

Competing Visions for International Order

Challenges for a Shared Direction
in an Age of Global Contestation

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From Periphery to Centre

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Introduction

In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, India chose to remain silent, refusing to condemn Moscow or join Western sanctions. To some this came as a surprise, because during the past years the world's largest democracy has been aligning itself more with Western-minded countries in terms of security and defence. Furthermore, Indian sovereignty itself is under threat by China. Global actors, not least in the West, are gradually becoming aware that strategic autonomy, pragmatism, multi-alignment and a "national interest first" policy are driving India's role in global politics.

India's increasingly clear "foreign policy mission" is of relatively recent origin. In a book on world views of aspiring powers, published in 2012, it was said that India does not have a well-articulated grand strategy or national doctrine to guide its foreign policy, which makes it "an ambiguous rising power" (Ollapally and Rajagopalan 2012, 73). Over a decade later, the picture is much less ambiguous. In today's global order, India is increasingly turning into a pivotal state, in the sense both of "being a pivot" and of actively "pivoting". India is becoming "a critical point around which great powers' actions revolve" (i.e. a *pivot*).¹ For example, the West is aware that strategies to balance China, including the United States' and Japan's free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), are impossible to implement without the support of India, and also need India as a potential economic alternative to China. At the same time, India is also a state that shapes the regional and global security environment through its policy choices (i.e. *pivoting*). India's unwillingness to criticise Russia's actions in Ukraine is an example. Rather, New Delhi has boosted trade ties with Russia, continues to buy cheap oil from Moscow, and remains dependent on the country for arms supplies. In short, multi-alignment is a key strategic foreign-policy tool for India as a pivot state, which has further repercussions on the global security environment.

In order to deepen our understanding of India's enhanced global role, it is instructive to investigate the underlying drivers of India's ordering visions. What kind of a world order does India envisage, and how does it frame its own place in it? What are the norms, values, and institutions such an order should be based on? What time frame does New Delhi envision in terms of the future? In terms

of the analytical framework applied by this book, this chapter first looks at the distributional dimension, arguing that India's ordering vision is strongly rooted in polycentrism and multi-alignment in a fluid multipolar world order. Subsequently the analysis examines how, normatively, this translates into self-perceptions as a civilisational state, which is projected from the domestic dimension onto the international order. Thereafter, the chapter scrutinises India's stance in terms of the institutional dimension, in particular its support for transformed multilateral institutions that accommodate India's enhanced role in world affairs, and more generally for alternative institutions that reflect developing countries' interests. It also examines New Delhi's views on institutional mechanisms that can undergird ordering, including minilateralism, plurilateralism, and institutional pluralism. Finally, the chapter examines the temporal dimension, analysing how India's ordering vision has evolved since 2014 and how the country envisages itself in a Golden Era up to 2047, when it aims to be a fully developed state.

Multipolarity and Multi-Alignment in a World of Frenemies

The year 2014 marked the start of the first administration under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The same year can also be seen as a watershed moment for India's vision of world order and the country's place in it. For some it was the start of a "Modian consensus" (Singh 2024) around a number of ideas that continue to define India's domestic and foreign policy in the decades to come: cultural rootedness, welfare of all, and assertive nationalism. Rooted in this consensus, the domestic agenda of economic growth and nationalism, on the one hand, and foreign policy, on the other, became increasingly intertwined (Tremblay and Kapur 2017, 22). For Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), creating a strong and self-reliant India – including by promoting "Brand India" – and regaining New Delhi's rightful place in the neighbourhood and beyond became central foreign-policy tenets.

When Modi came to power, he famously said that "India is neither to meet the world by casting down its eyes, nor will it glare at the world, but India will meet the world 'eye to eye'" (Tremblay and Kapur 2017, 21). This is a good example of India's newfound confidence and ambition to take up what it sees as its rightful place as a rising power, while situating "India's global strategic engagement in a new paradigm and on a wider canvass" (Bharatiya Janata Party 2014). China's growing confidence and presence, including in India's immediate neighbourhood, the retrenchment of American power, coupled with greater multipolarity and uncertainty in international affairs compelled India to reformulate its foreign-policy goals in a world that "now looked like a global marketplace with less pre-conceptions and more transactions" (Jaishankar 2020, 93).

As of 2014, India increasingly characterises the world as multipolar, with the country itself as an emerging yet undisputed pole. India's ordering vision is strongly rooted in polycentrism and multi-alignment. Instead of fixed alliances or binary antagonisms, a polycentric world is defined by overlapping networked relationships and global interdependence marked by both intense cooperation and competition (Wojczewski 2019, 185–86). New Delhi seeks to avoid having to make policy

choices between China, Russia, and the United States. In the words of India foreign minister Jaishankar, New Delhi sees the world as “a fluid array of multiple poles where convergence is possible but not congruence, where frenemies abound and where it’s natural to engage with the US, China and Russia all at the same time” (Sirohi 2019). This is akin to an emerging geopolitical order, recently referred to as “the à la carte world” (Russell 2023). Especially since 2014 India has replaced non-alignment with multilevel engagement and multi-alignment, actively pursuing “a diversity of interests in diverse settings with diverse powers”, based on the concept “the world is one family” (Tremblay and Kapur 2017, 49–50).

For New Delhi, world order is, therefore, marked by diversity, pluralism, and polycentrism. However, for thinkers such as Gautam Chikermane (2024, 15), in such a world, even the very idea of a world “order” is outdated:

A world order is a paradigm whose time has gone but in whose momentum the US, China, and Russia remain trapped. The hegemonic expression of power is yesterday’s conversation; equality is the future’s signature. As such, international relations need to be reimagined. India’s ancient dictum of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is one family) can become the alternative narrative.

Reimagining a new and more equal world necessitates giving a greater voice to countries in the Global South. India has been a strong proponent of integrating Global South priorities in global affairs. Uniting, empowering, and giving a voice to countries from the Global South remains one of India’s explicit foreign policy aims. This is made explicit in the BJP 2024 Manifesto, in which India as “friend to the world” (*Vishwa Bandhu Bharat*) vouches to further consolidate the voice of the Global South.²

India’s view of a multipolar world view is decidedly post-Western, and the country’s identity as a postcolonial state has a strong bearing on this dimension. In general, in light of over 200 years of European colonialism, India is wary of Western interference in its domestic affairs. New Delhi is not afraid to call out the West over perceived hypocrisy. India’s foreign minister Jaishankar, for example, has urged Europe “to grow out of the mindset that Europe’s problems are the world’s problems, but the world’s problems are not Europe’s problems” (Barman 2022). India has also refused to follow the “democracies versus authoritarian states” logic. For India, the colonial mindset continues. For example, the fact that Western think tanks and universities have a low evaluation of India’s democracy (e.g. by labeling it an “electoral autocracy”) is seen as an “incorrect, manipulative, colonial and adverse” opinion that nevertheless has a real-life impact on India’s credit ratings (Chikermane 2024, 24).

India propels itself in the role of an active force, offering an alternative route to peaceful coexistence, international cooperation, and solidarity among developing countries. In a post-Western world India is not only a partner but also a moral leader and normative power, encapsulated in the idea of “Vishwaguru” (guru or leader to the world) (Hall 2017, 127).³ The G20 summit in New Delhi on

9–10 September 2023 amply showed that India is increasingly profiling itself as a leading voice of the Global South. India clearly aims to represent the interests and concerns of the Global South, including Africa and the Pacific islands. New Delhi is likely the most conspicuous of this group of countries that has become more vocal as a result of the onset of the war in Ukraine. The conflict has given these countries the opportunity to contest the West, the “global order”, and the world view of richer countries. Many of these countries, not in the least India, see Russia as a bulwark against Western postcolonial influence. They have a thriving arms trade with Moscow, seek to curtail US dominance in global affairs, appeal against an international order they perceive as unjust, and plainly aim to make their own autonomous choices amidst US–China competition.

Hinduism as Source of Domestic Unity and Global Relevance

India’s self-identity and the envisaged world order are directly linked. Domestically, the Modi government has placed national identity and assertive nationalism at the centre of the economic growth and development agenda. India is a highly diverse union of 28 states, eight Union Territories, and 800 administrative districts, and tensions exist between national and subnational identities. Hinduism (80 per cent) and Islam (13 per cent) are the main religions, but both groups are heterogeneous in terms of languages, castes, or customs. Maintaining the political unity and integrity of the Indian state has always been the main goal of the party in power, whether it has been the Congress Party or Modi’s BJP. The ruling BJP, however, has tried to forge a new national identity under the concept of “one nation, one people, one culture” and defined by one ancient cultural heritage, namely the Hindu nationalist tradition of thought or *Hindutva* (Dutt 2013, 72). Domestically, the idea of a homogeneous and dominant culture, namely *Hinduness*, has been used to demarcate and exclude (predominantly Muslim) minorities.

Internationally, India’s ambitions to become a great power are rooted in self-perceptions as a civilisational state. India has always seen itself, justifiably, as an ancient civilisation in terms of knowledge, philosophy, and culture. However, in recent years, there has been a marked shift in India’s overarching vision, from being a civilisation in plural terms, that is “a bridge and amalgamation between cultures”, to a civilisational state, meaning a more singular, exclusive view on a society seeking homogeneity, fractures, and demarcations between peoples, communities, and cultures (Srivastava 2023, 458). This corresponds to a shift away from the view of India associated with former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, namely seeing India as a bridging civilisation between East and West, and between regions, great powers, and religions, typified by non-alignment. The Modi government’s view as of 2014 is not secular but religious at the core and is dominated by *Hindutva*, with India as the heartland of Hinduism, destined to take a leading role among great powers (Bajpai 2024, 8).

Religion, therefore, has taken on a key role in self-perceptions.⁴ Prime Minister Modi and his Foreign Minister Jaishankar have been using the term *Bharat*, the Hindi name for India. The term has cultural and historical connotations linked with

ancient scriptures appealing to the country's Hindu tradition and concomitantly promoting Hindu nationalism.⁵ In his latest book, Jaishankar builds on the *Ramayana* (the Story of King Rama), which focuses on the need for ethics and pure thought and a quest to observe rules and norms. For some this links with the BJP promise to restore the Hindu glory of Bharat, a promise made on the opening of the contested Hindu temple Ram Mandir (to commemorate the birth of King Rama) in January 2024 on the grounds of a former Muslim mosque (the site had been the subject of communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims). Hindu nationalists destroyed the sixteenth-century mosque in 1992. For Jaishankar, the *Ramayana* is read as the story of a rising power that correlates its interests with the global good. At the core of the narrative "is an exploration of India's progress in ascending the global hierarchy, shedding its defensive, non-aligned posture, and actively engaging with multiple nations on various fronts" (Bhowmik 2024). Internationally, the Hindu deity Ram has become a central element in India's civilisational rhetoric as well as diplomatic efforts such as global outreach programmes.⁶ Relatedly, when in 2014 the United Nations (UN) established an International Day of Yoga to be held annually on 21 June, it constituted one of Modi's early diplomatic successes. This drew on the idea of Indian exceptionalism as a model to follow, with Yoga as a means to unite the world (Miller and de Estrada 2017).

In sum, India's national identity under the concept of "one nation, one people, one culture" defined by Hindu nationalist tradition seeks to mask the tension with the country's bewildering heterogeneity. Paradoxically perhaps, the rhetoric on how India deals with heterogeneity is projected as a model for the world. A polycentric world looks very much like India itself, namely diverse, heterogeneous, complex, and accommodating differences, while at the same time adhering to non-violence and peaceful coexistence. As argued by Wojczewski (2019, 186–90), Being a multi-religious, multilingual, and multi-ethnic state with an identity based on the ideal of unity in diversity grants India global relevance, which can then be projected onto the global order. Pakistan, a source of constant security threats in India's foreign policy, has traditionally been seen as India's normative Other: Islamic, hostile, authoritarian, fundamentalist, and militaristic, as opposed to India's secular-pluralist, democratic, and peaceful identity.

Institutional Promiscuity in a World of Great-Power Competition

As pointed out earlier, India pursues an active policy of multi-alignment, to the point of being accused of "strategic promiscuity" (Melin 2022, 52). It allows India 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" (Ogden 2023, 246). This is nothing new: throughout the post-Cold War era strategic promiscuity meant that India "got into the habit of calling every tactical alliance a strategic partnership" (Baru 2020).

At the institutional level, India's quest for a more equal world less biased towards the West is most clearly symbolised by its advocacy for fairer and more democratic international structures, not only to make sure everyone's voice is heard, but also

to accommodate its own enhanced role in world affairs. India is strongly pursuing a permanent seat in the UN Security Council (UNSC). As a case in point, Foreign Minister Jaishankar referred to the UN as a “frozen 1945-invented mechanism . . . singularly focused on . . . [the established powers’] own advantage, to the exclusion of the well-being of the international community” (Mukherjee 2024, 14). Under the heading “A Bharat First Foreign Policy” the BJP Manifesto emphasises that the party is “committed to seeking permanent membership in the UN Security Council to elevate Bharat’s position in global decision making” (Bharatiya Janata Party 2024, 35).

India has also markedly increased its presence in other multilateral institutions. This signifies a clear transition, from opposition (to global institutions) to being a global agenda setter (Saran 2015). In the post-war era India was generally critical towards global institutions, as is clear in alternative movements such as the Non-Aligned Movement. However, after the end of the Cold war it has increasingly sought to position itself as a major player within international institutions. These include the G20, which, as mentioned earlier, serves as a platform to promote a more equal world by giving voice to Global South countries. Regionally India is also a key member in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-run institutions, such as the East Asia Summit, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the only pan-Indian-Ocean multilateral grouping and central to the implementation of India’s security and growth for all in the region concept of regional maritime cooperation. India’s membership of the International Energy Agency, on the other hand, is currently under negotiation, after having applied in October 2023. In order to promote regional maritime multilateralism, New Delhi established an Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region, aiming to build cooperation with regional nations in the monitoring of maritime traffic, implicitly to keep track of China’s increased activity in the region.

At the subregional level there is the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, further involving Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation has been paralyzed since 2014 because of India’s tense relations with Pakistan, which it accuses of considering cross-border terrorism as a legitimate tool of statecraft. Relations with Pakistan also impede India’s membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which is blocked by China, based on the assertion that New Delhi has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty but also linked to China’s support for Pakistan’s bid to become a member of the same club (Stewart and Sultan 2019).

For experts such as Samir Saran, India’s policy is marked by plurilateralism, in other words, a broad but selected cooperation among multiple like-minded countries. This has helped to “place India firmly within the established order of global management and provide a flexible architecture for its diplomacy” (Saran 2015, 624). In the course of the past decade, minilateralism, in the form of even more focused cooperation among a small number of countries, has taken on an increasingly important role. In late 2017, India, together with the United States, Japan, and Australia, re-launched the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly referred to

as “the Quad”. A trilateral with Japan and the US (Japan–America–India or JAI) was created in 2018. In parallel with this, the Indian Navy has been actively seeking defence relations with major states across the Asia-Pacific region – Japan, Vietnam, Australia, Indonesia, South Korea, and Singapore. These defence relations have entailed regular joint naval exercises between India and these major states. The Malabar exercises include diverse activities, ranging from fighter combat operations from aircraft carriers to maritime interdiction operations exercises. Talks of cooperation with AUKUS (the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization are ongoing. A recent addition to minilateral engagement is the I2U2 (India, Israel, United States, and United Arab Emirates), an economic grouping but grounded in geostrategic considerations. At the same time, India is a member in numerous arrangements with non-Western countries. It actively takes part in the Brazil–Russia–India–China–South Africa grouping (BRICS, expanded in 2023 to BRICS+).⁷ Expansion of UNSC membership is high on the agenda of the IBSA trilateral dialogue forum composed of India, Brazil, and South Africa. Furthermore, India is a member in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), as well as the Russia–India–China (RIC) gathering.

India is clearly maximising its options, engaging with multiple players in numerous fora. This is akin to hedging: valuing freedom of action, “hedgers . . . form partnerships of convenience to pursue specific foreign objectives”, and in response to a new, multipolar world, hedgers (such as India) aim to avoid the pressure to choose between China, Russia, and the United States (Spektor 2023). There is, therefore, no contradiction in reconciling the RIC with JAI, the Quad with the SCO, Iran with Saudi Arabia, or Israel with Palestine.⁸

A lot of this should be seen in light of India’s competition with China over influence in South Asia, and with balancing China’s increasing clout in the wider Indo-Pacific. India’s challenging relations with its neighbours have been compounded by an ascending and increasingly assertive China. As a result, India felt compelled to rethink its foreign policy (see Gaens and Ruohomäki 2017). Hence, starting with the premiership of Narendra Modi in 2014, India has initiated a “soft power” offensive, aiming, in the first instance, to improve economic and diplomatic relations with its immediate and extended neighbours. These economic initiatives have been underscored by strategic security considerations. In November 2014, speaking at the summit of the ASEAN, Narendra Modi announced the establishment of an “Act East” policy. This replaced the previous government’s “Look East” policy, which underlined the need to pivot towards the region lying to India’s east. However, the latter policy remained very much dormant with little action. Modi sought to remedy this through a more action-oriented policy. He stressed the need to ensure the freedom of navigation in Asia’s regional waters, and the necessity to work with partners to ensure that oceans, the cyber sphere, and space remain avenues of shared prosperity rather than theatres of contest.

Indeed, China is currently India’s key security threat, not least due to unresolved border/territory disputes over Aksai Chin (administered by China) and Arunachal Pradesh (administered by India). The latest flareup of hostilities dates back to 2020.

Furthermore, China has been “an all-weather friend” and a major supplier of military hardware and economic assistance to Pakistan, including major infrastructure projects. In South Asia as well as the wider Indian Ocean region, China has been actively wooing all of India’s neighbours, including Afghanistan and Myanmar. Many of India’s neighbours have welcomed China as a counterweight to India, as Beijing has hardly any historical baggage in the region. It is also a very attractive economic partner to the smaller South Asian nations. For example, China has supplied Bangladesh with military hardware, built a naval facility in Sri Lanka, invested in hydropower and other infrastructure in Nepal, and invested heavily in economic infrastructure in Afghanistan and Myanmar. These efforts are part of China’s wider geopolitical ambitions in the Indian Ocean as well as in Africa, and pose a direct threat to India’s interests in the region and beyond.

In order to tackle China’s increased encroachment, India has become more proactive in balancing Beijing. To counter Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean, India has started to engage in the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea, which, by contrast, China considers its sphere of influence. As a result, India seems to have emerged as a natural ally to the United States and “the West’s” position in the Indo-Pacific balance of power. Alternately, for the West, India, as the only country in Asia comparable to China in terms of size and demography, is the key in balancing China. India is also an attractive trading partner, as India’s economy has grown steadily in the past decade.

However, as made amply clear by New Delhi’s refusal to criticise Russia’s actions in Ukraine, “strategic autonomy” remains key to India’s foreign policy. In light of the much-discussed China–Russia “no-limits” partnership, India has sought to retain whatever leverage it has over Moscow and avoid isolating Beijing and Moscow. This explains why, based on a pragmatic stance and rooted in self-proclaimed national interest, India has boosted trade ties with Russia after the invasion of Ukraine and remains an active participant in the SCO and RIC. “Strategic autonomy” initially referred to the policy of keeping distance from the West, especially the United States, during the period of non-alignment, but it also resulted in dependencies, such as on Russia for arms and China for manufactured goods. India’s new version of strategic autonomy allows it to exploit the possibilities of cooperation with the West, while continuing to constructively engage with other powers (Mohan 2024; Jaishankar 2024). Increased alignment with the United States can, therefore, be seen as a way to secure strategic autonomy vis-à-vis India’s principal security threat, namely China (Smith 2020). However, this does not take away the fact that, in spite of rocky relations with Beijing, China remains a key trading partner for India. Trade and economic relations have expanded significantly since the turn of the century, and trade figures surged to record heights in 2021. While India’s trade with the United States has risen strongly in recent years, China again overtook the United States as India’s top trading partner in fiscal year 2024 (Ministry of External Affairs of India 2024). Furthermore, both Beijing and New Delhi support a multipolar world order and share common interests in global trade negotiations, the restructuring of global financial institutions, and climate policy negotiations.

Strategic autonomy gives India leverage over Western countries, as New Delhi is fully aware that strategies to balance China, including the United States' and Japan's FOIP, are impossible to implement without the support of New Delhi. The West, including the European Union (EU), needs India as a potential economic alternative to China, leading to the creation of stronger trade and investment relations. In February 2023, in spite of disagreements over Ukraine, the EU and India signed an agreement after 15 years of negotiations to set up a trade and technology council. Furthermore, the two partners agreed to finalise a free trade agreement by the end of 2025, and to create a defence and security partnership. This has led some to conclude that, in the current tense global climate, Europe has correctly decided that it needs as many friends as it can possibly get and that Europe's own strategic autonomy requires it to woo New Delhi (Sharma 2025).

Conclusion: India's Ordering Vision across Time

According to the current Minister of External Affairs Jaishankar (2020, 75–77), India's foreign policy has gone through six phases since the country's independence in 1947. An initial period of optimistic non-alignment under Prime Minister Nehru during the bipolar era (1946–1962) was brought to an end by the 1962 conflict with China. This was followed by an era in which India pursued a more realist policy and hard power strategies (1962–1971). This resulted in a period of regional assertion (1971–1991) after the US–China–Pakistan axis threatened India's prospects. After the collapse of the USSR, India's close ally, and the emergence of a unipolar world, India became a nuclear power that aimed for strategic autonomy (1991–1998). In the ensuing period India became a balancing power, brokering a nuclear deal with the United States, cooperating with China on trade and climate change, and consolidating ties with Russia, leading, for example, to BRICS (1998–2014). The sixth and current phase started in 2014 when a rising China, a relatively declining United States and an inward-looking Europe gradually gave rise to a multipolar world in which India shifted towards more energetic diplomacy marked by issue-based arrangements.

As this chapter has made clear, a new, self-confident India was born in 2014 after Modi came to power. India had to come to terms with the new international environment featuring greater multipolarity, more uncertainty, and narrow convergences rather than broad approaches (Jaishankar 2020, 93). A more vocal and proactive India aimed to raise its global profile, influence international negotiations, boost high-level diplomacy, and invest in connectivity. This took place at the regional level through South Asian regionalism and the Act East policy.

At the moment, against the background of ongoing power transition and the crisis of the so-called liberal rules-based international order, India's rise as a regional power and its increasing impact on the global geopolitical landscape today seems uncontested. First, there are the country's capabilities. India surpassed China as the world's most populous country in April 2023, and it has a young and highly educated population. It is also the world's biggest democracy, encapsulated in a multi-faith, multi-ethnic, and multilingual state. In terms of the economy, India

currently has the world's fifth-largest economy (\$3.95 trillion nominal gross domestic product [GDP]), which grew by 8.2 per cent in fiscal year 2023–2024. It is expected to become the third-largest economy by 2030. As for climate change mitigation, India is a key player, given its size and economic growth. Geopolitically, the fact that we now speak of the Indo-Pacific, rather than the Asia-Pacific, is a signifier of India's strategic importance. Militarily, India spends 2.9 per cent of its GDP on defence; it has the fourth most powerful army in the world, the third highest defence budget after the United States and China, and the second-largest standing army consisting of 1.5 million military personnel. India has deployed more than 50,000 troops along its contested border with China (the so-called line of actual control). Lastly, following the lunar landing in 2023, it is now also a space power. For the likes of Jaishankar, India's Foreign Minister, all of the above means that "the rise of India is unstoppable and the country is taking its place in the world" (Economic Times 2023).

India's future vision is extensive and arguably covers three eras. The first one is "Amrit Kaal" (Golden Era), a term coined for the first time by Modi in 2021. It indicates the era of 25 years up to 2047, when India celebrates 100 years of independence. India's ordering vision and global ambitions are considerably linked to China's development, because China celebrates its centennial in 2049. India's overall goal is to achieve a "Viksit Bharat 2047", that is a developed India. The country aspires to be a USD 30 trillion economy by then, improving the quality of life "of 140 crore countrymen"⁹ and closing the gap between rural and urban areas. In light of the contest with China, it will be a milestone for New Delhi to check achievements and setbacks in realising India's own global positioning (Singh 2024, 243–44). Some analysts take the Golden Era by 2047 to further visionary levels by including the next half a century for India to become a global pillar responsible for creating a secure and sustainable planet by 2100. After that it would take another millennium to accomplish a physical and philosophical human unity by the year 3000 (Chikermane 2024, 17).

In the short term, challenges abound for India. Poverty reduction remains a crucial problem, as do the country's protectionist policies, absence from regional trade integration efforts such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and an insufficiently competitive manufacturing sector. India is often referred to as the world's largest democracy, but Prime Minister Narendra Modi's brand of Hindu nationalism/populism has had ramifications for internal politics, such as the questionable independence of courts and media, religious strife, and unequal treatment of citizens, including the country's 200 million Muslims. This has led to Western accusations of democratic backsliding into an "electoral autocracy". So far this has not had a sizable impact on foreign relations and international engagement. Key players, including the United States and EU, are mindful of India's allergy to external meddling and are fully aware of India's indispensable role in balancing China in terms of security as well as trade and economy.

India's pivotal role in the ongoing regional and global power competition will only grow in the years to come, and New Delhi is certainly very aware of this. The rest of the world, including the West, needs to come to terms with India's greater

voice, its foreign policy contradictions, and its global outlook. Prospective partners need to agree to disagree with India on certain matters and cooperate wherever possible on an issue-by-issue basis.

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Notes

- 1 “Pivot states are states that possess military, economic or ideational strategic assets that are coveted by great powers. Pivot states are caught in the middle of overlapping spheres of influence of multiple great powers as measured by associations that consist of ties that bind (military and economic agreements and cultural affinities) and relationships that flow (arms and commodities trade and discourse). A change in a pivot state's association has important repercussions for regional and global security” (Sweijts et al. 2014, 1).
- 2 “We will further consolidate Bharat's position as a Voice of the Global South by using the Prime Minister's visionary 5S approach of Samman, Samvad, Sahyog, Shanti and Samridhi [respect, dialogue, cooperation, peace and prosperity]” (Bharatiya Janata Party 2024, 35).
- 3 “Mother India seated as the World Guru”, see Hall (2017, 127).
- 4 As argued by Chatterjee and Das (2023, 492), India's civilisational rhetoric since 2014 has moved towards a majoritarian reading anchored in religious terms.
- 5 For Jaishankar (and Modi), “India can only rise when it is truly Bharat” (Jaishankar 2024).
- 6 “Ramayan is celebrated across the world, particularly in South and South-East Asia. We will launch a global outreach program for documenting and promoting the tangible and intangible legacy of Lord Ram in all countries” (Bharatiya Janata Party 2024, 37).
- 7 In August 2023, Argentina, Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates were invited to become new members of the group.
- 8 In the words of Minister of External Affairs Jaishankar (2019), “[h]edging is a delicate exercise, whether it is the non-alignment and strategic autonomy of earlier periods, or multiple engagements of the future”.
- 9 A crore is ten million in the Indian numbering system.

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