

ESTABLISHING INDIA'S POLARITY IN GLOBAL POLITICS

A BALANCING ACT BETWEEN THE SCO AND THE QUAD

India's foreign policy was historically rooted in movements like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), but currently, to counter China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region, India has joined a US-driven association, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). India is also a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is a Eurasian bloc. The article explores India's diplomatic balancing act by analysing its stance in the Ukraine-Russia conflict and its participation in the SCO and QUAD. It questions whether India merely balances or independently shapes international affairs. In balancing relationships with the SCO and QUAD, India demonstrates its diplomatic prowess and establishes a third pole, safeguarding its national interests. The article broadly explains and substantiates this statement.

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INTRODUCTION

India comprises one-fifth of the world's population and currently boasts the world's fifth-largest GDP. With its massive population, it holds immense potential in the global landscape. India's foreign policy gave it a leadership role in the Global South, and loose coalitions such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) have played a significant role.

In contemporary geopolitical issues, including China's emergence as a dominant power and India's pursuit of investments and exploration of extensive export markets, India has come closer to the West. Notably, India's membership in the QUADrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia signifies a substantial shift in foreign policy. The QUAD is a security and strategic coalition involving three other nations that have rivalries with China. The QUAD is aiming to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific, although China considers QUAD as an "Asian NATO".

India's alignment extends beyond QUAD, as it is also a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), together with China and Russia, as well as Pakistan and several Central Asian nations. The SCO focuses on ensuring and maintaining peace, security, and stability in the region, as well as promoting effective cooperation in politics, national and international trade, economy, science and technology, culture, education, energy, transport, tourism, and environmental protection. (<http://eng.sectsc.org/cooperation/20170110/192193.html>)

The SCO offers India a platform to engage with both its neighbours and major powers.

India's decision to be part of both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Quadrilateral Security

Dialogue (QUAD) raises questions about the diplomatic risks involved and India's capacity to manage this delicate balancing act.

The conflict between Ukraine and Russia has significantly impacted the geopolitical landscape of world politics; leading Western nations seek bloc-like alignments either with the West or Russia. India, known for its balanced relations with both the East and West, faced unique challenges in their context. India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar asserted the ability to maintain good relations with both sides, emphasising India's distinct policy and strategy.

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By hosting both Eastern and Western coalitions, India showcases its diplomatic capability to navigate complex international relationships while pursuing its national interests. As India strikes a delicate balance between the East and West, it establishes and demonstrates its ability to engage with multiple stakeholders while safeguarding its national objectives. This article elucidates this hypothesis based on India's current position in the global international system.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The article is based on qualitative research methods and relies solely on secondary data sources. However, at the same time, it incorporates statements from prominent individuals to understand the facts. It goes through the explanation with a specific case study of world political events. To obtain secondary data, this article relies on online versions of newspapers, YouTube channels, research articles, book chapters and data from prominent websites. From online sources, many edited videos have been circulated. Therefore, when using YouTube videos as references, it gives preference to popular and reputed channels and ensures verification from other sources as well. Not all the research is solely dependent on data observation; the author's explanations hold substantial value. Consequently, this article gathers information and elucidates the facts by incorporating the author's observations as well.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The primary focus of this article is the examination of India's diplomatic balancing act between the East and the West. It delves into this topic through the analysis of two specific case studies. The first case study investigates the official statements made by the Minister of External Affairs of India regarding the country's neutral stance during the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Through a comprehensive examination of these statements, the article sheds light on India's strategic navigation in the international arena.

The second case study takes a broader perspective, discussing India's

participation in international bodies such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), and the QUAD. It explores how India's involvement in these groupings operates in the context of the Ukraine-Russia conflict and China's ascent as a hybrid power. As global politics once again splits ascender the Eastern and Western blocs, the article critically assesses how India manages its position between these two coalitions.

Ultimately, the article raises significant questions about whether India's actions merely constitute a diplomatic balancing act or whether the country is actively charting its own course in international affairs. It aims to provide insight and analysis into India's complex diplomatic manoeuvres in the face of evolving global dynamics.

INDIAN STAND IN THE UKRAINE- RUSSIA WAR

When the conflict between Russia and Ukraine began, Western nations attempted to marginalise Russia through various means. One goal of Western policy was aimed at isolating Russia and reducing its exports to the global market. Both the United States and several Western European nations imposed sanctions on Moscow, arguing that trading with Russia was tantamount to "financing Russia's war efforts".

India has been steadily expanding its trade partnerships with the US and EU while maintaining a strategic friendship with Russia. As a member of the QUAD and an active participant in the Indo-Pacific region, Western nations expected India to potentially distance itself from Russia during the conflict in order to gain favour with the West. However, India chose to pursue a delicate balancing act, refusing to compromise on its independent foreign policy by succumbing to US-EU pressure.

In defence of India's position in the global international system, India's Foreign Minister, S Jaishankar, made some significant statements. These

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statements provide insight into India's actions in the current context.

In November 2022, India's Foreign Minister staunchly defended the country's decision to maintain a neutral stance amid the Russia-Ukraine crisis, despite mounting pressure from Western nations. The Minister's resolute statement that:

"I am not running a foreign policy for the demands of other people. (My foreign policy) is for what is in my country's and my people's interest. I believe that India's interests are well served." (*The Economics Times*, (26 November 2022). <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/indias-jaishankar-defends-indias-neutral-stance-over-russia-ukraine-crisis/articleshow/95773595.cms?from=mdr>)

This unwavering commitment to an independent foreign policy underscored India's political and economic stability. India demonstrated it would not change its foreign policy or interests due to any external influence or circumstance. While many Western nations criticised India's stance, the country's leaders exhibited steadfastness in their position. This firmness was a testament to the emergence of a "New India", one that charted its course independently, not aligned only with the West or overtly supportive of Russia or China. It was a reaffirmation that India would be its own pole.

In December 2022, The Indian Foreign Minister paid a visit to Austria and was interviewed by Austria's National Public Broadcaster, ORF. The minister faced questions about India "financing Russia's war" by not participating in Western sanctions and New Delhi's imports from Moscow having "increased five times" since the beginning of the invasion last year.

During that time, the minister upheld a comparative discussion and reversed the blame to the West. He said:

"Europe imported, in the same period, six times the energy which India did...if it is a matter of principle why didn't Europe cut on the first day? Why didn't on 25th February (start of Russian invasion towards Ukraine), a complete cut off of energy imports from Russia?" (*WION*, 03, January 2023 EAM Jaishankar from: <https://www.wionews.com/world/terror-epicentre-indias-external-affairs-minister-jaishankar-in-a-veiled-attack-on-pakistan-in-austria-549020>)

Before this interview, S Jaishankar had a conversation at the Globsec 2022 Forum in Bratislava, Slovakia. There, he stated:

“If only Indian money and oil, which comes to India, are funding Russia for war, is not the gas coming to Europe from Russia funding war?” (*WION*, 03 June 2022, *Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar speaks at Globsec 2022, calls out Europe's hypocrisy*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz1mptcumyw>)

He also argued that the world cannot be as “Euro-centric” as it was in the past. Jaishankar said:

“Europe has to get out of the mindset that Europe’s problems are the world’s problems, but the world’s problems are not Europe’s problems.” (*CRUX*, 04 June 2022, *Russia-Ukraine War | Jaishankar Calls Out West Again, Questions ‘Isn’t Europe Funding the War?’* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2EdQD_Eag0)

Fast forward to February 2023, the Indian Foreign Minister engaged in an interview with ANI, an Indian news agency. During this conversation, he highlighted India’s cordial relations with major global powers, with the exception of China. Regarding the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the minister said:

“New Delhi has goodwill and both Russia and Ukraine know that if we can be of any use, we will be willing.” (*NDTV*, 22 February 2023, *If We Can Be Of Any Use...: S Jaishankar*, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/s-jaishankar-over-russia-ukraine-war-if-we-can-be-of-any-use-3801542>)

This non-partisan stance signified that India was unwilling to take sides in the Ukraine-Russia conflict and underlined India’s diplomatic capability to mediate in global disputes, such as the one between Ukraine and Russia.

Furthermore, the interview revealed India’s concern for the suffering endured by the Global South and developing nations amidst the Ukraine-Russia conflict. This empathetic stance demonstrated India’s aspirations to emerge as a leader of the Global South, building upon its traditional political initiatives like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Although NAM may not be as active as in the past, India continues its efforts to assert itself as a leader among nations from the Global South. This determination showcases India’s vision to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of international relations.

There are two other important quotes from the minister during the Globsec 2022 Forum and from his interview with ANI in 2023.

In the interview with ANI the minister said that the Indian Prime Minister

Narendra Modi told his Russian counterpart that: “today is not the era of war”, (*NDTV, 22 February 2023, If We Can Be Of Any Use...: S Jaishankar, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/s-jaishankar-over-russia-ukraine-war-if-we-can-be-of-any-use-3801542*) meaning that India’s priority now lies in achieving its aspiration of becoming the world’s third-largest economy. Consequently, the nation is committed to steering clear of any form of warfare or conflict that could impede its economic advancement.

When the moderator at the Globsec 2022 Forum asked him who India will side with—the US or China—in case it has to pick a side, the minister said:

“I don’t accept that India has to join either the US axis or China axis.” He also added, “We have difficult relations with China and we are perfectly capable of managing it.” (*CRUX, 2022, June 04, Russia-Ukraine War | Jaishankar Calls Out West Again, Questions ‘Isn’t Europe Funding the War?’ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2EdQD_Eag0*)

These statements shed light on India’s key positions. Firstly, India is inclined not to align itself with either the Russia-West conflict or the China-West conflict. While India is a member of the QUAD, it also participates in organisations like SCO and BRICS alongside Russia and China. Consequently, India is charting a course independent of specific blocs, prioritising its own interests and strategies. Despite acknowledging a less-than-ideal relationship with China, India emphasises that cooperation persists within forums such as SCO and BRICS, affirming its ability to manage the situation with China.

Essentially, with these statements India aims to convey to the West that it possesses the capability to safeguard its borders, obviating the need for third-party cooperation or intervention. This assertion holds significant importance. One major aspect of a great power or potential great power is its ability to secure its borders independently. (*Buzan and Wæver, Region and powers: The Structure of International Security (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): Chapter 2 p35*) Another interpretation of these statements is that India aims to achieve great power status.

The next phase of the article will delve further into India’s strategy of balanced diplomacy as it simultaneously participates in both the SCO and QUAD.

INDIA WITH SCO

In June 2023, the Indian Prime Minister successfully completed a state visit to the United States. (*Statement from White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre on the Official State Visit*

of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Republic of India, White House website, 10 May 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/10/statement-from-white-house-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-on-the-official-state-visit-of-prime-minister-narendra-modi-of-the-republic-of-india/>) Following this visit, he hosted the leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for its annual summit. (*WION, 04 July 2023, India hosts SCO summit: Key takeaways on security, terrorism and regional development, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1XBmfEe5Lc>*) It was a significant message from India that if India shakes hands with the West with the right hand, it will shake hands with the East with its left hand.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was formed in 2001 with Central Asian countries taking the lead, along with China and Russia. It had an anti-Western orientation, with its primary goal being to prevent Western engagement in Central Asia. In 2017, the SCO experienced its first extension with the inclusion of Pakistan and India as members. It is assumed that both nations joined simultaneously to maintain a balance of power in South Asia, with India and Pakistan aligning themselves with Russia and China, respectively.

Recently, Iran gained membership in the SCO, raising concerns about the triangular relations between Russia, China, and Iran against the Western bloc. If these relations solidify under the auspices of the SCO, the question arises of how India will manage its balancing act with the West while also being a member of the SCO. Another argument revolves around what India stands to gain within this anti-Western bloc, where China and Pakistan are also members, considering India's contentious relations with China and Pakistan.

The Indian membership in the SCO is a strategic policy of New Delhi's. However, as of now, India has not achieved any visible milestones as a member of SCO, even though Indian membership manifests recognition of its geopolitical importance and appeal in the Euro-Asian security and connectivity dialogue. The SCO serves as a future connectivity platform for Euro-Asia, including leader of the Global South and influencing the power dynamics of Euro-Asia. India has a vested interest in preventing any single hegemonic power from arising in the Eurasian region.

When the moderator at the Globsec 2022 Forum asked the Indian Foreign Minister who India will side with—the US or China—in case it has to pick a side, the minister said: “I don’t accept that India has to join either the US axis or China axis.” He also added, “We have difficult relations with China and we are perfectly capable of managing it.”

Recognising the geopolitical importance and mineral resources of Euro-Asia, the SCO was created as a counterbalance to NATO, with participation from China and Russia in the context of the former Soviet regional order.

India does not want to cede strategic influence in the region to China and Pakistan. If China and Pakistan attempt to shape the SCO's agenda, India, along with Russia, can counter their efforts. So, Indian participation in the SCO is not to give China a chance to lead in the Global South and Asia.

India's "Connect Central Asia Policy", introduced in 2012 and revived by Prime Minister Modi in 2015 during his visits to all five Central Asian countries—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—aims to achieve connectivity goals. (*Chari Seshadri 16 September 2022, Modi govt is mastering the art of balancing QUAD and SCO, 'sanctioned' nations and democracies, The Print, <https://theprint.in/opinion/modi-govt-is-mastering-the-art-of-balancing-QUAD-and-sco-sanctioned-nations-and-democracies/1130377/>*) The SCO plays a crucial role in this strategy, especially considering India's lack of a land boundary with Central Asia.

Pakistan opposes India joining the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline. New Delhi can gain access to this pipeline through the SCO by expanding the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC). If India can gain access in Central Asia through SCO connectivity, it would be a significant achievement.

If we examine the Indian agenda in the last two SCO summits, it was centred on connectivity, transit, and supply chain.

In the 2022 Summit of SCO, which was held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, India sought reliable, resilient, and diversified supply chains that require better connectivity, full rights to transit, Special Working Groups on innovation and startups.

In the 2023 Summit in New Delhi, India's emphasis was on cross-border terrorism, inclusive government in Afghanistan, connectivity while respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member countries. (*Wani Ajaz, 09 August 2023, Decoding India's Priorities at the SCO: Connectivity, Counterterrorism, and Afghanistan, Observer Research Foundation, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/decoding-indias-priorities-at-the-sco/>*) So, the SCO is a connectivity and strategic platform for India.

INDIA WITH QUAD

The Doklam incident of 2017 and the Galwan Valley clash of 2020 pushed India towards active participation in the QUAD. India's primary objective

within the QUAD is to counter Chinese maritime hegemony and Beijing String of Pearls strategy in the Indo-Pacific region.

India can counterbalance China's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific region, including its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has led to the construction of port facilities in countries neighbouring India. Economically, the QUAD will also make India a preferred destination for investment.

With the QUAD, India can project its influence beyond the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, India's Act East Policy and Neighbourhood First Policy enhance India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

(Pant V Harsh 09 August 2022, India and the QUAD: Chinese belligerence and Indian resilience, Observer Research Foundation, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-and-the-QUAD/>)

The QUAD can provide a long-term strategy to deter Chinese expansionism. Even when countering China in the Indo-Pacific region, neither the US nor Japan have advantages like India, which possesses a large geographical border with China, the longest coastline in the Indian Ocean, a strong military, and significant production potential. A QUAD without India would have less credibility in Asia, and would immediately lose the "Indo" in "Indo-Pacific". So, the Indian alignment with QUAD is based on mutual needs and on geographic realities.

Considering this geopolitical landscape, in 2020, India accepted Australia's request to join the Malabar Exercise, *(Singh Prashasti 03 November 2020, first phase of Malabar exercise starts today: All you need to know, Hindustan Times, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/malabar-naval-exercise-2020-first-phase-of-the-malabar-exercise-starts-today/story-iQV6I06yUUMyy3az9IntPL.html>)* effectively transforming it into a *de facto* QUAD gathering. Consequently, India now has the flexibility to purchase Russian S-400 air defense systems and still engage in maritime exercises with the US and other QUAD nations.

As a result, India's foreign policy has shifted from non-alignment to a multi-alignment strategy. India is now capable of working with China and Russia on one hand, and with Western nations on the other. This represents India's calculated balancing act between the East and the West

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INDIAN BALACING ACT

India faces land border tensions with China and also grapples with security dilemmas in the Indian Ocean. However, it is essential to note that the Indian Ocean is not exclusively Indian; it involves several stakeholders. For instance, the Diego Garcia Island, which is under UK sovereignty, hosts a US naval base. The Chinese nuclear test of 1964 prompted India to seek US involvement in the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, China is primarily a strategic threat to India rather than an ideological one. Approximately 40 per cent of China's oil imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, and around 82 per cent transit the Malacca Strait in Southeast Asia. (*US Department of Defence. (2012) Annual report to congress: Military and security developments involving the People's Republic of China 2012. Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defence*) So, China has a security dilemma and therefore aims at acquiring strategic preponderance in the Indian Ocean.

China has extensively engaged with Indian Ocean riparian states like Sri Lanka and the Maldives. If China were to establish naval bases in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bangladesh, it would pose further challenges for India. General Zhao Nanqi, Director of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, remarked, "We are not prepared to let the Indian Ocean become India's Ocean". (*China's plan to build up its navy, 13 January 1993*)


Consequently, India has limited alternatives when it comes to aligning with the US and the QUAD in the Indian Ocean to counter China. Nevertheless, it's crucial to acknowledge that the US naval base in the Indian Ocean and its military facilities in the Gulf also present security concerns for India. The international system is both competitive and cooperative at the same time.

So, India will not abandon its friendship with Russia, which is still India's largest arms supplier. The strategy of the Pakistani army has been the biggest concern, for India and Pakistan receives a lot of aid from the US. Despite continuous border tensions with China, India maintains trade relations because it does not want to harm its economy, while simultaneously seeking Western involvement to counter China. If China and Pakistan strengthen their coalition, India might have to seek support from Russia. India will not relinquish influence over the Indian Ocean, the Himalayas, or the Euro-Russian region. That is the Indian ultimate polarity in the global politics.

CONCLUSION

International relations always involve conflicts of interest. The aims of states are shaped by their abilities, including geography, strategic location, economy, and latent military power. India has emerged as a major player in global politics due to its strengths in these areas.

Once considered a middle power, India's political leadership embraced a non-aligned position. However, India's capabilities abroad have since increased significantly. It is now a nation soon to have the world's third-largest GDP and the potential to become a great power. Consequently, India's position has shifted from non-alignment to multi-alignment.

Today, India is implementing a foreign policy that emphasises its own interests without succumbing to the influence of any major power. India simultaneously maintains friendly relations with the West and with the East. This alignment is not solely driven by Indian intentions but is also a result of the universal recognition of India's geo-strategic and geo-economic importance by both the East and the West. 

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India's "Connect Central Asia Policy", introduced in 2012 and revived by Prime Minister in 2015 during his visits to all five Central Asian countries—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—aims to achieve connectivity goals. The SCO plays a crucial role in their strategy.