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## A Courtship in which India and the US are Playing Each Other

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*The US seeks Indian support for its geopolitical strategy while India wants to maintain a certain 'non-alignment' and yet increase defence purchases. For domestic audiences, the symbolism of Modi's visit to the US will be the more important political narrative.*

Ever since relations between India and the United States began to be transformed in the late-1990s, the US has courted India, hoping it would become a core pillar of America's global policy.

India-US relations comprise an extensive portfolio. The big question in the relationship is about the international order and the role of geopolitics in shaping it: how the two nations overlap, how they read the contemporary crisis in international affairs and the need for a new order, and what role they see for geopolitics in shaping the emergent order.

### Transformation of India-US Relations

The Bill Clinton and George Bush administrations sought to enlist India in their efforts to spread and consolidate the liberal international order, even as balancing China with Indian assistance remained an important but only medium-to-long-term concern.

The strategic component of India-US relations drifted during the Barack Obama presidency. Relations, in general, became mutually transactional while Donald Trump was in office.

The liberal international order began unravelling during the Obama years. The Trump presidency did much to destroy it even as it sharpened its China policy and brought the US-China great power rivalry to the centre stage of international relations.

President Joe Biden has inherited a full-blown return of geopolitics with Russian and Chinese revisionism. Given its investments in developing relations, the US has unsurprisingly expected India to take a similar view as it does of the threats to international order posed by Moscow and Beijing.

It is highly unlikely that India would commit [during Modi's US visit] to such geopolitical roles vis-a-vis China and Russia that the US expects it to adopt.

Indian leaders have responded astutely to American courtship and expectations during this period. Prime Ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh were sympathetic to the liberal international order but not its committed partisans. They supported global democratisation but not Western-style democracy promotion. They were also sensitive to the inequities that capitalism produces as it spreads and deepens. And they were sceptical of American hegemony, professing support for a multipolar world.

Above all, they were reluctant to give India's foreign policy a geopolitical orientation customarily associated with great powers. China was an emergent geopolitical rival, but India under Vajpayee and Singh preferred bilateral engagement over systemic policies such as balancing and containment, which would have invariably involved aligning policy with the US.

### Challenges of Geopolitics in the 2020s

During Modi's premiership, India has faced an international situation in which its reluctance to act geopolitically has been severely tested.

Over the past decade, China's profile in South Asia and the wider Asian and Indo-Pacific regions has steadily risen. It has also become increasingly aggressive along the contested border with India.

For six years before the summer of 2020, when the crisis in the eastern Ladakh region broke out, the Modi government's China policy involved pushing Beijing to prioritise the resolution of the boundary dispute while trying to strike a political understanding at the level of President Xi Jinping and Modi himself on the overall tenor of the relationship. That the crisis of mid-2020 put paid to those efforts made it clear that India's China challenge was systemic rather than bilateral. India needed more than itself to mount an effective

response.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has complicated the picture. In India's semi-official discourse, the war is considered Europe's problem. That may be so, but the changes it has set in motion have made it harder for New Delhi to avoid power politics.

The war has compelled Europe to transform itself into a military power. It has also alerted Western nations and their Indo-Pacific allies to the fact that the revisionisms of Moscow and Beijing, though separate and different for now, pose a direct challenge to the fundamental rules and arrangements of international politics set in place after the Second World War.

India's global ambitions run through this geography of wariness. And its security is imperilled by aggression from China, increased Chinese influence over Russia, and India's dependence on Russia for military hardware at a time when Western sanctions impede Russia's ability to meet its obligations to India.

Realpolitik would demand that India balance China by working purposefully with the West and its Asian and Indo-Pacific allies. Puzzlingly, however, India has been overly careful not to let its Quad and Indo-Pacific strivings be seen as attempts to balance China. Its China posture has been remarkably unassertive, which can be gleaned by comparing the words New Delhi has used for Beijing and Islamabad in recent times.

India's unwillingness to add muscle to its Indo-Pacific strivings with the West comes from its belief that it constitutes an independent pole in international politics rather than a potential element in a Western alliance.

While its reluctance to criticise Russia over Ukraine is understandable, what is unclear is why it has turned sharply critical of the West in the past year, accusing the grouping of being insular, hypocritical and much more. Why has it risked distancing and antagonising a global force whose strategic ambitions overlap with its own, especially when they share at least one rival in common?

A plausible explanation is that New Delhi believes there is enough international room for it to pursue conflicting priorities.

India's cautious and careful China posture stems from the massive power differential with that country. Its unwillingness to add muscle to its Indo-Pacific strivings with the West comes from its belief that it constitutes an independent pole in international politics rather than a potential element in a Western alliance.

### **India's 'non-alignment'**

India's neutrality over the Ukraine war highlights a preference for nonalignment that never quite left its foreign policy framework. It reads the contemporary international crisis as one in which the two pillars of the Western-crafted international order – liberalism and capitalism – have been discredited. This explains both the extensive criticism of the West and the prominence of the Hindutva reading of India's civilisation – and not liberal democracy – as the country's primary international identity.

More importantly, there is a belief that the West needs India more than the other way around.

India's strategic location, vast continental and maritime profile, large market, demographic potential, and leadership position within the global South all are seen as resources that the West needs to build a credible Indo-Pacific strategy that goes beyond balancing China to actually helping the new international order.

India believes it has considerable room to drive a hard bargain with the West and the US as it responds to their overtures.

American expectations that the China threat will cause New Delhi to become more open to moving beyond a strategic convergence are also frustrated by the dominant position of the Modi regime in the country's domestic politics.

Had China's territorial incursions and gains on India's borders since mid-2020 happened under another government, it would have been severely cornered and compelled to respond more assertively. But the regime's hold on the foreign policy narrative is strong, and it can drown out even the strongest criticism of its conception and handling of India's national interest. Having managed the Chinese threat perception, it faces negligible domestic pressure to respond according to the realist logic.

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Modi's state visit to the US this week must be seen against this backdrop. Breakthrough agreements in defence and security cooperation may be inked. We may see substantive beginnings in India's quest to lessen its dependence on Russia for its military needs. Agreements likely to be signed could, over time, seriously augment India's defence capabilities and ease its long-term security concerns

But it is highly unlikely that India would commit to such geopolitical roles vis-a-vis China and Russia that the US expects it to adopt. American expectations could only be moderately met. In India, however, the symbolism of the state visit will dominate the narrative.

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