

## Short analysis: India is really changing its alliances?

Ever since India's defiance of the Western pressure to sever trade ties with Russia in the wake of Russia's launch of the special military operation in Ukraine in Feb 2022, the West has been incrementally ratcheting up its rhetoric against India, specifically targeting the BJP-led government. This is a stark reversal of the kind of treatment India received from the West earlier when the latter viewed India as a strategic partner in the much-touted strategy of the West's pivot to Asia to check the growing global influence of China and serve as a counterbalance to it.

The Indian administration has and continues to officially follow the policy of strategic autonomy, in which it adopts policies that are in the country's best interest without completely aligning itself in any one camp. For this reason, it could join international bodies dominated by the Global South, particularly Russia and China, such as BRICS+ and SCO, while also enjoying a prominent place in Western alliances formed, for all practical purposes, to check their adversaries, Russia and China in particular, such as QUAD. India viewed the support of the West as crucial in establishing a deterrence towards the economically and militarily far superior neighbor, China, with which India has had a very fraught relationship ever since the Sino-India war in 1962. The strong economic and trade ties of China with its archenemy, Pakistan, further increased India's skepticism towards China's intentions and China's diplomatic offensives in the other countries neighboring India, such as Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Maldives,

almost always to the detriment of India's position in these countries made matters worse and pushed India further into the arms of the West. The military standoff between the two countries in 2020 led to casualties on both sides. It was perceived in India as a major breach by China of their bilateral agreements and a significant escalation, souring their relations even further. The West, led by the United States, interpreted this cascade of events as an assurance of India's long-term allegiance to its anti-China project. The West would have very well succeeded in maintaining this equation indefinitely had Russia not thrown a spanner in the works.

Historically, Russia and India have enjoyed a close relationship that has always found bipartisan and uncontroversial support in India. Russia has historically been a major provider of defense equipment for India, although the proportion of India's defense spending on Russian equipment has recently reduced from an earlier high of 60% to about 30% as India drew closer to the West. In Feb 2022, Russia launched its 'special military operation' in Ukraine, and the collective West came down on Russia with punishing sanctions vowing to destroy the Russian economy and convert the 'Russian ruble to rubble'. Russian oil exports were at the center of the sanctions war that the West initiated against Russia and demanded that the rest of the world accept and adhere to. India defied the West and not only continued their trade with Russia but also increased it multifold, reaping immense profit while significantly bolstering Russian efforts to withstand these Western sanctions. In the end, Russia won the sanctions war and, contrary to the Western narrative, was able to do so, keeping the deficit under check and ensuring reasonably healthy and sustainable growth. The collective West construed these actions of India as a significant betrayal that could not go

unpunished. US Ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti, recently expressed displeasure towards India's policy towards Russia, stating that "there is no such thing as strategic autonomy in times of conflict". This narrative fits perfectly with the Western hegemonic principle of "with us or against us" – a principle that views the world as a binary model and does not leave any room for a neutral stance.

Another issue that has tested India's diplomatic relations with the West is the alleged (by India) support and sanctuary provided by the West to the Sikh separatists among the Western diasporas. The Khalistan movement is a movement by the Sikhs (followers of the religion of Sikhism, comprising about 2% of the Indian population), primarily supported by the Sikh diaspora, to carve out a separate nation (Khalistan) from the Sikh-majority state of Punjab in India for the Sikh community. Hardeep Singh Najjar, a Sikh separatist who India regards as a terrorist, was assassinated in Canada in June 2023. Canada accuses the Indian intelligence service of plotting this murder, an accusation that India vehemently denies. The United States, too, has accused an Indian of plotting (unsuccessfully) to assassinate another Sikh separatist leader in the US, and the Indian government has consistently dissociated itself from this plot, too. Irrespective of the truth behind these plots, what was remarkable was the way this dissension by the West was played out – openly, publicly and undiplomatically, in the process brazenly showing their support and tolerance towards the activities of the Sikh separatists, knowing fully well that India considers this as a very grave issue and a matter of high national interest. Canada, for instance, has been permitting these separatists to hold non-binding referendums in Canada on the creation of 'Khalistan', seemingly to pander to the influential Sikh lobby in Canada.

India has always been skeptical about the United States being an honest, loyal friend and partner. It has always had its misgivings about the double role the United States played with Pakistan. On the one hand, the US would often condemn Pakistan for the terrorist activities allegedly carried out, funded and supported by Pakistan on Indian soil, while on the other, the United States would fund and arm Pakistan, which it saw as an essential ally in its ‘war against terror’, especially in Afghanistan. There are also rumblings in the Indian media that the United States has deliberately been trying to undermine India’s geopolitical security in the region, and this was at least one of the factors for engineering the recent coup in Bangladesh, ousting a staunch Indian ally and replacing with the Nobel laureate, Mohammed Yunus, a Western asset. There are also rumors of the involvement of the United States in supporting the Kuki militants in the northeast region of India, who have been causing enormous mayhem in the region and posing a significant challenge to the Modi-led government. There are also rumors and warnings about the threat from Islamists, including ISIS, resurfacing in the Indian subcontinent – a development seemingly not entirely disconnected from the increasing US hostilities with the current Indian administration. The recent meeting of the US Consul General Jenifer Larson with an outspoken and popular Muslim leader from South India, Mr. Asaduddin Owaisi, has also raised some eyebrows, especially with the alarming developments in Bangladesh (for India) in the background.

The final straw that broke the camel’s back for the Modi-led government, was the concerted effort of the West to influence the recent national elections and precipitate a regime change in the country. For instance, the think tanks and the entire mainstream media in the West abruptly turned against India and Modi,

with a stream of articles showing the country and the government negatively. Typical accusations revolved around Modi's personality, discrimination against minorities, poor human rights track record and cracking down on opposition politicians. India's foreign minister alluded to this, referring to it as the 'influence game' of the West. Of course, this was just a cog in the vast machinery of the West that worked concertedly but failed as Narendra Modi was able to win the elections once again and successfully formed the government at the Center. Modi and his team acted more cautiously before and during the elections to avoid inflaming the West even further and giving them any excuse for significantly ratcheting up their efforts towards regime change. However, once the elections were won, they were unfettered from these fears and went on a diplomatic offensive in an overdrive mode.

The first person the newly elected prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, chose to meet was none other than the archenemy of the collective West, President Putin of Russia. The timing was not coincidental, either. He did not on the day of NATO's 75th anniversary when all the NATO leaders met at the NATO Summit in Washington. On the day when the collective West wished to prove that they were successful in isolating President Putin on the global stage, the optics could not have been worse for them, with the Prime Minister of one of their most praised allies making his first foreign visit to Russia and embracing their arch enemy with a warm bear hug. As the Western mainstream media and the political establishment noted accurately, this was a snub by the Indian prime minister towards the West. The West has not forgotten that embarrassment and has not forgiven him for it, and this is visible in increasingly bitter Western rhetoric

against India with statements such as, “India appears to be sharing values with Russia and China” – something abominable in the eyes of the West.

The recent moves that point to a possible rapprochement between China and India are the logical next steps if India has indeed decided to complete the shift from the West towards the Global South. Soon after the elections, India announced steps to open the economy to Chinese investments (except in critical sectors) and lift visa restrictions for Chinese citizens. The two countries' foreign ministers have held two back-to-back meetings in the post-election period, first on the sidelines of the ASEAN meeting in Laos and second on the sidelines of the SCO meeting in Astana and have expressed an urgent need and resolve to solve their border issues. In a jibe towards the West, Indian foreign minister Jaishankar stated that the border between the two countries is a bilateral issue that does not require any interference from a third country.

The bilateral trade between the two countries is US\$118.4 Bn. China and India are natural trading partners with complementary strengths. China has transformed itself into a wealthy nation and the world's manufacturing hub but is concerned about an ageing population. India has a robust domestic consumption story and a healthy demographic dividend, which it can tap into. The BRICS+ project, which China and Russia are spearheading as a response to the hegemony of US\$ in the global financial system, cannot succeed unless the acrimonious relationship between China and India is sorted out. While it appears to be very difficult, China and Russia have demonstrated enormous skill in diplomacy and were able to solve seemingly intractable global issues. The rapprochement brought about

among the Palestinian factions or between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and, most recently, between Turkey and Syria are just some of the examples.

In an ideal scenario, India would like to maintain its policy of 'strategic autonomy' and avoid any adversarial relation with either the China camp or the camp of the collective West. However, unless the United States changes its approach, realizing the multipolarity of the new world order and desisting from coercive actions and policies on other countries to enforce absolute subservience of their foreign policy to the hegemonic project of the United States, India will be left with no choice but to choose and all indications are that it will choose freedom, sovereignty and dignity.