising China undermining India's regional standing in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The fears of a unipolar world dominated by the US increasingly gave way to concerns about a unipolar Asia led by China. The new worries about China saw Delhi revive the Quad forum in 2017 and support its steady consolidation and growth since then. As India rode both the BRICS and Quad boats – a far cry from the Cold War orientation of Indian foreign policy – the idea of an Indian [transition from non-alignment to multi-alignment](#) took root.

India's participation in both the BRICS and the Quad did not seem to create too many problems so long as the US and Western relations with Russia and China were on an even keel. However, as tensions between the great powers mounted, India's simultaneous membership of competing coalitions – the BRICS and the Quad – came under greater scrutiny. As a result, the problem has become even more acute since the Ukraine crisis.

So far, India has managed to navigate the Ukraine crisis with a [careful pursuit of its own interests](#) with both Russia and the West without creating a rift with either side. Some analysts have seen [India as a major beneficiary](#) of the war in Ukraine. India has actively avoided turning the Quad into an anti-China block and shaped its evolution [as a non-military forum](#). In the BRICS, India has [resisted efforts](#) by China and Russia to turn it into an anti-Western bloc.

As an active member of competing great power coalitions, it is easy to see a new focus on multi-alignment; yet, there is no doubt that the salience of the West continues to rise in India's great power relations. Notwithstanding [Washington's disappointment at Delhi's](#) reluctance to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US has been willing to cut political slack for India. That, in turn, is rooted in India's centrality in the US' Indo-Pacific strategy and the presumed Indian role in shaping the balance of power in Asia.

Beyond the question of balancing China, the US and Europe also see the value of drawing India into the broader Western coalition on global issues. Since 2019, India has been a regular invitee of G-7 summits – a forum that does not include either Russia or China. The US and Europe now see [India as part of the answer](#) in dealing with issues like climate change, health and food security.

Meanwhile, India has also been [actively engaged with the British Commonwealth](#) that it once viewed as a relic of colonialism. India now sees the Commonwealth as a potential instrument in promoting its economic and strategic interests in a community that shares so much in common. India's new interest in the Commonwealth comes on top of India's expanding cooperation with the Anglosphere, including Australia, Britain and Canada. Equally important has been India's deepening engagement with the European Union.

If keeping political distance from the colonial West was part of the ideology of non-alignment during the Cold War, stronger economic, political, and military ties with the US, the United Kingdom and Europe have become a major priority for India's foreign policy. Irrespective of the label one might put on India's foreign policy, the growing weight of the West in India's international relations is a reality. That stands in contrast to a stagnation in India's Russian ties and a souring relationship with China.

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