



Multi-alignment under "Uneven Multipolarity": India's Relations with Russia in an Evolving World Order

Nivedita Kapoor

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia

Abstract: The article explores the ongoing evolution of India's relationship with Russia, using the concept of "uneven multipolarity" and its specific distribution of capabilities. It argues that India's perception of the balance of threats has shifted with respect to China, particularly in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, which are crucial to India's national security and future power projection ambitions. In the current context of uneven multipolarity, the capabilities of the US and China exceed those of weaker major powers, such as India, Russia, and Japan, without tipping the system into explicit bipolarity. This specific nature of current polarity and India's "China challenge" have led to shifting alignments in its foreign policy.

When combined with changes in Russia's external relations, particularly the breakdown of its relations with the West and growing closeness with China, these factors have created particular constraints on New Delhi's partnership with Moscow. Multi-alignment for India represents a choice other than the formation of alliances as a balancing response, but it does introduce a hierarchy in its foreign relations. Under prevailing conditions, it emphasizes the importance of the relationship with the US while diminishing the significance of the relationship with Russia, even as the value of the bilateral partnership is retained in specific ways. These observations are instrumental in the assessment of the present and future trajectory of Indo-Russian ties presented in the article.

Keywords: India-Russia relations, Indian foreign policy, China, multipolarity, Asia-Pacific, multi-alignment, Russia-China relations, India-US relations

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Russia in 1947, the two countries have encountered various challenges in managing their partnership amidst the evolving world order. India and Russia have undergone significant changes in the 21st century, as evidenced by their foreign policy choices. Pur-

UDC 327.5(470+571+540)

Received: December 20, 2022

Accepted: April 17, 2023

suings their national interests has been facilitated and hindered by the changing global order and their respective positions within it. In a speech in Moscow, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar emphasized that the current India-Russia relationship is based on the acceptance of multipolarity as both a reality and an aspiration¹. He further noted that constraints on state interests in this system are determined by the balance of interests rather than the balance of power, which requires a flexible approach without seeking exclusivity.

In recent years, the notion of a multipolar world order has been a recurrent theme in the official discourse of both India and Russia. However, neither state appears to be entirely convinced that such an order has been effectively established, as evidenced by statements that rather emphasize the belief that the world is gradually becoming multipolar without specifying that the process has reached its intended conclusion². This reluctance to announce the arrival of a new multipolar world order can be attributed to the absence of a clearly established international order, despite the acknowledged decline of American unipolarity and the rise of China. In the present context, the world is characterized by a specific type of disorder that requires India to tailor its response to threats while avoiding entanglement in any alliance system. The alignments adopted as a result of these developments also shape India's strategic partnership with Russia, which no longer operates within the same systemic parameters that existed at the end of the Cold War in a unipolar system.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the impact of the changing global order on the current strategic partnership between India and Russia. Specifically, the article examines how the evolving international system affects India's role, interests, and constraints and how this impacts its engagement with Moscow in the 21st century. The article adopts a structural realist perspective, which looks beyond the formation of alliances as a balancing response to explore alternative strategies. The theoretical framework of structural realism is used to provide an understanding of the contours of the changing global order. The article then applies this understanding to Indian foreign policy more broadly and the India-Russia relationship in particular, linking theoretical insights with empirical observations. To achieve the stated objective, the article will investigate three central research inquiries. Firstly, the study will examine whether the present global order is that of multipolarity. Secondly, it will explore whether India is moving towards a balance of threat perception in its approach towards China concerning both the Asia-Pacific region and the Indian Ocean. Finally, the research

¹ Jaishankar S. 2021. India-Russia ties in a changing world. *Embassy of India*. July 8. Available at: <https://indianembassy-moscow.gov.in/press-releases-EAM-08-07-2021-1.php> (accessed 25.02.2023)

² Kortunov A. 2018. Why the World is Not Becoming Multipolar. *RIAC*. June 27. Available at: https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/why-the-world-is-not-becoming-multipolar/?sphrase_id=90036059 (accessed 25.02.2023)

Raja Mohan C. 2021. Reconnecting to the West: India's New Geopolitics. *IIMB*. October 28. Available at: <https://www.iimb.ac.in/sites/default/files/inline-files/Foundation-Day-Lecture-Raja-Mohan-2021.pdf> (accessed 25.02.2023)

will evaluate whether the answers gained from the previous two questions impose any limitations on India's multi-alignment policy and, correspondingly, whether it has any impact on the country's ties with Russia.

A multipolar world?

Although the United States and China are currently the two strongest states in the world, the global system cannot be described as bipolar. However, there are indications of emerging bipolarity in the Asia-Pacific region³. The relative decline of the US has marked the end of its unipolar moment, while China's economic growth has fuelled its ascent as a great power. Although the gap between their capabilities has narrowed, it has not been completely bridged, with certain aspects of Chinese "comprehensive national strength" (such as military capability, partnership networks, and soft power) still lagging behind that of the US.⁴

Realists posit that a state's increased economic influence, which is the foundation of long-term power projection, broadens the range of its interests and increases their significance (Waltz 1993). This is particularly evident in East Asia, where China's rising power is at its strongest and seeks to assert more significant influence over the region, putting it in direct competition with the United States, which has held a position of primacy since the Cold War.⁵ In recent years, this competition has extended to the Asia-Pacific, where Beijing comes close to matching the former superpower on several but not all characteristics of a great power, including the size of its population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability, and competence (Waltz 1993; Lemahieu and Leng 2021).⁶

However, the current global order cannot be accurately described as multipolar. A balanced multipolarity requires power to be distributed relatively evenly among major states without a clear potential hegemon, but this is not the case in the current state (Mearsheimer 2001). On the other hand, an unbalanced multipolarity entails three or more great powers, one of which has the potential to become a hegemon. Although

³ Xuetong Y. 2015. A Bipolar World is more likely than a Unipolar or a Multipolar One. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. April 20. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/04/20/bipolar-world-is-more-likely-than-unipolar-or-multipolar-one-pub-59915> (accessed 25.02.2023)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mearsheimer J.J. 2005. The Rise of China Will Not Be Peaceful at All. *The Australian*. November 18. Available at: <https://www.mearsheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-Australian-November-18-2005.pdf> (accessed 25.02.2023)

⁶ Based on the calculations presented in the Asia Power Index 2021, the United States is considered the most powerful country in Asia, as it outperforms other countries across eight power indicators. Despite China's economic dominance and its influence over Asian economies through interdependencies, it is not as strong as the US in terms of conventional military capability, resilience to potential threats, future resources, defense networks, diplomatic influence, and cultural influence. Consequently, the United States holds the top position in the region while China ranks second, according to the index.

other significant powers such as India, Russia, and Japan possess certain aspects of great power status that enable them to influence specific regional contexts, they lag behind the US and China in overall capacity. As a result, the current structure appears to be tilted in favor of what Rodrik and Walt have described as a "highly uneven multipolarity", where countries like India, Russia, and Japan occupy much weaker positions among major powers, with the US and China significantly stronger than others⁷.

The significance of states that possess most but not all of the capabilities of great power should not be underestimated, but they do face constraints on their conduct due to the potential risk posed by those states that do possess all of these capabilities (Waltz 1993). Such differences in capabilities have led to the formation of alignments in the contemporary international system (Snyder 1991). To address their vulnerabilities, states have established alignments with other powers, highlighting the tendency towards balancing in the international system.

In the current state of uneven multipolarity, India and Russia's avoidance of forming alliances with either of the two major powers highlights the significance of their alignments⁸. Such alignments help them address the disparities in their capabilities and distinguish between "opponents and friends". Several factors, including aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intentions, influence these alignments' formation. For middle powers like India, their alignment decisions are shaped by additional factors beyond the total resources that major powers possess. Given that both the US and China surpass India in terms of economic, technological, and military capacity, India's alignment choices will be impacted by China's growing aggregate power, which has affected India's threat perceptions based on its proximity, offensive capability, and intentions.

Indian assessment of China's "peaceful rise"

India and China share a disputed land border that spans over 3488 kilometres. Both countries have disagreements about the demarcation of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in certain areas. Recently, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has significantly increased its military presence on the border, occupying areas that were previously under Indian control. Incidents along the border have also been increasing since

⁷ Rodrik D., Walt S. 2021. How to Construct a New Global Order. *HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series*, RWP21-013. May 2021. URL: <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/how-construct-new-global-order> (accessed 25.02.2023).

⁸ When confronted by a potentially hostile state, countries have a range of options available to them beyond forming an alliance or siding with the said power. Snyder (1991) suggests that they could choose to remain neutral, improve relations with a third party (without forming an alliance), or seek a compromise with the threatening state. In this context, alignment refers to the expectations that states have about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions (Snyder 2007). These expectations are shaped by their perceived interests, capabilities, and observed behaviour of other states. On the other hand, alliances are a subset of alignments that involve a pledge of mutual military assistance between two or more independent states. Allies are expected to provide support to one another even when not in a state of war, a feature that is not necessarily present in alignment.

2012. India has expressed concerns about China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, which, when combined with the rising tensions on the border, China's decision to build the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through Indian territory, and China's opposition to India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), has led to a steady deterioration of relations between the two countries. The military standoff that began in Ladakh in 2020 has further strained their relationship. Talks to resolve the standoff have been ongoing while China continues its rapid infrastructure build-up. As a result, India now sees China as a "national security existential challenge".⁹

The rise of Chinese aggregate power, coupled with its actions in close proximity to India and its increasing offensive capabilities, has led many to conclude that China has offensive intentions towards India.¹⁰ This observation is supported by the fact that states that appear to be more aggressive are more likely to face opposing coalitions forming against them (Walt 1985). As a result, India has strengthened its alignment with the US and other like-minded states in the Asia-Pacific region to deal with the threat posed by a more assertive China. The focus of this alignment has been on the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, as these are the areas where India and China compete the most for influence and where India, as a middle power, has enough capabilities to be an influential player when coordinating with other partners.

Chinese assertiveness has increased in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in its territorial disputes with Southeast Asian neighbours over the South China Sea, with Japan over the Senkaku Islands, and with Australia over trade. This behaviour is believed to have contributed to an increase in military spending by regional states such as Japan and Australia.¹¹ Scholars attribute this trend to a shift in Chinese foreign policy after the global financial crisis of 2008, as Beijing became more assertive in line with its growing global ambitions¹², and with an aim to establish regional hegemony in Asia.¹³ China's rapid economic growth has been accompanied by a consistent expansion of

⁹ Jacob H. 2022. A New Delhi View on the World Order. *Institut Montaigne*. October 6. Available at: <https://www.institut-montaigne.org/en/analysis/new-delhi-view-world-order> (accessed 25.02.2023)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ World military expenditure passes \$2 trillion for the first time. 2022. April 25. *SIPRI*. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/world-military-expenditure-passes-2-trillion-first-time> (accessed 25.02.2023)

¹² Gokhale, V. 2021a. The Road from Galwan: The Future of India-China Relations. *Carnegie India*. March 10. Available at: <https://carnegieindia.org/2021/03/10/road-from-galwan-future-of-india-china-relations-pub-84019> (accessed 25.02.2023)

¹³ The rise of China on the back of impressive economic growth, with annual real GDP averaging 9.5% from 1979 to 2018, has catapulted it into the League of great powers. This has also been accompanied by a steady expansion of its military expenditure, which according to SIPRI, has grown for 27 consecutive years, and in 2021 is estimated to be \$293 billion.

Doshi R. 2021. The long game - China's grand strategy to displace American order. *The Brookings Institution*. August 2. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-long-game-chinas-grand-strategy-to-displace-american-order/> (accessed 25.02.2023)

its military spending, second only to the US, and its military-technological policies have resulted in it becoming a formidable regional military with continuously growing capacity.¹⁴

India's decision to balance against China was motivated by its perception of a shift in Chinese intentions towards regional domination, particularly in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. This perception of China as a threatening power has led India to adopt a balancing strategy, which is a common tendency among states in response to such threats (Snyder 1991). Although India initially attempted to engage with China to settle border disputes and maintain cooperation, it eventually concluded that its concerns were not being taken into consideration by China.¹⁵ Unlike some smaller Asian states that have chosen to bandwagon with China due to their economic dependence and weaker relationships with other powerful stakeholders,¹⁶ India and other middle powers have pursued a strategy of balancing by strengthening their other alignments.

In the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, there is a competition for influence between New Delhi and Beijing, with India perceiving China as a hindrance to its progress¹⁷. As such, India has aligned with the United States as a major power, given that balancing against China requires the presence of another major power that has the capacity to manage the threatening power.¹⁸ Furthermore, there is a long-term concern that China's hegemony in Asia would enable it to expand its influence beyond the re-

¹⁴ Campbell C. 2021. China's Military: The People's Liberation Army (PLA). *Congressional Research Service*. June 4. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46808> (accessed 25.02.2023)

¹⁵ Beginning in 1999, India and China resumed ministerial-level meetings, established a security dialogue, and initiated talks on resolving their boundary question. Over time, the two countries organized regular summit-level meetings and saw a significant increase in economic ties and the establishment of defense exchanges. In 2004-05, the relationship was elevated to a strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity. However, in 2005-06, China began to dispute India's claims over Arunachal Pradesh and issued stapled visas to Indians from that state and Jammu and Kashmir. As a result, experts note that India's China Study Group recommended the government focus on building border infrastructure due to the rapid pace of similar development on the Chinese side. Despite this, the pace of such efforts, particularly focused on building roads in border areas, remained slow during the Manmohan Singh government. Nonetheless, these developments signaled an ongoing shift in India's response to what it perceived as an emerging threat of a two-front war with Pakistan and China. Tensions have been rising on the Line of Actual Control, especially since 2012, and efforts to settle the border issue have stalled. This has coincided with a shift in the balance of power in China's favor, with its economy and defense capacities surpassing those of India. During border negotiations, India has come to believe that China is now less interested in adhering to previous understandings in dealing with border disputes.

For more, see Gokhale V. 2021. The Road from Galwan: The Future of India-China Relations. *Carnegie India*. March 10. Available at: <https://carnegieindia.org/2021/03/10/road-from-galwan-future-of-india-china-relations-pub-84019> (accessed 25.02.2023)

¹⁶ Jackson V. 2016. Asian Security after US Hegemony: Spheres of Influence and the Third Wave of Regional Order. *The Asian Forum*. October 14. Available at: <https://theasianforum.org/asian-security-after-us-hegemony-spheres-of-influence-and-the-third-wave-of-regional-order/#a17> (accessed 25.02.2023)

¹⁷ Raja Mohan C. 2017. Between Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific: India's New Geopolitics. *Valdai Discussion Club*. December 20. Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/between-eurasia-and-the-indo-pacific-india/> (accessed 25.02.2023)

¹⁸ In the case of Asia-Pacific, the presence of the US has been seen as having contributed to its economic growth and stability. The rise of China in the past years has given rise to fears among the key middle powers about its assertive nature, leading them to get closer to the US to encourage a balancing strategy to manage Beijing, which has again discouraged states from pursuing this strategy vs. Washington.

gion, thereby undermining Indian ambitions, particularly on the Eurasian landmass¹⁹. This has made China the "main national challenge" for India, leading to a reorientation of its alignments around this focal point²⁰. Consequently, India has prioritized balancing China in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean by building domestic capacities and enhancing strength through partnerships with like-minded regional stakeholders. In this context, the US's intentions towards India have leaned towards cooperation, and policymakers do not perceive it as a current source of threat to the country.

Despite the US maintaining its relationship with Pakistan, even selling F-16s in 2022, which has caused discontent in New Delhi, there is a perception that India has surpassed its South Asian neighbour and become the dominant power in the region.²¹ Furthermore, India views the threat from Pakistan not only through cross-border terrorism but also through its relationship with China, which raises concerns about any changes in US-Pakistan ties that may alleviate pressure on Pakistan. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has also impacted India's policy, where it relied on the Western presence to develop economic and strategic ties. Nevertheless, the India-US partnership has gained momentum with the aim of balancing China (Rajagopalan 2017).

The current period is marked by increasing tensions between the US and China, coinciding with a shift in the distribution of capabilities in the international system, which has led to China's transformation into a major power. China's rise has fuelled its resistance to the presence of another great power in the region where it is based.²² The US, in response, is pursuing efforts to maintain its own primacy in the Asia-Pacific region, which it considers critical to its status as a global power. Other US allies, such as Japan and Australia, are also grappling with their respective concerns about China's intentions, leading to a renewed emphasis on the Quad and the promotion of the Indo-Pacific, as well as the formation of AUKUS. These developments have been met with opposition from Beijing, and India is either a participant or a supporter of these initiatives.

Multi-alignment and Indo-Russian partnership

Salience of Indo-Russia ties

India's tendency to seek alignment in response to external threats has been observed throughout the Cold War period, despite its official policy of non-alignment (Walt 1988). This trend has resurfaced recently due to an increased threat perceived

¹⁹ Walt S. M. 2013. How Long Will China Tolerate America's Role in Asia? *Foreign Policy*. December 2. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/02/how-long-will-china-tolerate-americas-role-in-asia/> (accessed 25.02.2023)

²⁰ Raja Mohan C. 2022. India, America, and the China challenge. *The Indian Express*. October 19. Available at: <https://indian-express.com/article/opinion/columns/india-america-and-the-china-challenge-8214579/> (accessed 25.02.2023)

²¹ Jaishankar S. 2022a. Today, the world doesn't see India, Pakistan equally. *Hindustan Times*. December 10. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/today-world-doesn-t-see-india-pakistan-equally-s-jaishankar-watch-101670691163569.html> (accessed 25.02.2023)

²² Walt, S. M. 2013. How Long Will China Tolerate America's Role in Asia? *Foreign Policy*. December 2. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/02/how-long-will-china-tolerate-americas-role-in-asia/> (accessed 25.02.2023)

from China, which has become a central factor in India's bilateral and multilateral interactions in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. India is concerned about China's expansion of power and influence, which is upsetting the regional balance of power. India's current policy, termed "multi-alignment"²³, aims to address this challenge. India's non-membership in any alliance system enables the pursuit of this policy, which may be seen as opportunistic as India seeks strategic convergence²⁴. The strategic partnership between India and Russia is considered an important element of this policy direction. There is an acknowledgment that the world order remains in transition, with no clear bipolar or multipolar system having been established. Thus, middle powers such as India need to maintain multiple ties to pursue their interests in various regional settings. Indo-Russian defence ties are critical as they involve a willingness to supply or transfer military technology that is not available from other sources²⁵. Moscow is perceived as a partner that can help India secure its interests in the Eurasian landmass, particularly in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and West Asia. With the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, India has limited leverage and is more dependent on other players like Russia in the region. India calculates that its own policy is critical in providing the former superpower with strategic space vis-à-vis China. A failure to do so could create a hostile quasi-alliance power relationship on the Eurasian landmass, where India's Western partners have a weak presence. Both sides are interested in avoiding a bipolar system²⁶ from emerging (Raghavan 2020), and disengaging from a strategic partner with whom India enjoys a cordial relationship is not considered a wise move.

²³ Lok Sabha MP Shashi Tharoor, who has been credited with coining the term multi-alignment, explains it in his book *Pax Indica* as moving beyond non-alignment. This would be a situation where India plays an important role in a whole range of multilateral platforms, including UN, G20, Nonaligned Movement, Community of Democracies, G77, SAARC, BRICS, RIC, IBSA, and BASIC. It would involve cooperating with democracies but also dissenting from them when expedient. No country would be "exempt from its embrace", and it is a "strategy of making and running shifting coalitions of interests". He further argues that this is in response to a situation in the present geopolitics where "neither autonomy nor alliance offers adequate answers in themselves". For the current foreign minister S. Jaishankar, multi-alignment is "more energetic and participative as compared to an earlier posture of abstention or non-involvement". Expanding on this in his book *"The India Way,"* he adds that given the range of tasks that Indian foreign policy needs to fulfill, it "will be convergence with many but congruence with none". This includes efforts to "engage with America, manage China, cultivate relations with Europe, reassure Russia, coordinate with Japan, strengthen ties with neighboring countries, and expand support of India's traditional constituencies".

²⁴ Jaishankar S. 2021. India-Russia ties in a changing world. *Embassy of India*. July 8. Available at: <https://indianembassy-moscow.gov.in/press-releases-EAM-08-07-2021-1.php> (accessed 25.02.2023)

²⁵ It is estimated that more than 70% of the military equipment used by India is of Russian or Soviet origin. From 2014 to 2018, 58% of India's arms imports were from Russia, a decrease from 70% during the 2010-2014 period. Numerous arms deals were made between the two countries in 2018 and 2019, with an estimated value of \$14.5 billion. The Indian and Russian governments have also agreed to collaborate on the production of spare parts for military equipment of Russian or Soviet origin. They have also decided to continue joint manufacturing of spare parts and other equipment as part of the "Make in India" program.

²⁶ In the Indo-Pacific region, India views a balance of power as more favourable to its interests than having either the United States or China exert dominance, as noted by Gokhale in his work "China's Vision of Hegemony: The View from India" (ASPI). India achieves this balance by avoiding aligning with one partner on all issues. Foreign Minister Jaishankar emphasized that cooperation with a partner in one conflict area does not necessarily extend to cooperation in a different conflict, reflecting a transactional relationship rather than a formal alliance.

The fact that India and Russia are members of non-western multilateral organizations such as BRICS and SCO has further strengthened their bilateral partnership. Russia supported India's application for full membership in the SCO, which was successfully completed in 2017, with the intention of managing Chinese influence (Lanteigne 2017). The two countries share a "commonality of interests" that has deepened their relationship amid changes in the international system during and after the Cold War, including Russia's support for India in the UN Security Council (Pant 2013). Furthermore, the establishment of the 2+2 defence and foreign ministers meeting between the two sides, with its inaugural meeting held in December 2021, signifies their strong commitment to deepening bilateral ties. However, economic ties between the two countries continue to be a weak point in the Indo-Russian relationship. While bilateral trade has increased recently due to oil imports in the wake of a growing global energy crisis, there has been no corresponding increase in exports from India.²⁷

Shifting Alignments

In recent years, the alignment between Russia and India has been experiencing strains, particularly due to Russia's deteriorating relations with the West, which are expected to remain in long-term decline following the conflict in Ukraine. China has emerged as Russia's key external partner, further contributing to the strain. China has become a crucial trade partner for Russia, and, despite earlier policies of not selling the latest defence technologies to China, Russia has reversed its stance, which has raised concerns for India (Raghavan 2020). This situation has resulted in an asymmetrical relationship between Russia and China becoming more unbalanced. Differences in the distribution of capabilities are continuing to rise, even as Russia's leverage against the rising power is diminishing.

Despite China's growing power, Moscow remains comfortable aligning with it and balancing against the US. Russia views the US as its rival and perceives China's intentions toward it as non-threatening at present. Russia asserts that the world is moving toward a multipolar direction, with the US trying to prevent such a move by containing China. Russia also categorizes the Indo-Pacific²⁸, Quad, and AUKUS²⁹ within this

²⁷ During the decade spanning 2010-2020, the bilateral trade between India and Russia remained within the \$8-12 billion range. The joint statement issued in 2014 established the goal of increasing this trade to \$30 billion by 2025. However, due to India's import of heavily discounted oil in response to the energy crisis caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the trade volume increased to \$18 billion in April-August 2022. Additionally, there has been a significant rise in India's import of fertilizers from Russia. As a result, Russia has become India's seventh-largest trading partner, a substantial increase from its 25th position in 2021. The majority of this increase can be attributed to Indian imports from Moscow, while exports from India to Russia during this period remained at less than one billion dollars.

²⁸ Lavrov S. 2022. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the 30th Assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy. *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*. May 14. Available at: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1813377/ (accessed 25.02.2023)

²⁹ Lavrov S. 2022. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with the NTV network. *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*. June 16. Available at: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1818292/ (accessed 25.02.2023)

understanding. However, India's assessment of the implications of China's rise and its policy prescription for balancing the rising power sharply contrasts with Russia's position. This discrepancy has raised concerns about whether Moscow can play an independent role in the event of an India-China conflict, where it has so far remained neutral³⁰.

The current situation has also undermined India's efforts to provide strategic space to Russia in relation to China, as Moscow has become closer to Beijing than ever before, aligning itself with China on issues related to regional order in Asia and opposing US "hegemony", in contrast to India's position. The former superpower has always had a weak presence in the Asia-Pacific region due to various factors, such as limited historical experience, weak economic linkages, the presence of other influential powers, and a weak strategy³¹. The ongoing conflict will further impact Russia's power projection capacity in the broader Eurasian landmass, making it both a weaker partner for other regional players and more dependent on China. India, which is not yet a strong enough regional player, may find it challenging to work with Russia in the future.

The current state of uneven multipolarity has compelled India to shift its alignment, which is more likely to happen in such a situation compared to balanced or unbalanced multipolarity. In a balanced multipolar system, major states have a mostly equal power distribution, reducing the possibility of forming a balancing coalition against each other. In an unbalanced multipolarity, the presence of a potential hegemon that poses a threat to other states due to a clear preponderance of power makes coalition formation against a common target more likely (Mearsheimer 2001). However, in the current state of uneven multipolarity, where two powers clearly outpace others without transitioning to bipolarity, it gives weaker major powers more flexibility in their alignments but also makes them more susceptible to shifts than would be the case under either balanced or unbalanced multipolarity. The fact that India and Russia are becoming more strongly aligned with the two opposing major powers (the US and China, respectively) only further creates conditions for divergences in their current state of alignment.

In the Indo-Russia partnership, the future alignment of the two strategic partners will depend on the "lines of conflict and commonality" on different issues, with "mutually reinforcing lines" on common interests leading to stronger alignment (Snyder 1991). Additionally, "changing patterns of power" and "issue priorities" also have a direct impact on alignment between states (Snyder 2007). While there is continued commonality on some issues between India and Russia, the conflict lines over China

³⁰ Chaudhuri R. 2022. How Russia's invasion of Ukraine has undermined strategic choices available to India. *The Print*. March 2. Available at: <https://theprint.in/opinion/how-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-has-undermined-strategic-choices-available-to-india/854376/> (accessed 25.02.2023)

³¹ Kapoor N. 2022. Russia's Pivot to Asia – A 10-Year Policy Review. *Valdai Discussion Club*. March 21. Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-s-pivot-to-asia-a-decadal-policy-review/> (accessed 25.02.2023)

are widening. Moreover, the issues of common interest are affected by a relative decline of overall Russian capacities and questions about the limits of its power projection capacities in the aftermath of the conflict in Ukraine³². This has been reflected in Moscow's struggles to translate visions of both the pivot to the East and the Greater Eurasian Partnership into reality.

India's China Question

The emergence of China as India's foremost foreign policy challenge has had a direct impact on its relationship with the US and other like-minded stakeholders. As China continues its rapid ascent, India has taken measures to ensure that it does not become a hegemonic power in Asia, which is vital in constraining China's influence beyond the region. Consequently, effectively managing China's ascent in Asia has become essential to managing its rise in Eurasia. However, India's limited capacity to balance China in the region necessitates strong partnerships. There is a recognition that India and other regional powers cannot confront China alone and that the combined capacities of like-minded middle powers would still fall short compared to the rising power. Although the US is no longer a hegemonic power, it remains the strongest state capable of balancing China with its allies and partners.

The absence of a strong American presence in Asia might prompt middle powers in the region to make concessions to China on specific issues, potentially leading to an undesirable shift in the balance of power for India³³. As a result, India has developed a shared interest with the United States, reinforced by burgeoning economic ties that contribute to achieving national economic development objectives. Although India may not agree with the United States on all matters and is not engaged in an alliance, it can no longer afford to overlook the critical strategic importance of aligning with the United States. This has made the West a "necessary" partner for India, while Russia remains a "desirable" partner³⁴.

India's efforts to strengthen its position in the Eurasian landmass are being hindered by its limited economic and security connections and by the constraints imposed by one of its key regional partners – Russia. While maintaining good relations with Moscow is essential for preventing the emergence of a hostile coalition comprising Russia and China against India, the India-Russia partnership has failed to enhance New Delhi's regional presence. This is evident in the limited progress made by the partnership in advancing India's interests through bilateral or multilateral means, as well as in dissuading Russia's closer engagement with China.

³² Ashford E. 2022. Ukraine and the Return of the Multipolar World. *The National Interest*. July 4. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/ukraine-and-return-multipolar-world-203276> (accessed 25.02.2023)

³³ Porter P. 2022. What world order comes after Ukraine? *YouTube*. April 13. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNW0LHboywY> (accessed 25.02.2023)

³⁴ Menon S. 2022. India in a World Adrift. *Centre for Air Power Studies – YouTube*. May 13. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7LoYpQeAIs> (accessed 25.02.2023)

For instance, in Central Asia, while Russia is still perceived by regional states (and India) as a buffer against Chinese influence, the former superpower's role in the region has been evolving, even as a "security provider". Experts have noted that the increasing Chinese economic influence in Central Asia has started affecting security. However, given the present state of the amicable Sino-Russian relationship, the Kremlin does not consider this development a matter of concern (Kazantsev et al. 2021).

India is particularly concerned about the impact of the ongoing conflict on Russia's future power projection in Eurasia, which could give China additional advantages. A decline in Russian capacities increases Beijing's weight in the bilateral relationship, limits options for regional states in Eurasia, and makes them more likely to align with China due to the absence of clear balancing options. As a result, India may find it more challenging to maintain equally beneficial ties with both Russia and the West, putting it in a weaker position³⁵. Furthermore, this weakening of Russia also makes it difficult to accelerate India's ties with Russia³⁶, despite India's refusal to implement Western sanctions and the acceleration of the energy relationship. Structural constraints continue to hinder the bilateral partnership.

In an era of uneven multipolarity, India faces a policy challenge as a middle power that depends on a variety of alignments to advance its national interests. If Russia's ability to balance China in key regions of concern to India declines due to a reduction in capacity and a reliance on China, there is potential for divergences to emerge between the two strategic partners, driven by shifts in the international system. Despite India's policy of multi-alignment, certain relationships will become more important than others due to specific threat perceptions and the distribution of capabilities, while others will weaken due to emerging lines of conflict over issues of top priority for one or both partners.

Alignments, not alliances

Nevertheless, a shift towards one partner does not necessarily entail a breakdown in relations with other states. The absence of formal alliance obligations of India and Russia with other major powers provides them with greater leeway to maintain cordial ties with various nations. Moreover, balancing against a particular power does not inevitably result in a confrontational course of action. As Walt (Walt 1988) suggests, states balancing against their rivals may also seek amicable relations with them. In India's case, this has been manifested in its efforts to engage in military and diplomatic talks with China to resolve border issues and to continue developing a strong eco-

³⁵ Jacob H. 2022. A New Delhi View on the World Order. *Institut Montaigne*. October 6. Available at: <https://www.institut-montaigne.org/en/analysis/new-delhi-view-world-order> (accessed 25.02.2023)

³⁶ Chenoy A. 2022. Russia-India Relations in a Transformative World Order. *Valdai Discussion Club*. July 20. Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-india-relations-in-a-transformative-world/> (accessed 25.02.2023)

conomic partnership, with bilateral trade reaching \$135.98 billion in 2022, despite the Indian government's insistence that normalizing relations with China requires an end to Chinese attempts to alter the LAC. India's recognition of the need to prioritize economic growth, given the widening power disparity and potential fallout of a full-scale conflict, is one reason why it understands that it cannot address its "main strategic challenge" through a "purely antagonistic" approach³⁷.

The rapid expansion of India's relations with the West and its alignment with the US have not led to an alliance relationship. Instead, India pursues relationships across the board, including with Russia. Although the principle of multi-alignment is facing stress due to current conditions, India recognizes that abandoning this concept will harm its relations with Russia. As India continues to rely heavily on Russian weaponry, particularly to address the threat from China, it would not be in its best interest to damage these linkages. Despite recent diversification efforts, it may take some time before a noticeable impact is seen³⁸. Furthermore, India cannot overlook that Russia has been the only willing partner to provide sensitive information to help with local defence production in specific sectors of military technologies. Unless India's Western partners increase their efforts, the defence relationship with Russia will remain relevant for India. Energy has also emerged as another significant area of bilateral cooperation, with India as a net energy importer with increasing demand. Therefore, India's willingness to continue purchasing Russian oil is not surprising. In this regard, India has argued that its approach is guided by a balance of its own values and interests³⁹. Meanwhile, Moscow acknowledges the importance of furthering its partnership with power centres other than China, particularly in light of the breakdown of relations with the West.

These contradictory trends have resulted in a unique form of engagement between India and Russia. While New Delhi is committed to avoiding alliances and forging relationships with multiple powers, it has prioritized specific alignments over others. Specifically, in the Indo-Pacific region, India has aligned with the US and other Quad partners who share common interests and have the capacity to collaborate effectively. Nevertheless, this does not imply that India and its partners hold identical views on every issue, as evidenced by India's stance on the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Instead, cooperation occurs only when there is convergence⁴⁰.

³⁷ Menon S. 2020. The Crisis in India-China Relations. *ICS Occasional Paper* No. 63. November 2020. URL: <https://www.icsin.org/uploads/2020/12/15/25da5b22cbfc731c25bd931c20127ca8.pdf> (accessed 25.02.2023).

³⁸ While in overall terms, Russia remained India's top supplier of defence items during 2014-18, the total exports fell by 42 percent between 2014-18 and 2009-13. Russia still commands 58 percent of total arms imports by India (2014-18), followed by Israel and the US at 15 and 12%, respectively. Nevertheless, compared to 2010-14, Russia's share has declined from 70 to 58%, while that of Israel has gone up from 7 to 15%.

³⁹ Jaishankar S. 2022b. India is not sitting on the fence, entitled to have its own side: S Jaishankar on Russia-Ukraine war. *The Economic Times*. June 4. Available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-not-sitting-on-fence-entitled-to-have-its-own-side-s-jaishankar-on-russia-ukraine-war/articleshow/91993466.cms> (accessed 25.02.2023)

⁴⁰ Ibid.

This approach also applies to India's relationship with Russia, where defence and energy issues, particularly, are expected to continue converging at the bilateral level. Through this engagement, India aims to prevent the emergence of a Sino-Russian security alliance in its vicinity while hoping that Moscow will eventually seek to balance China if it continues to expand its influence in Eurasia. Russia, too, recognizes the growing gap in capabilities between itself and China and does not wish to be a subordinate partner (Torkunov et al. 2020), which could lead to increased bipolar tendencies and harm its relations with India. Therefore, Russia seeks to avoid such outcomes.

However, the challenges associated with extensive regional or multilateral cooperation may result in a lack of progress at this level of engagement. Russia's relationship with China will remain its primary partnership, and India must adjust its expectations regarding the extent to which its engagement with Moscow can alter the prevailing balance of power or always benefit India. For instance, India is concerned that attempts to shift from current systems, such as de-dollarization or creating an alternative to SWIFT, could lead to the emergence of a more "China-centric" system that would be detrimental to its interests⁴¹. This stagnation is also apparent in the limited scope of agenda-setting within regional organizations such as BRICS and SCO, where India and Russia are key members, reflecting the power differences in the prevailing uneven multipolarity.

Over the years, BRICS and SCO have successfully established cooperative mechanisms in the economic and security domains, respectively, which remain relevant to their member-states. These organizations were established, and their agendas were set when the US was still a hegemonic power. Other states were interested in cooperating to promote a multipolar order and hedge their bets by pursuing multi-vector foreign policies. This contributed to the alignment among these varied powers, who were also emerging as important powers in their own right. However, the nature of their growth and the evolving international system has slowed down the effectiveness of these groupings, highlighting their internal fault lines. Today, neither BRICS nor SCO presents a united alternative vision for dealing with crises or collectively addressing issues of regional or global concern despite being billed as non-western groupings that will be instrumental in shaping the future world order.

In essence, India and Russia have expressed their preference for a multipolar global order, but the current situation of "highly uneven multipolarity" has made it challenging for them to manage the uncertainty associated with such a system, given their limited capabilities. This situation is particularly evident for weaker major powers like India and Russia, whose individual power is inadequate to alter the balance of power in the international system fundamentally. They lack both the collective power to bring about a balanced multipolar order and a common threat perception to act in concert effectively to promote their national interests.

⁴¹ Jacob H. 2022. A New Delhi View on the World Order. *Institut Montaigne*. October 6. Available at: <https://www.institut-montaigne.org/en/analysis/new-delhi-view-world-order> (accessed 25.02.2023)

Conclusion

In the near to medium term, it appears unlikely that India or Russia will achieve the same level of power as the US or China. Nonetheless, they will retain their ability to exert influence in specific regions or on particular issues. As a result, the conduct of the US and China will remain a significant factor in determining how other states interact⁴². A more conciliatory relationship between the two superpowers would decrease, albeit not eliminate, tensions with weaker major powers. Even if India were to resolve its disputes with its neighbour, China's overwhelming power and India's growing aspirations would likely compel the latter to continue pursuing balancing strategies. The level of conflictual engagement will depend on US-China ties and China's policies towards India and its neighbouring states. A more conciliatory stance of Beijing towards regional states that demonstrates its commitment to a peaceful rise would reduce the intensity of balancing strategies, even if it does not bring them to an end.

In contrast, a rise in tensions between the two major powers, namely the US and China, could result in a "rigid" bipolar state, making cooperation between India and Russia even more challenging than it currently is. Even if such a transformation of the global order does not occur, the partnership between India and Russia could still be strained if the regional order in the Asia-Pacific region increasingly leans towards bipolarity, which would push India towards the US, given its concerns about China. This would signify a change from the Cold War era when India did not face any serious security issues with either of the two superpowers⁴³. If such a development were to transpire, it could also bring Russia closer to China, even if the two countries do not form an alliance.

It is important not to underestimate the significance of weaker major powers such as India and Russia but rather recognize that the current distribution of power in the international system limits their policy choices in meaningful ways. A departure from this pattern would necessitate a significant transformation in the prevailing system of power distribution – a change that neither New Delhi nor Moscow currently seems capable of effecting. Given this, it is likely that the current state of uneven multipolarity will persist in the near to medium term, and as a result, the existing pattern of India-Russia relations will likely continue with cooperation occurring mainly at the bilateral level and limited opportunities for expansion into multilateral or regional contexts.

⁴² Rodrik D., Walt S. 2021. How to Construct a New Global Order. *HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series*, RWP21-013. May 2021. URL: <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/how-construct-new-global-order> (accessed 25.02.2023).

⁴³ Tellis A. 2017. New Bipolarity Between the United States and China Poses Challenges for India. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. April 19. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/04/19/new-bipolarity-between-united-states-and-china-poses-challenges-for-india-pub-69904> (accessed 25.02.2023)

It is unlikely that there will be any significant changes in US-Russia or India-China relations, as their differences are deeply rooted. Therefore, India and Russia are likely to continue their policy of balancing against the threats posed by their major rival powers (China and the US, respectively). This will limit the impact of their relationship on their foreign policies and lead to stagnation beyond the bilateral level. India's policy of multi-alignment prioritizes bilateral ties based on the capabilities of major stakeholders in the international system, India's position in the system, and its balance of threat perception. This results in a weaker India-Russia strategic partnership, which despite its commonalities, is inadequate in addressing the challenges posed by the current disorder in the international system for India.

About the author:

Nivedita Kapoor – PhD, Research Fellow, International Laboratory on World Order Studies and the New Regionalism, Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, National Research University Higher School of Economics. 20 Myasnitskaya Ulitsa, Moscow, Russia, 101000. E-mail: kapoor.nivedita@gmail.com.

Conflict of interest:

The author declares the absence of conflict of interests.

УДК 327.5(470+571+540)
Поступила в редакцию: 20.12.2022
Принята к печати: 17.04.2023

Многовекторность при «неравномерной многополярности»: отношения Индии с Россией в условиях меняющегося миропорядка

Ниведита Капур
[DOI 10.24833/2071-8160-2023-2-89-15-32](https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2023-2-89-15-32)

Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики»

Российско-индийские отношения рассматриваются в статье с опорой на концепцию «неравномерной многополярности». В Индии меняется восприятие Китая, а вместе с ним и оценка баланса угроз, особенно в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском и Индоокеанском регионах, имеющих решающее значение для национальной безопасности Индии и её растущих региональных амбиций. США и Китай превосходят по своему потенциалу

остальные великие державы, однако, это не приводит к формированию полноценной биполярности. Современная система международных отношений скорее соответствует понятию «неравномерной многополярности».

Изменения во внешнеполитическом курсе России, связанные с ухудшением её отношений с Западом и растущим сближением с Китаем, создали ряд ограничений для развития индийско-российских отношений. Многовекторность во внешней политике Индии не предполагает формирование союзов, тем не менее как форма политики баланса сил она всё же подразумевает расстановку внешнеполитических приоритетов. В сложившихся условиях отношения с США оказываются для Индии сравнительно более важными, тем не менее партнёрство с Россией сохраняет особое значение.

Ключевые слова: индийско-российские отношения, внешняя политика Индии, Китай, многополярность, Азиатско-Тихоокеанский регион, многовекторность, российско-китайские отношения, индийско-американские отношения

Об авторе:

Ниведита Капур – PhD, научный сотрудник Международной лаборатории исследований мирового порядка и нового регионализма, Факультет мировой экономики и мировой политики, Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики». 101000, Россия, Москва, улица Мясницкая, 20. E-mail: kapoor.nivedita@gmail.com.

Конфликт интересов:

Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

References:

- Bajpai K. 2017. Narendra Modi's Pakistan and China Policy: Assertive Bilateral Diplomacy, Active Coalition Diplomacy. *International Affairs*. 93(1). P. 69–91.
- Kazantsev A., Medvedeva S., Safranchuk I. 2021. Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*. 12(1). P. 57–71.
- Lanteigne M. 2018. Russia, China, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the 'Crimea Effect.' In: Blakkisrud, H., Wilson Rowe, E. (eds) *Russia's Turn to the East*. Cham: Palgrave Pivot. P. 119–138.
- Mearsheimer J.J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: WW Norton & Company.
- Pant H.V. 2013. India-Russia Ties and India's Strategic Culture: Dominance of a Realist Worldview. *India Review*. 12(1). P. 1–19.
- Raghavan P.S. 2020. The Changing Geopolitical Landscape of India–Russia Relations. In Jo Inge Bekkevold, S. Kalyanaraman (eds.) *India's Great Power Politics*. New Delhi: Routledge India. P. 227–246.
- Rajagopalan R. 2017. U.S.-India Relations under President Trump: Promise and Peril. *Asia Policy*. №24. P. 39–45.
- Snyder G.H. 1991. Alliances, Balance, and Stability. *International Organization*. 45(1). P. 121–142.
- Snyder G.H. 2007. *Alliance Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Walt S.M. 1985. Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power. *International Security*. 9(4). P. 3–43.
- Walt S. M. 1988. Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia. *International Organization*. 42(2). P. 275–316.

Waltz K.N. 1993. The Emerging Structure of International Politics. *International Security*. 18(2). P. 44–79.

Torkunov A.V., Streltsov, D.V., Koldunova, E.V. 2020. Rossijskij povorot na Vostok: dostizhenija, problemy i perspektivy [Russia's pivot to the East: Achievements, problems, and prospects]. *Polis. Political Studies*, №5. P. 8-21. (In Russian).

Список литературы на русском языке:

Торкунов А.В., Стрельцов Д.В., Колдунова Е.В. 2020. Российский поворот на Восток: достижения, проблемы и перспективы. *Полис. Политические исследования*. №5. С. 8-21.