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The Strategic Culture of India's 'Third Republic'

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that a distinguishing characteristic of the 'Third Republic,' a label used for the Narendra Modi government, is discernible in India's calibrated effort to reshape its strategic culture as it aspires to emerge as a global power. India's ways of dealing with security issues refer to its strategic culture, which encompasses the attitudes, values, symbols, traditions, and practices of managing threats and the use of force. However, strategic culture is a theme that is not very popular in Indian foreign policy discourse. One of the main reasons for its lack of popularity is the ambiguity about its precise nature and the operational dynamics. For instance, Indian policymakers conflate the country's extant attitudes and

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beliefs about war, diplomacy and security with classical Indian treatises—*Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and *Arthashastra*. This article demonstrates the changing notions of 'strategic autonomy,' which have traditionally informed India's strategic culture. The reshaping of India's strategic culture is occurring because of China's assertive and aggressive behavior which has caused concern among American policymakers who are promoting the Indo-Pacific concept. The new U.S. President, Joe Biden, has expressed his intention to work with India to preserve a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. This article contends that since the structural realities of the international order would not allow the Biden administration to radically change America's policy toward China, India would incrementally overcome its hesitation for strategic alignment. India's integration of the Indo-Pacific and the Quadrilateral into its foreign policy thinking will have a lasting impact on the country's strategic culture.

Culture has always played a key role in international politics and national security. One of the difficulties of understanding culture stems from the fact that culture is difficult to define and has been the subject of intense debate. In the words of Valerie M. Hudson, the complexity of defining culture arises not from what to include in a definition, but rather what to exclude.¹ In broad terms, the primary roots of a nation's strategic culture can be traced in its history, culture, and dominant ideas on war and peace. But defining strategic culture is as challenging as defining the national culture of a country.

In the 1960s, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba defined political culture as "that subset of beliefs and values of a society that relate to

¹ Valerie M. Hudson, "Culture and Foreign Policy: Developing a Research Agenda," in *Culture and Foreign Policy*, ed. Valerie M. Hudson (Boulder, CO and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), 2.



the political system,” further arguing that it includes attitudes toward democratic ideals and institutions, ideas about the use of force, the rights of individuals or collectivities, and the role of a country in international relations.² Clausewitz had advanced the primacy of culture when he recognized war-fighting strategy as “a test of moral and physical forces.” Seen from the context of cultural peculiarities, the former British army officer, Liddell Hart, had hypothesized about a traditional “British Way in Warfare.” In his article on “The Napoleonic Fallacy,” Hart attacked the very notion of waging absolute war, instead arguing for the “indirect approach.”³ He equated it with Britain’s traditional approach to armed conflict, which involved avoiding direct military intervention and instead applying pressure on the enemy through various economic measures. Similarly, Russell Weigley’s *The American Way of Warfare* underscored the significance of the cultural dimensions of strategic orientation.⁴ In his study on the Soviet nuclear strategy during the Cold War, Jack Snyder paid close attention to the link between political culture and strategic choice.⁵

Alastair Iain Johnston has classified the literature on strategic culture into three generations. According to him, the first generation were mostly security-policy analysts who focused on explaining the different styles of nuclear strategy making in the United States and the

² Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, ed., *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965).

³ Lawrence Sondhaus, *Strategic Culture and Ways of War* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 1–2; Azar Gat, “The Hidden Sources of Liddell Hart’s Strategic Ideas,” *War in History* 3, no. 3 (July 1996): 293–308;

⁴ Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1960).

⁵ Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1977).

Soviet Union and attributed these differences to respective historical experiences and political culture. The second generation adopted a critical perspective rooted in Gramscian discourse categories, recognizing the possibility of separation between a symbolic strategic-cultural discourse and operational doctrines. It was believed that this discourse was used to justify the hegemony of strategic elites, who implemented their designs. The third generation is said to be methodologically more rigorous, sharpening the empirical focus to test the effects of strategic culture.⁶

India's Strategic Culture

Does India have a strategic culture? This question has always led to differing answers. It has been commonplace to assert that India does not have a strategic culture. It would be relevant to explain here that there exists a thin difference between the tradition of strategic culture and strategic thinking. In his famous monograph published in 1992, the American researcher, George K. Tanham, had pronounced that India lacked a strategic culture to support its emerging geopolitical ambitions.⁷ He argued that India's cultural diversity, historical legacy and the policy of non-alignment prevented the proliferation of strategic thought and might have contributed to defensive strategic responses to multiple challenges on the national security front. This argument was met with resistance from many Indian scholars who rejected it due to its essentialist character. Yet, the prominent Indian strategic thinker, K. Subrahmanyam, fundamentally agreed with

⁶ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁷ George Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1992).



Tanham's analysis, arguing that India never planned offensively.⁸ A 2006 U.S. Department of Defense study under Rodney W. Jones, "India's Strategic Culture," found that India had a distinct strategic culture rooted in its ancient history and heritage, and particularly in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*.⁹ A few years later, Stephen Philip Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta argued that India was "arming without aiming."¹⁰

The source of the problem goes back to the pre-British era when India was not politically unified as various princely states focused on the security of their own kingdoms, and there was no grand vision of India's global strategy. As the princes always felt threatened by one another, there was no incentive for them to strategize collectively about the Indian subcontinent. Thereafter, colonial subjugation was a painful experience for politically and socially conscious Indians as the British planned grand strategies and fought wars for their imperial benefits.¹¹ The colonial experience has, therefore, impacted the worldview of India's ruling elites, regardless of the political ideologies they believe in, to the extent that they have always prioritized autonomy in foreign and security policy, and sought to avoid being entangled in security or military alliances.

India's evolution as an independent actor in the international system has undergone a remarkable transformation since its

⁸ K. Subrahmanyam and Arthur Monteiro, *Shedding Shibboleths: India's Evolving Strategic Outlook* (New Delhi: Wordsmiths, 2005).

⁹ Rodney W. Jones, "India's Strategic Culture," Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, October 31, 2006, <https://fas.org/irp/agency/dod/dtra/india.pdf>.

¹⁰ Stephen P. Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming without Aiming: India's Military Modernisation* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2010).

¹¹ Aparna Pande, *Making India Great: The Promise of a Reluctant Global Power* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2020).

independence from the British. However, Indians are acutely conscious of their country's existence as a civilizational state.¹² India's external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, asks India to follow China's example in drawing on its cultural heritage, and to project its global personality and shape global norms and values. For him, the Indian epic of *Mahabharata* is as significant as the *Arthashastra* in explaining India's thoughts on diplomacy and statecraft, as the former focuses on elements of ethical dilemmas, "tactical compromises, utilizing obsessive players, undertaking regime change and ensuring balance of power."¹³ Clearly, India's foreign policy behavior shows several traits that can be understood from a strategic cultural framework.

It may be convenient to follow Kanti Bajpai's conceptual categorization that in the post-Cold War period, three different streams of thought—Nehruvianism, neoliberalism, and hyperrealism—have contested for dominance in India.¹⁴ Immediately after independence, India's diplomatic behavior was guided by idealism and moralism, reflected in New Delhi's emphasis on staying aloof from the ideological struggle of the Cold War. Through the policy of non-alignment, Third World solidarity, self-reliance and nuclear non-proliferation, the Indian leadership sought to put realism on the backburner. In his latest book, Jaishankar lists three important historical "burdens" of Indian foreign policy.¹⁵ First on his list is India's Partition which struck a huge

¹² Ibid.

¹³ S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2020), 50.

¹⁴ Kanti Bajpai, "Indian Strategic Culture," in *South Asia in 2020: Future Strategic Balances and Alliances*, ed. Michael R. Chambers, Strategic Studies Institute, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/101060/South_Asia_2020.pdf.

¹⁵ Jaishankar, *The India Way*, 18.



blow to India's demographic and political strength, giving China more strategic space in post-colonial Asia. The second is a fifteen-year delay in starting economic reforms, again putting India at a great disadvantage vis-à-vis China. The third is the avoidable ambivalence on the nuclear option, making the country struggle unnecessarily to gain influence in this domain. Jaishankar has advised against consistency and caution, while advocating the need for hard-headed pursuit of national interest.

The dominance of idealism, however, did not prevent India from using force whenever required such as when responding to Pakistan's invasion of Kashmir in 1947-48, and the forcible incorporation of the Portuguese colony of Goa. India's wariness of alliances and its celebrated tradition of non-alignment, on the one hand, did not prevent it from seeking military assistance from the Kennedy administration during the Sino-India War of 1962. On the other hand, despite attempts to emerge as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, India never concealed its preference for cultivating a special relationship with the Soviet Union, which eventually culminated in the signing of the historic Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in 1971. The treaty was the outcome of Pakistan's increasingly close ties with China and the United States.

Non-alignment may have served India's national interests in the early phase before it was weaponized for propagating anti-Americanism. NAM was a policy designed to increase India's strategic autonomy in a bipolar world as New Delhi did not see any merit in aligning with either superpower. According to the former Indian

diplomat, Rakesh Sood:

Nehru crafted non-alignment as a strategy; his successors made it an ideology, which it was not intended to be.

Further arguing that,

. . . in a globalizing world where India is increasingly integrating, how can India practice non-alignment (it would imply isolationism) and from which country should we be non-aligned—from our neighbourhood, from our adversaries one of whom happens to be a major trading partner, from our friends like Russia with whom we have long-standing ties, from major democratic powers like US, EU and Japan with whom we share democratic values and much else, or from the Gulf states which are a home to our diaspora and the source of our energy supplies.¹⁶

Nehru's approach has also been criticized for his pursuit of soft power without prioritizing the acquisition of hard power. After the end of the Cold War, the Nehruvian ideas of non-alignment were heavily contested and were replaced with neoliberalism. India became more conscious of projecting itself as a market economy with a lot of emphasis being placed on incentivizing the private sector. Another significant outcome of the shift was India's outreach to the United States, driven mainly by the neoliberal thinking of the ruling elite and the emergence of a strong middle-class segment. With the rise of Hindu nationalist ideology and the weakening of the dominant Congress Party, India's political culture has changed considerably in

¹⁶ Rakesh Sood, "Nehru crafted non-alignment as a strategy; his successors wrongly made it an ideology," *The Print*, January 11, 2019.



recent years. Hindu nationalists, who had begun to play a more prominent role in India's strategic discourse after the 1998 nuclear tests, strongly believe in the comprehensive development of India's economic and military power combined with a global strategy.

Gradual Evolution

K. Subrahmanyam, in a posthumous essay in February 2012, emphasized the importance of the India-U.S. relationship which would ensure the defence of core Indian values from the challenges of one-party rule and jihadist ideology as well as to contain China. He argued that "the real question about the future world order is whether it is to be democratic and pluralistic, or dominated by one-party oligarchies that prioritize social harmony over individual rights."¹⁷ He further posited that "if the U.S. remains the world's predominant power, and China is second, India will be the swing power." It would, therefore, have three options, Subrahmanyam argued: "partnering with the US and other pluralistic, secular and democratic countries; joining hands with China at the risk of betraying the values of its Constitution and freedom struggle; and remaining both politically and ideologically non-aligned, even if against its own ideals." But skeptics in the Indian foreign policy establishment have continued to harbor doubts about redefining the country's foreign policy priorities, both in substance and style.

During the rule of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, some renowned analysts came up with a policy report in 2012, emphasizing the revival of the non-alignment tradition in India's external engagements. Those fearing India's drift towards the United States praised it, but the document also received criticism. For

¹⁷ K. Subrahmanyam, "India's Grand Strategy," *Indian Express*, February 3, 2012.

instance, emphasizing the “need to cut away all the obscuring—and obscurantist—foliage that grew around the original non-alignment,” the former Indian diplomat, K. Shankar Bajpai, argued that reviving “that concept is all too likely to drive our people back to something that is not only long outdated but—and this is its dangerous legacy—which we still fail to recognize as having done us more harm than good.”¹⁸ Similarly, Sumit Ganguly asked why its authors were “attempting to resurrect a moribund set of principles,” and where is the “need to harp on a doctrine that may well have served its interests in the 1950s but is singularly ill-suited to the needs of today’s vastly altered global order?”¹⁹

The dynamism of the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, on the foreign policy front has lent credence to the view that India was decisively moving away from many conventional approaches in its external relations. For instance, Modi decided to skip the 17th NAM summit, sending then Vice-President, Hamid Ansari, to represent India. This made him only the second prime minister, after Charan Singh in 1979, to miss the summit ever since India had co-founded the movement.²⁰ Many prominent Indian commentators including C. Raja Mohan suggest that the period after 2014 has marked the emergence of an Indian ‘Third Republic.’ According to this logic, the period from independence to the beginning of liberalization was the ‘First Republic’; the ‘Second Republic’ started after the end of the Cold War;

¹⁸ K. Shankar Bajpai, “NAM and the pitfalls of revisiting it,” *Business Standard*, January 21, 2013.

¹⁹ Sumit Ganguly, “Delhi’s Strategy Deficit,” *The National Interest*, March 12, 2012.

²⁰ Harsh V. Pant, “End of the Road for the Non-Aligned Movement?” *Yale Global Online*, September 29, 2016.



and the 'Third Republic' began with Modi at the helm of affairs. Borrowing from the taxonomy of Republican-era France, which has been through five 'republics' between 1789 and the present,²¹ Raja Mohan's argument is that India's 'First Republic' was characterized by the domination of Nehruvian thinking in India's foreign policy. The 'Second Republic' coincided with the shift in strategic thinking following the 1991 economic reforms initiated by the Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, and his finance minister, Manmohan Singh. During this period, India's foreign policy came to be increasingly driven by the imperatives of integration with the global economy. The Second Republic lasted until the end of the tenure of Manmohan Singh as prime minister. However, Raja Mohan's most important argument is that the government led by Narendra Modi ushered in the 'Third Republic' as it has embraced a non-ideological worldview guiding India's global ambitions.²² India's ambition to emerge as a global power is the most important feature of the Third Republic.

Strategic autonomy is not a phrase that Modi's foreign policy officials used in the initial phase of his government as the term is often associated with previous Congress governments. However during his landmark speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, Modi remarked that "it is a measure of our strategic autonomy that India's Strategic Partnership with Russia has matured to be special and privileged."²³ Clearly, the speech underlined the importance of the

²¹ Lorraine Boissoneault, "Why Is France in Its Fifth Republic?," *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 20, 2017.

²² C. Raja Mohan, *Modi's World: Extending India's Sphere of Influence* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2015).

²³ "Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 1, 2018.

principle of strategic autonomy for India's foreign policy, at least theoretically, if not practically. As mentioned earlier, New Delhi has been gradually moving away from non-alignment's ideological straitjacket. Although the world has become much more inward-looking as the forces of globalization seem to be on the defensive with the rise of nationalism and protectionism in recent years, even the most powerful nations find their strategic autonomy circumscribed by economic and military capabilities, geographical location as well by the constantly shifting wind currents of global power equations in a highly interdependent, digitalized, and industrialized world.

Current Debate on Strategic Autonomy

The world order has changed radically with the disappearance of bipolarity, and we are living in a strategic era characterized by multipolarity which has had a decisive impact on the Third Republic's strategic culture. The attitude of the Modi government towards NAM became absolutely clear when India's former foreign secretary, Vijay Gokhale, declared at the 2019 Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi that "India has moved on from its non-aligned past. India is today an aligned state—but based on issues."²⁴ The main reason Gokhale's assertions did not raise much controversy was because the Modi government had gradually shifted the discourse on Indian foreign policy. NAM was never a priority in Modi's foreign policy since he became prime minister in 2014; he did not attend the two NAM summits held during his tenure in 2016 and 2019.²⁵

²⁴ ANI, "Raisina Dialogue: India an aligned state based on issues, says Vijay Gokhale," *Business Standard*, January 10, 2019.

²⁵ Suhasini Haidar, "Narendra Modi skips NAM summit again," *The Hindu*, October 23, 2019.



India has strategic partnerships with many countries; it has a special and privileged partnership with Russia, which remains India's strongest defence partner. New Delhi has forged a strong India-U.S.-Japan partnership that now extends to trilateral naval exercises. India has also joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as a full member, along with its membership of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), which is often viewed as a counter to the West. Moreover, India knows the value of maintaining the highest-level dialogue with China to keep tensions under control. In fact, the Russian expert, Dmitry V. Suslov, has aptly observed that "BRICS and the SCO are a graphic embodiment of Russian and Indian equidistant partnerships with other non-Western power centres, which is fundamental for the two countries' positioning as independent great powers refraining from joining the US-China confrontation as junior partners of either superpower."²⁶ Clearly, it is in the Third Republic's interests to define its bilateral relationships on its own terms, while engaging closely with those countries that help it develop leverage in its dealings with its adversaries, and facilitate its rise to global prominence.

Till the end of the previous century, India's major challenge had been to resist Western hegemony. Now, India is keen to counter China's hegemonic ambitions in Asia. India's territorial disputes with China have become a grave security threat, requiring New Delhi to strengthen its deterrence capabilities and to establish partnerships with key Western countries that also see a threat in China's rise. In such a strategic environment, non-alignment in the old sense has lost all relevance. But non-alignment still evokes nostalgia for many in India.

²⁶ Dmitry V. Suslov, "Non-Western multilateralism: BRICS and the SCO in the post-Covid world," Observer Research Foundation, July 29, 2020.

As Sino-Indian relations have reached a tipping point, the debate over India's alignment has acquired a new momentum.

India's former National Security Advisor, M. K. Narayanan, was not happy when India and the United States started the "2+2" dialogue in 2018 because the format was seen "alien to traditional diplomatic and strategic intercourse between nations."²⁷ Even after the Ladakh border clashes between Indian and Chinese soldiers in June 2020, Narayanan remained unenthusiastic to the prospect of strengthening Indo-U.S. ties and believed that the time was not ripe for "India to be seen as the front end of a belligerent coalition of forces seeking to put China in its place," further advising New Delhi to remain "truly non-aligned and not become part of any coalition that would not be in India's long-term interest."²⁸ A month later, he seemed to suggest that India had neglected its relations with the neighboring countries of Nepal and Bangladesh, as well as the extended neighborhood allies such as Iran and Vietnam at the cost of strengthening ties with the United States. He remarked that "countering China's moves to 'buy' influence will not be easy, but India's involvement with the Non-Aligned Movement should prove invaluable in this respect. India's relationship with NAM needs to be revitalised."²⁹

India's obsession with strategic autonomy has often shaped the manner in which New Delhi views American policies in its periphery. The main reason has been a fundamental mismatch between India's

²⁷ M. K. Narayanan, "2+2 is less than the sum of its parts?," *The Hindu*, September 18, 2018.

²⁸ M. K. Narayanan, "Remaining non-aligned is good advice," *The Hindu*, June 16, 2020.

²⁹ M. K. Narayanan, "The main planks in a counter-China policy," *The Hindu*, July 22, 2020.



global ambitions and its understanding of the nature of the alliance system. According to Raja Mohan, India's strategic "community continues to be troubled by the question of alliances and autonomy when it comes to dealing with China and the United States," and "it could, perhaps, find a thing or two from Pakistan that has managed these relationships quite well." This was because Pakistan's tilt toward China, soon after America included the former into Asia's anti-Communist alliances, was so successful that it ultimately emerged as the link between Washington and Beijing.³⁰

New Delhi has been in search of "strategic autonomy" which "has now assumed relevance once again in terms of global supply chains," according to Jaishankar.³¹ There is a clear strategic context to India staying out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In fact, India's aversion to RCEP goes beyond economic arguments, and as argued by Jaishankar, New Delhi's position was based on a "clear-eyed calculation" of the gains and costs of entering the new trade arrangement. Jaishankar has asserted that India "cannot be a rising power without being a rising economy. . . Building on national capacity doesn't make [India] anti global," and if India is keen to "participate more vigorously in the global economy, [it] must build stronger domestic capacities, and do what it takes for the gaps to be closed as a result of decades of disadvantage."³² This is an unambiguous reflection of India's decision to stay out of the RCEP, and

³⁰ C. Raja Mohan, "Alliances and strategic autonomy," *Indian Express*, January 15, 2019.

³¹ ANI, "India, ASEAN together to shape Asia and world: Jaishankar," *The Times of India*, August 20, 2020.

³² Shubhajit Roy, "India's strategic thinking on RCEP, and the China factor," *Indian Express*, November 19, 2020.

its implications will continue to be debated. When India had decided to stay out of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017, there were many opposing voices criticizing New Delhi for isolating itself, but India's position seems to have been vindicated now because of the unfair trade and investment terms imposed by China on host countries.

The salience of an economic security dimension of the overarching national security may be seen as the external component of the Third Republic's new economic strategy known as "Atmanirbharata" or self-reliance, raising the question whether India is reversing its economic policies. But it would be reasonable to assume that the current logic of strategic autonomy is aimed at steering India away from China while exploring other forms of collaboration with a broad group of countries that have a shared interest in creating alternative global supply chains. While Australia's participation in the Malabar exercises could create a template for the Quadrilateral comprising of India, the United States, Japan and Australia, what merits special attention is New Delhi's willingness to reorient its strategic culture towards greater alignment.

It was not inevitable. Chinese governments before the ascendance of Xi Jinping focused more on building their economic strength and development at home, and less on ideological issues. But after Xi became the supreme leader, the political landscape inside and outside China has been transformed. A tectonic shift has occurred within the ideological dimensions of the current Chinese leadership which seems driven to undermine the global rules-based order led by liberal democracies. This has had a decisive impact on India's strategic culture.

China's stupendous growth has been enabled by other economies engaging with it on liberal terms. However, China's growing wealth and the manner in which its wealth is being utilized has warped



the global geostrategic environment. Xi Jinping's revocation of presidential term limits in 2018 snuffed out any hope of liberalizing political reforms in China. His notion of the Chinese nation's exceptionalism has led him to underline the need for developing a fighting spirit to push back against so-called insults to national honor. Xi's regime has prioritized firming up the capacity of the Chinese state's internal security forces for controlling their own citizens.

The United States has, in response, been most explicit about the Quad containing China and particularly its flagship geopolitical scheme, the Belt and Road Initiative, which is increasingly linked with Beijing's national security interests. The Trump administration not only escalated a tariff war with China, but also advocated economic decoupling of the world's two major economies, radically changing the trajectory of America's China policy. India may not have declared openly that its vision of the Quad is premised upon countering China's aggression, but the intent is too visible to be hidden. Even a usually reticent Australia is now recalibrating its China policy, bringing more clarity on how to manage China's constant interference in its domestic politics.³³ And Japan's new prime minister, Yoshihide Suga, continues his predecessor's vision of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific,' as Tokyo's proposition is to ensure the rule of law and free navigation in the region. With the gradual decline of the United States as the world's most dominant nation, Japan is keen to ensure a more inclusive multilateral security mechanism to maintain regional security. The 'Five Eyes' informal alliance of democratic and English-speaking

³³ Rory Medcalf, "Australia and China: understanding the reality check," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 2 (2019); Michael Shoebridge, "Australia's emerging China policy," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, *The Strategist*, September 30, 2019; Editors, "As China Rises and U.S. Influence Wanes, Australia Aims for Self-Reliance," *World Politics Review*, July 16, 2020.

Anglo-Saxon countries that share intelligence—the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand—is drawing closer as well.³⁴ The group, which brings together information obtained by intercepting communications, emails and telephone calls with the aim of utilizing such intelligence for national security purposes, is considering including Germany and Japan into its fold in order to push back against China.³⁵

Post-Trump Scenario

President Donald Trump's strategic investment for the success of America's Indo-Pacific strategy will not go waste as the new president, Joe Biden, is most likely to continue with his predecessor's policy stance on China. Beijing's hopes of a thaw in ties with the Biden-led White House may be too much to sustain under the weight of post-pandemic geopolitical realities. The global security landscape demands new partnerships and issue-based alliances as a new 'Great Game' is underway in the Indo-Pacific region. Trump's political rhetoric on the Indo-Pacific has been inseparable from his broader India policy as Washington has made a significant investment in its relationship with New Delhi during the last four years. Recently, the two countries signed an agreement to share real-time geographical data through satellite images. The longest-negotiated Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) accord is the last of four military agreements between India and the United States that is expected to

³⁴ Abhijnan Rej, "Five Eyes Countries Issue Joint Statement, "on Hong Kong," *The Diplomat*, November 19, 2020; Peter Martin, Kitty Donaldson and Kait Bolongaro, "It's like 'return to the Cold War' as Five Eyes spy alliance trains focus on China," *The Print*, October 21, 2020.

³⁵ Hiroyuki Akita, "Pros and cons of a Six Eyes with Japan and allies," *Nikkei Asia*, December 22, 2020.



solidify their military partnership to galvanize the Quad operations.³⁶ Obviously, the primary motivation behind India-U.S. ties is to form a united front in managing the upheaval caused by the rise of China. Moreover, India's notable attachment to the notion of strategic autonomy has not prevented New Delhi from cementing its strategic partnership with Washington. Successive U.S. administrations have taken note of this important fact. The deputy secretary of state in the Trump administration, Stephen Biegun, had aptly remarked: "One of the constants in U.S.-India relations has been that every presidential administration here in the United States has left the relationship in even better shape than the one it inherited."³⁷

Overcoming its traditional skepticism of formal alliances, India has begun to strengthen its commitment to the Quad. Fearing containment by leading maritime democracies, China's criticism of the Quad as an Asian version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is quite understandable.³⁸ China is fully aware of the costs of India's wholehearted participation in the Quad. A recent commentary in China's state-run media outlet, *Global Times*, invokes India's strategic culture, ruling out its alignment with the Quad: "By participating in the quadrilateral coalition, the US, Japan, and Australia aim to turn the QUAD into an Asian version of NATO, or basically a military alliance to

³⁶ Dinakar Peri, "2+2 Ministerial dialogue: India to sign geo-spatial cooperation BECA with U.S.," *The Hindu*, October 26, 2020; PTI, "2020: A milestone in India-US ties; Trump's visit elevates 'comprehensive global strategic partnership'," *Financial Express*, December 22, 2020.

³⁷ Yashwant Raj, "India-US ties bright regardless of who wins White House: Official," *Hindustan Times*, October 20, 2020.

³⁸ Zhang Jiadong, "QUAD desires 'Asian NATO,' but China has smarter solutions," *Global Times*, October 11, 2020.

guard against China.”³⁹ It adds that “while India wants to have some bargaining chip with China, it is not necessarily hot to trot with an exclusive and confrontational military alliance per se,” further arguing that “India’s diplomatic tradition of currying favor from all sides is well known. So is its thirst for strategic independence and increased regional strength. In light of this, India is unlikely to completely lean toward the US, Japan and Australia.” The implication of this assertion is that India would be naïve to rely on the unequivocal support of these countries in confronting China. But this seems wishful thinking on the part of China as India’s defence and security cooperation with the United States, Australia and Japan had seen major expansion in 2020.⁴⁰

Trump’s exceptional personal chemistry with Prime Minister Modi has contributed to India and the United States coming closer in the Indo-Pacific. The New Delhi visit of the Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and the Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, in October 2020, just a few days ahead of the U.S. presidential election, left no doubts about the Trump administration’s perception of the value of American engagement with India.⁴¹ Trump’s recent bestowal of the Legion of Merit award to Modi for his leadership in elevating the India-U.S. strategic partnership and the emergence of India as a global power is a testimony of the significance the Trump administration attached to the Quad; Trump has presented the Legion of Merit to the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, and the former Japanese Prime Minister,

³⁹ Long Xingchun, “Japan asking India to commit more won’t spice up the QUAD,” *Global Times*, December 28, 2020.

⁴⁰ PTI, “Indian armed forces displayed firm resolve in blunting Chinese aggression in 2020,” *Financial Express*, December 30, 2020.

⁴¹ U.S. Embassy and Consulates in India, “Highlights of 2020 U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue,” October 28, 2020, <https://in.usembassy.gov/highlights-of-2020-u-s-india-22-ministerial-dialogue/>



Shinzo Abe, as well.⁴² But Trump's tumultuous departure from the White House will not affect the mutual bonhomie as the Biden administration is also expected to deepen the existing bonds of friendship between New Delhi and Washington.

Biden should not forget that Asian countries including India were not very comfortable with what they saw as the Obama administration's penchant for accommodation with Beijing despite its aggressive behavior. Although Obama's hands were tied because of other significant challenges such as North Korea, Libya, and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, however American foreign policy simply could not define the nature of its relationship with China.⁴³ China's militarization of the South China Sea went almost unchallenged during Obama's tenure when Biden was the vice-president. On the other hand, with his Indo-Pacific strategy, Trump brought more clarity on how to deal with China. That is why even if Biden changes the nomenclature of the Indo-Pacific strategy, its essence will not change much.

The concept of the Indo-Pacific has become entrenched in the national security architecture of the United States to the extent that it is now a fundamental part of American foreign policy. Realizing this inevitability, Biden no longer mentions China as optimistically and enthusiastically as he once might have done. Biden will need to prioritize the counterbalancing of China so that it does not dominate the Indo-Pacific region. In particular, the Biden administration can ill afford to ignore the "China Standards 2035," which is Beijing's plan to

⁴² Sriram Lakshman, "PM Modi awarded 'Legion of Merit' by Donald Trump," *The Hindu*, December 22, 2020.

⁴³ David Unger, "The Foreign Policy Legacy of Barack Obama," *The International Spectator* 51, no. 4 (2016); Ivo H. Daalder, "Obama's foreign policy: Not every global problem has an American solution," *Washington Post*, November 18, 2016.

rewrite global standards for the next generation of emerging technologies such as 5G internet, the Internet of Things, and artificial intelligence.⁴⁴ This move could have huge implications for global tech industries. After all, Trump's willingness to stand up to China on technological and trade fronts was welcomed by many countries in the Indo-Pacific.

One needs to remember that the stability of the Indo-Pacific region is vital to the national security of all Quad members and many other countries who believe in maintaining the existing international norms. France, Germany and the UK are also seeking to enhance connectivity between Europe and the Indo-Pacific. But, stabilizing the Indo-Pacific region remains a daunting task because of the persistent threat of instability triggered by China's growing challenge to American power, and Beijing's overtly hostile attitude towards New Delhi. Establishing China's alternative underpins the *raison d'être* of the Quad which must focus on cyber and maritime security along with an emphasis on infrastructure creation and regional connectivity. Though there are many faultlines in the Indo-Pacific which are too difficult to navigate, the concept of the Indo-Pacific has nonetheless gained widespread acceptance among those who perceive the threat of China's aggressive pursuit of its aspirations to become a global power.

Patrick Mendis and Antonina Luszczkiewicz have rightly argued that "India has finally removed the mask of 'non-aligned' foreign policy which it has nominally employed since independence in

⁴⁴ William C. Hannas and Didi Kirsten Tatlow, ed., *China's Quest for Foreign Technology: Beyond Espionage* (London: Routledge, 2020); Arjun Kharpal, "Power is 'up for grabs': Behind China's plan to shape the future of next-generation tech," *CNBC*, April 26, 2020.



1947.”⁴⁵ They further posit that although “during the Cold War, the so-called non-alignment was supposed to give India the flexibility to maneuver in its relations between the United States and the former Soviet Union,” however “recent border tensions and China’s increasingly bold attempts at interfering in India’s internal affairs make it impossible for New Delhi to keep the facade of neutrality.” Besides the strategic dimension, it is in India’s economic interests to align with the United States as the former needs investments, technology, and a manufacturing ecosystem to keep its young population gainfully employed. The consequences of alienating the U.S.-led western world in an already unstable global geopolitical environment are too severe for India’s economic growth and strategic choices. Therefore, by inheriting a strong economic and military relationship with India, Biden would like India to jump off the fence, and to show more commitment toward the Quad. There are already indications of the Third Republic shedding its traditional reticence in this regard and redefining its strategic culture in the process.

India is locked in a bitter confrontation with China in the Himalayas. China’s transgression in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 and subsequent refusal to disengage had jolted India’s political elite out of their comfort zone and may have also removed some of the anxieties over losing the country’s ‘strategic autonomy.’ Given India’s current security challenges, it is impossible for New Delhi to become non-aligned in the traditional sense of the term. India needs to forge partnerships with like-minded countries in order to build its economic and military capacities. As we all know that anxiety is imprecise, more

⁴⁵ Patrick Mendis and Antonina Luszczkiewicz , “To Balance China, Joe Biden Should Build Upon Trump’s India Strategy,” *National Interest*, December 27, 2020.

acute and less manageable than fear since the latter is always finite, in the sense of being explicitly referable to something tangible. In this sense, India's fear of Chinese aggression is clearer than its anxiety of losing strategic autonomy.

Most importantly, India's strategic autonomy is not going to be sacrificed as the alliances of the present century will not be the same as those of the previous one. New Delhi seems to be redefining strategic autonomy as an attainable objective through strengthened partnerships rather than the avoidance of partnerships. Washington prefers its allies and partners to manage their own security, while sharing intelligence and civil-military technologies, extending logistics support and conducting joint military exercises. The Third Republic does not seem averse to this expectation. And despite New Delhi's growing engagement with Washington, India has demonstrated that it is capable of standing up to the United States where its core interests are involved.

Conclusion

The Third Republic has undertaken the task of making India a powerful nation in the image of the Westphalian state, a task that remains central with respect to both the national and international dimensions of the Republic. This article has shown that India's strategic culture has evolved during the last decade, particularly after the Modi government came to power. If India's strategic autonomy in the last century was mostly about fending off America's political threats to India, it is inescapably about coping with China's challenge to India's national interests in the present century. India's search for strategic autonomy from the West-dominated international system had once driven New Delhi into a political coalition with Moscow and



Beijing. Now, the notions of strategic autonomy seem to be changing, nudging India to deepen its partnerships with the United States, Japan and Australia.

China's rise has presented many economic, political and strategic challenges. Beijing's external behavior since the beginning of 2020 has been so obviously hostile and offensive that it has drawn the Quad members closer together. However, India can succeed in pushing back against China's authoritarian interference to the extent that the Modi government works with the strengths of the country's democratic system. This can only be achieved within a framework of democratic principles that can both secure a durable consensus with the Quad, and serve as a force multiplier to strengthen it. If India does not maintain the resilience of its pluralistic democracy, it could adversely affect its ability to contribute to ensuring a rules-based global order, and its status as a democratic role model would be undermined. Besides acting as a geopolitical balancer, India must be seen as a credible ideological contrast to China.

One cannot ignore the emerging global faultlines: China's contested territorial claims in the South China Sea, violent border clashes between India and China, the mass incarceration of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, and the 'China Standards 2035' whose main aim is to dominate key technologies and global standards. In such circumstances, India's participation in the Quad holds the key to the success of the emerging security and economic architecture in the rules-based Indo-Pacific region. The urgency for a new coalition was felt following China's adventurous push at Doklam, and it has now become an inevitability post-Galwan. China's attempts to shift the balance of power in the Indian Ocean require a multi-pronged response. New Delhi can no longer remain a passive bystander in the

emerging geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific if it is to provide a strong counterweight to China, economically, militarily and strategically.

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