

India's Multialignment and Democratization of the International Order

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Introduction

The post–World War II global order was primarily defined by the war's victors. At this critical moment, much of Asia and Africa was colonized and subsequently excluded from the governance structures of the post–World War II global order. That foundational fact goes a long way to explain why the global order has been less than democratic.

Decolonization was a globally transformative moment that increased demands for a more representative global order. Beginning with the landmark 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, postcolonial Global South nations have consistently pushed for a voice and commensurate vote in the global order to better serve their interests.¹

India, one of the most prominent participants at Bandung, had participated in the pivotal 1945 San Francisco conference and signed the UN Charter as a founding member, but it was denied a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.²

The independent Indian state was born in 1947 with two identities: the first of a latent major power and the second of having overcome colonization through a hard and unique struggle. India's grand strategy of nonalignment (which later was better described as multialignment) can be best explained by those foundational identities. Multialignment can be defined as seeking strong bilateral relationships with as many major powers in the international system as possible.

India's push for a more democratized and multipolar global order was a byproduct of its strategy of multialignment, as only in a multipolar world could multialignment be truly safeguarded. Consequently, India pushed for greater representation in the United Nations and Western-led international financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Rooted primarily in self-interest more than idealism, especially in recent decades, India's multialignment strategy does not preclude tilts toward a particular major power under contingencies. But when the utility of such tilts has run its course, India has often corrected them, though sometimes with a significant time lag.

India's approach has also led to serious differences with the United States, some of which are persistent. However, multialignment is likely to remain India's preferred strategy for the foreseeable future, and its consequent efforts at democratizing the global order cannot be curbed beyond a point. Even when annoyed by India's strategy, Washington will find it more productive to work with New Delhi to maximize gains rather than persuade it to abandon multialignment. Such gains are there to be taken, as there will remain important common interests between the two countries. If the United States plays its cards right, a more nuanced approach could yield a net positive in the bilateral relationship.

Historical Evolution

Though India lost out on a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, it played a prominent role in early UN peace initiatives, such as in Korea in 1950 and the Republic of the Congo in 1960, and in UN-led nuclear disarmament efforts. However, India's 1962 military defeat by China and the post-1965 domestic economic slowdown (highlighted by the major rupee devaluation in 1966) damaged India's status in the developing world.³ During the 1962 war with

China, India found to its consternation that most decolonized states preferred to not choose between the Asian giants.⁴

President Lyndon B. Johnson's "short tether" policy on food aid and the 1971 India-Pakistan War further chilled India's relationship with the United States and generated a clear tilt toward the Soviet Union.⁵ During the war, President Richard Nixon had backed Pakistan and deployed the USS *Enterprise* carrier group off the Indian coast. India's leaders now began to see the United States with deep suspicion; Prime Minister Indira Gandhi famously referred to "a foreign hand" in her speeches.⁶

The post-Cold War unipolar period was a mixed bag for the democratization of the global order (which came to be termed as the Liberal International Order, or LIO) and an inflection point in Indian strategy. At one level, some of the new institutions that arose were more representative of the world at large. For instance, the World Trade Organization (WTO), which included more Global South countries than the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), its predecessor. The WTO's more formal, legal structure also provided more avenues for those countries to press their claims. In this same period, India played a central role in the creation of the BRICS (the bloc of nations including Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, which has expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates).

But many newer international norms continued to be predominantly defined by the systemic hegemon, the United States. Those norms included counterproliferation, transnational justice, enhanced counterterrorism, and enhanced conditionalities on IFI loans, among others.⁷

Meanwhile, reform at the United Nations and IFIs barely progressed, even as China and India's economies grew substantially.

While India embraced globalization and formed closer economic ties with the United States, it took positions at odds with the U.S.-led LIO—for example it opposed the NATO attack on

Yugoslavia in 1999⁸ and criticized the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003.⁹ India continued to advocate for the interests of developing countries in global trade negotiations.

Multialignment and the Shaping of India's Bilateral Relations

India's strategy of multialignment plays an important role in shaping its cornerstone bilateral relationships. This has taken on greater significance due to India's economic growth, military modernization, and greater weight in the post-Cold War international system. India's bilateral ties with the United States, France, and Russia are among its most important. More recently, Israel has also emerged as an important Indian partner. Those four relationships are a window into India's multialignment patterns.

The 2000s reset in New Delhi-Washington ties is a classic example of multialignment in action. The U.S.-India partnership began to thicken dramatically, driven mainly by a shared interest in balancing China. India also began distancing itself from Iran as a result.¹⁰ The India-U.S. nuclear deal (signed in 2005 and completed in 2008) was the most prominent marker of this shift. India thus corrected its pronounced historic tilt toward the Soviet Union and moved away from its Cold War-era suspicions of the United States. However, even as India forged a strategic partnership with the United States, New Delhi did not enter, or even ask for, a formal alliance with Washington.

India's deep relationship with France is another example of multialignment in action. The India-France relationship has security and defense at its core: maritime cooperation, defense sales, and counterterrorism. France sees itself as an Indo-Pacific power by virtue of its overseas territories in the region and its eight thousand troops stationed there.¹¹ Despite being a core member of NATO, France has pursued a doctrine of strategic autonomy from the days of President Charles de Gaulle, and has welcomed its strong bilateral relationship with India. This means that India also values France as an alternative and autonomous Western partner whose positions and interests do

not always align with the United States. Paris imposes fewer conditions on its arms sales to New Delhi than Washington does. Nor did France impose sanctions after India's 1998 nuclear tests.¹²

Furthermore, in line with its multialignment strategy, India has maintained strong ties with Russia despite pressure from the United States. India is Russia's biggest defense customer, and the two have developed close security ties. Despite Washington's threat of sanctions, New Delhi purchased Moscow's sophisticated S-400 air defense system in 2021.¹³ The India-Russia bilateral relationship has also helped ease India-China relations: in 2001, the three formed the RIC trilateral forum, which continued to meet until 2021.¹⁴

India is also Russia's second-largest energy customer, and has imported liquified natural gas from Russia at significant levels since 2018. Soon after the Russia-Ukraine war began, New Delhi greatly increased discounted oil purchases from Moscow, despite U.S. pressure.¹⁵ India has taken a neutral stance on the war and avoided blaming Russia, even abstaining from multiple UN General Assembly resolutions condemning the invasion.

Although arms purchases from Russia have declined as a fraction of India's total, such rebalancing is consistent with multialignment; India continues¹⁶ to sign major arms deals with Russia even as it courts other defense suppliers.¹⁷ Similarly, India reduced its Russian oil purchases after the Trump administration's punitive tariffs,¹⁸ but continued to import large quantities.¹⁹ New Delhi and Moscow are also expanding nuclear energy cooperation and aiming to increase bilateral trade from \$68 billion to \$100 billion by 2030.²⁰ Therefore, despite some tactical pullback in India-Russia ties, there is no strategic turn away from Moscow.

India's thaw toward Israel in the 1990s after decades of nonrecognition was an adjustment to new realities emerging in the Middle East after the Oslo Accords. In doing so, India gained a partner in technology and later security cooperation. But India also continued to strongly support a two-state solution to the Palestine question. In recent years however, India has drawn closer to Israel

than an evenhanded Middle East policy would suggest, with leader visits, increases in arms sales, and the planned India Middle East Economic Corridor linking the two countries with Jordan and the United Arab Emirates among the waystations.

Multialignment and India in Multilateral Institutions

India has also pursued its multialignment in multilateral institutions. During the 1990s and the 2000s, New Delhi took an independent position during the Doha round of WTO negotiations, clashing with the United States and the European Union while sometimes even cooperating with its historical adversary, China. But as global uncertainty has increased, India has also sought to widen its multialignment net. After a lull in prioritizing Global South agendas, India has reasserted its identity as a major Global South player since 2022, the year before it hosted the Group of Twenty (G20) summit.²¹ That has included holding annual Voice of the Global South summits and, through them and otherwise, deepening bilateral ties with Brazil, Indonesia, and countries in Africa.

India's membership in BRICS is another significant example of this approach. India was a founding member of BRICS in 2009 and instrumental in the 2014 establishment of its development finance institution, the New Development Bank. The bank, headquartered in Shanghai, follows international lending standards but imposes far less onerous conditions than Western-led IFIs. India works closely with BRICS partners on other aspects of the developmental agenda as well: climate action, WTO norms on trade, and health security among the more impactful. But New Delhi has also been skeptical of the more ambitious measures proposed by BRICS members. It has opposed de-dollarization, was initially reluctant on BRICS expansion, and has not initiated a joint statement critical of the U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran during its 2026 BRICS presidency.

Even as India pushes reform to the Western-led order through BRICS, the Quad (comprising India, the United States, Australia, and Japan) is an important grouping in the Indo-Pacific active since 2017, implicitly aimed at countering China in the region. India backs the grouping's broader goals on China and engages in quasi-security activities in maritime domain awareness and coast guard interoperability. But New Delhi prefers not to name Beijing explicitly in the Quad's joint statements and has emphasized a chiefly public goods agenda for the grouping.²²

With membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), India has embedded itself in Eurasia, competing with China and Pakistan. SCO membership is a soft balancing play that adds a continental dimension to New Delhi's strategy; India is keenly aware that its threat matrix is not just confined to its maritime zones.

Multialignment and Democratization of the Global Order

India's multialignment strategy has persisted through very different phases of the international order: Cold War bipolarity, post-Cold War unipolarity and its incarnation as the LIO, and the current period of interregnum and uncertainty. The strategy is not anti-U.S. or anti-Western; the goal is to reform and complement suboptimal international institutions, enhance bilateral engagements with like-minded powers, and preserve India's sovereignty, thereby enabling the country's rise. Nor is the strategy altruistic. By keeping its ties with all major poles of power, India believes it can maximize its own strategic benefits. But India's multialignment itself also aids the democratization of the global order.

By not leaning too far in the direction of any single great power for too long, India preserves its strategic autonomy and acts as a check on tendencies toward rigid blocs of the international system. By maintaining strong ties with Russia and the United States, India has not only strengthened its own space for action, it has also acted as a check on unipolarity in the global order. Further, New Delhi's close security cooperation with Paris acts as another check on

unconstrained Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific. Due to India's size, massive population, and fast-growing economy, its strategy of multialignment helps open up the international system, creating space for other middle powers and newer institutions.

For example, during the 2023 G20 summit in New Delhi, India was critical in pushing for the inclusion and formal membership of the African Union in the G20 grouping.²³ India has also consistently advocated for a fairer climate regime in international forums, including more concessional finance and much greater support for adaptation—policies that would also assist vulnerable states in the Global South. As the WTO-led trading order comes under pressure from Washington (with sweeping tariffs) and Beijing (with the weaponization of critical resources), India has been among the strongest voices for defending this order, most recently signing multiple trade agreements with diverse actors including Oman, the European Union, and Mercosur (the Southern Common Market in Latin America).

New Delhi does not see multialignment as neutrality; the strategy allows for clear tilts toward a particular major power in contingencies. Such tilts can sometimes end up as being excessive when India's interests are no longer well-served. When that happens, a correction typically emerges over time, though often with an appreciable lag. India went through such a correction in the first decade of the 2000s, when it moved away from its Cold War-era suspicions of the United States. However, by the late 2010s, this correction had arguably developed into an overshoot.²⁴

The 2026 U.S.-Israel war against Iran also indicates that India overplayed its Israel hand.²⁵ In the coming months, Iran may emerge stronger than Gulf Cooperation Council states as the gatekeeper of vital energy supplies through the Strait of Hormuz and the U.S. role in the region could weaken.²⁶ In such a scenario, India's tilt toward Israel will turn out to be a net negative for its core interests.

Those developments indicate that, sooner or later, India will likely go through another correction in its strategic orientation. In fact, one could already be incipient, with the prioritization of the Global South in New Delhi's foreign policy rhetoric and an emerging (though limited) thaw with China.

Conclusion: Implications for the U.S. -India Relationship

It is no secret that the U.S.-India relationship has taken a hit of late. High tariffs imposed by the Trump administration citing trade imbalances and India's purchases of Russian oil are the most overt sign that all is not well. Though a recent trade deal has led to a major reduction in those tariffs, and Russian oil is temporarily a nonissue due to the war with Iran, the sense of major distrust remains on both sides.²⁷ New Delhi's role in BRICS continues to rankle in Washington.

The 2026 U.S.-Israel war with Iran has created another potential divergence between the two capitals. Though India has drawn close to Israel in recent years,²⁸ the extended conflict is badly hurting New Delhi's economic interests and forcing it to negotiate with Tehran practically ship-by-ship for essential cargoes.²⁹ India's middle road may not be to Washington liking as this war drags on.

Yet a longer view provides reasons for some hope. As the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy indicates, Washington has discarded most conceptions (problematic as they were) of a liberal international order, and accepted, at least in theory, that the world is becoming less unipolar.³⁰ Differences will remain on Washington's unilateral actions on trade and other fronts, but the acceptance of a post-unipolar world can be a point of India-U.S. convergence. Moreover, the National Security Strategy's lack of interest in grading and lecturing countries on domestic democracy and human rights is welcomed by many in the Global South, including India.

With all its ups and downs, India's strategy of multialignment is nevertheless likely to persist in the long haul. Thus, an India structurally subordinate to U.S. interests is unachievable. Serious differences will continue to rear their head on Russia, trade, BRICS, UN reform, and other areas. But in a post-unipolar world, Washington is going to need more partners, not fewer, if it is to retain long-term global influence.

Regardless of the comings and goings of governments and leaders, the United States has three intersecting and enduring interests with India: ensuring a multipolar Asia, countering terrorism, and securing supply chains. Resilience against natural disasters fueled by climate change—regardless of how it is packaged—will also increasingly be a common interest.³¹

India's rise will add a reformist (rather than radical) state with heft in the Global South and strong people-to-people ties with the United States. If Washington returns to a more multilateral path, it will find a supportive partner in India and a valuable channel to dialogue with the Global South.

The future world order will not return to post-Cold War unipolarity. Nor will it be one with major powers getting along harmoniously. The rise of a major state in Asia with substantial shared interests in a more democratized but also more conflict-ridden world order can be a net positive for the United States, if Washington can take advantage of it.

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