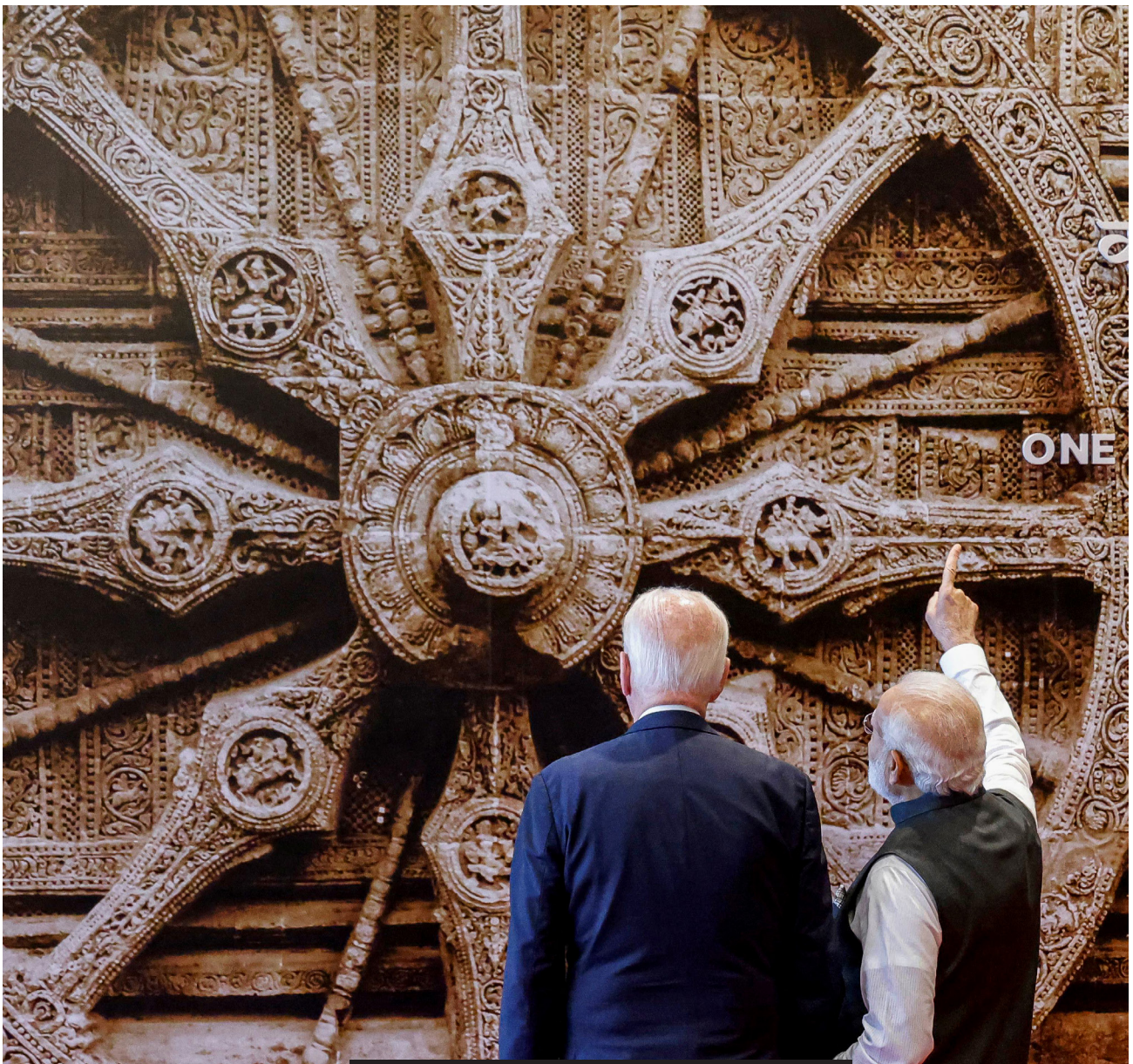


SPECIAL REPORT

no. 228

A Decade of Modi's Foreign Policy India Shows the Way

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Editor



MAY 2024

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Introduction

Harsh V Pant

A day might be a long time in politics, but in foreign policy, even a decade is usually not long enough to merit a serious appraisal. The past decade, however, has witnessed a phenomenal change in both the scale and scope of global politics. In India, too, politics experienced tectonic shifts, inevitably affecting the country's foreign policy. Yet it is not simply that. It is also that India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, has been personally involved in the realm of external relations, according India a unique place in contemporary international affairs. His selection of S Jaishankar as his second External Affairs Minister in 2019 has allowed India to weather a troubled global environment over the last few years.

When Modi assumed office in 2014, critics quickly labelled him a “provincial politician” lacking in foreign policy experience. His “Hindu nationalist” background was seen as a potential hindrance to India's relations, especially with the Islamic world. However, Modi surprised both detractors and supporters by adopting a pragmatic foreign policy centred around the ‘India first’ principle.

To be sure, India's rise as a formidable player in global politics is also largely driven by structural changes in the international order. The shifting balance of power and increasing disillusionment with China in the West have turned global attention to India, now the world's fastest growing large economy. Favourable demographics, its appeal as an alternative to China, and its strategic position in the Indo-Pacific have made this moment, India's.

Attribution: Harsh V Pant, Ed., “A Decade of Modi's Foreign Policy: India Shows the Way,” *ORF Special Report No. 228*, May 2024, Observer Research Foundation.

What has also changed is New Delhi's growing willingness to be more proactive on the global stage, in line with its aim of taking on the role of a rule-shaper rather than a mere rule-taker. Modi's diplomacy on the global stage has given wings to India's aspirations of playing a larger role globally. Consequently, Indian foreign policy has made the most of this inflection point in world affairs. In the last decade, India has shed its image of being a "perpetual naysayer" in global politics, and the world now sees it as a nation that is more than willing to contribute to global governance.

In the past decade, the perennial, artificial divide between domestic and foreign policy has blurred. India's primary focus remains its domestic development, which requires a comprehensive, collaborative approach. Indian diplomacy is aligned with these developmental goals, fostering a pragmatic stance in New Delhi's external outreach. While partnerships are crucial, India's needs, rather than ideologies, shape its engagements. This pragmatic approach is evident in India's robust ties with the West and its sustained partnership with Russia amid the complex Ukraine crisis. Indeed, India has effectively insulated its global engagement from the surrounding turbulence.

The Modi government's regional outlook under the 'Neighbourhood First' approach has sought to promote regional stability and prosperity, recognising the importance of a secure

and cooperative neighbourhood for India's overall development and security. The prime minister's outreach to neighbours is aimed at resolving longstanding issues and fostering closer economic and cultural ties. India also seeks to counter China's influence in the region, particularly through the Act East policy which seeks to deepen engagement with Southeast Asian nations. The focus of New Delhi's South Asia policy has shifted from Pakistan—with which it has long been preoccupied—to the more productive Bay of Bengal maritime geography which lends itself to a more organic linkage between South and Southeast Asia. This permanent de-hyphenation of India and Pakistan is perhaps the single most important achievement of the last decade, as it allows New Delhi to focus on the real strategic challenge that is China.

Modi had started off by reaching out to China in order to manage its rise through diplomatic engagement. Beijing, however, had other plans. And after the Galwan Valley crisis of 2020, India took an audacious stand, on which it has not turned its back: Sino-Indian relations cannot normalise unless the border situation is resolved. India's growing footprint in East and Southeast Asia and its inclination to shape the strategic contours of the wider Indo-Pacific underscore a new reality—i.e., New Delhi will not be diffident as it seeks for itself a greater regional and global role.

In the past decade, New Delhi confronted adversaries and cultivated allies without the ideological constraints of the past. As early as in 2014, India stood, alone, in challenging Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative; it responded firmly to Chinese military aggression, and collaborated with the US without entering into a full-fledged alliance. At the same time, India engaged the West to bolster its domestic capacities. This pragmatic approach has leveraged the existing balance of power to India's advantage. Today, India's primary focus is on enhancing its capabilities across all sectors, enabling a clear-eyed and strategic engagement with global partners.

The world may have in the past gotten used to a pontificating India. Today, it hears the voice of a responsible stakeholder which, despite being steadfast in its own ethos, value, and principles, will not shirk its global commitments.

In 2020 and 2021, as the COVID-19 pandemic peaked in South Asia, New Delhi led the way in shaping the regional response, which then became global in scope. The Indian initiative to support its neighbours with critical supplies of medicines and, later, of doses of life-saving vaccines as part of the Vaccine Maitri initiative, was a reflection of a new confidence that India can offer solutions to

global challenges. In 2023, India's G20 presidency positioned the country as a voice for developing countries and was exemplary of the mark that Modi's leadership has made on the international front.

It is that same mark that will follow India through these challenging times in global politics. More than any other major power today, Indians view their future in aspirational terms, and such perception is shaping their domestic and foreign engagements. The Modi government succeeded not only in tapping into that sentiment effectively, but also, in a sense, shaping that aspiration into his own image. And that is an undeniable legacy.

Yet, the world order continues to evolve rapidly and in unpredictable ways. New Delhi does not have the luxury of looking back. It will have to continue with a proactive foreign policy posture so that it can make the most of the opportunities presented by the new realities. The challenges that Indian policymakers will have to navigate are significant.

It is against this backdrop that this report examines the Modi government's foreign policy over the past decade, and underlines the challenges that continue to constrain New Delhi's future choices in the realm of external relations. Divided into three sections, this report is a survey of the Indian foreign policy landscape from when Modi took the helm. It identifies the key trends in various geographies and domains, and underscores the persistent obstacles facing the nation's policymakers.

As a new government takes office, it is our hope that the insights contained in this report will engender a forward-looking debate on the future trajectory of Indian foreign policy as India settles itself at the centrestage of global politics.

“New Delhi will have to continue with a proactive foreign policy posture and make the most of the opportunities presented by the new realities.”

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I India and Key Powers

The United States

A True Transformation

Vivek Mishra

Bilateral relations between India and the US have improved over the past two decades. When Narendra Modi first became prime minister in 2014, the previous government had already delivered on the civil nuclear agreement as the big-ticket deal upgrading India-US relations; the question then was about what the world could expect from the Modi government. To be sure, such question was being asked in the backdrop of a not-so-favourable assessment of Modi himself. At the political level, a vibrant bilateral relationship was being assessed against the seeming ideological differences between a Democratic government in Washington and a centre-right Bharatiya Janata Party in New Delhi.

What followed under the Modi government was a determined effort by both India and the US to redefine ties and pragmatically work together, taking the relationship further on the basis of mutual respect, and shared values and strategic interests. In the decade since Modi took charge, there has been a turnaround in several domains.

Key Trends

Defence and Security

One pivotal transformation has been the forging of a robust defence and security partnership. Strides have been made since 2014, including India being designated as a Major Defence Partner by the US in 2016. In 2018, India was granted Strategic Trade Authorization tier 1 status, enabling the country to access a broad spectrum of military and dual-use technologies without the need for licences. These have not only bolstered India's defence capabilities but have also enhanced bilateral cooperation economically, resulting in revenue for the US and deepening interoperability through joint defence exercises.

Alignment on the Indo-Pacific

Modi's keynote address at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018 redefined India's priorities in the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the country's commitment to a "free, open and inclusive region that embraces all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity."¹ A cornerstone of this change of priorities has been an emphasis on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, particularly with the US. The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), between India, the US, Japan, and Australia in 2017 underscored the growing alignment among democracies with stakes in the region. The shared strategic interests of the US and India in upholding a rules-based order, and India's proactive engagement in expanding its Area of Responsibility (AOR), show its commitment to regional stability in the Indo-Pacific, which is closely aligned with US objectives in the region.

Economic Engagement

The Modi government recognises the importance of economic cooperation in sustaining the broader strategic partnership with the US. Indo-US trade has seen notable growth across diverse sectors. The US has emerged as India's largest trading partner, alternating with China in that position. While defence sales constitute a significant portion

of the economic partnership, there is also evenly distributed growth across other sectors. However, challenges such as trade imbalances and tariff disputes have intermittently strained economic relations. A Free Trade Agreement (FTA) also continues to elude the two countries.

Persisting Challenges

Managing Expectations

A disparity of expectations has sometimes arisen between the two countries. However, both governments appear to be taking a pragmatic approach, which helps temper public expectations. The recent case involving Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, in which the US accused India of trying to assassinate the US-based Khalistani activist, has highlighted the critical importance of sustained communication between the two sides.²

The Matter of Visas

One of the primary achievements of the Modi government has been its successful outreach to the US-based Indian diaspora. Even so, issues such as the number of H1-B visas^a that the US grants

a A visa that permits the holder to work in the US.

to Indians—and which India wants substantially increased—are likely to remain contentious between New Delhi and Washington.

Political Stability

Politically, the Modi government being elected for two consecutive terms since 2014 has brought stability to India-US ties. In contrast, the US has seen, domestically, heated political competition between Democrats and Republicans during the same period. Navigating the complexities

of diplomacy across three US presidential administrations—those of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden—presented its own challenges. As both countries prepare for new governments this year, India hopes that the internal political discord will not be reflected in the US's India policies. Indeed, bipartisan support for India in the US Congress has been consistent in the past two decades, and it would do India well for such support to continue.

China

A Downward Spiral

Antara Ghosal Singh

One of the most critical aspects of the Modi government's foreign policy over the past decade has been its approach on China. From the stirrings over Modi-Xi informal summits in 2018-2019 to outrage over the 2020 border clash—the last ten years of India-China relations have been characterised by sudden and unexpected changes. It started on a particularly positive note, with hopes of a big reset in bilateral ties, but the process eventually lost steam and ended up in a state of heightened rivalry and contestation. Three trends in PM Modi's China policy stand out.

Key Trends

Economics driving politics; politics driving economics

Even before assuming office as India's prime minister, Modi had visited China thrice as chief minister of Gujarat, and each time secured more Chinese investment for his state.¹ It was

therefore no surprise that in the initial years of his prime ministership, his approach towards China was mainly for economic goals—i.e., seeking cooperation with China to develop India's infrastructure and manufacturing. The hope was that robust economic exchanges between China and India will soften China's stance at the border.

By the end of the decade, however, it is politics that has taken centrestage in China-India relations. Triggered by the Galwan clash of 2020 and influenced by the post-pandemic global trend of supply-chain resilience, India has introduced its *atmanirbhar bharat abhiyan* mission aimed at reducing India's dependence on goods manufactured in China and emerging as a global manufacturing hub itself. As part of its *atmanirbhar* policy, India has taken a series of measures vis-à-vis China, including rejecting Chinese investments,

tightening regulations, introducing a production linked incentive (PLI) scheme, and supporting local production in 14 key industries where India has been highly dependent on Chinese manufacturing.² The Modi government has made it clear that China-India economic exchanges can only be normalised, if there is peace and tranquillity at the border.³

Building on external partnership to deal with China

A key approach of the Modi government with regard to China has been to build up military and strategic ties with like-minded nations. China's aggressive stance at the LAC, particularly during the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan clash, pushed India towards reviving the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the US, Japan, and Australia. After a hiatus of 10 years, the Quad met in Manila in 2017 on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit.⁴ A few years later, the first in-person Quad Leaders' Summit was held in September 2021 where the grouping reiterated a mutual commitment and shared vision for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.⁵ Beyond the Quad, India has deepened its bilateral ties with each of the Quad members.⁶ India has also been reaching out to almost all stakeholders in the region, from ASEAN to Pacific Island nations, in its pursuit of a bigger role in the Indo-Pacific.⁷

Prioritising border connectivity

The other pillar of the Modi government's China policy has been its focus on strengthening border connectivity and "fortification of India's strategic locations."⁸ Successive governments before 2014 had paid little attention to border infrastructure, which adversely effected the country's ability to deal with the China challenge. To bridge the gap, the Modi government has put strong emphasis on the construction of strategic infrastructure along India's borders as well as employment of advanced technologies and surveillance systems. A series of high-profile infrastructure projects have been launched in the last couple of years, aimed at enhancing connectivity and defence preparedness, and boosting socio-economic development in remote regions.⁹

While it might be too early to judge the success, or lack of it, of PM Modi's China policy, the fact remains that critical challenges continue to lie ahead.

Persisting Challenges

India's continuing dependence on China

Despite the Modi government's deliberate efforts towards making India self-reliant, India's dependency on China remains. Reports highlight that China has overtaken the US to become India's largest trading partner after a gap of two years; imports from China reached a record US\$100 billion in FY23-24.¹⁰ Experts are of the opinion that a robust domestic manufacturing sector cannot be built in a day and India would continue to rely on China, particularly for materials needed in the clean energy and electronics sectors.¹¹

China's growing South Asia footprint

China's deep inroads in South Asia continue to pose challenges to India's foreign policy. The pressure is building up on India in the neighbourhood, with Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu's strong anti-India stance, a communist resurgence in Nepal, Sri Lanka's dependence on China, steadily progressing Bhutan-China border negotiations, deepening China-Myanmar ties, and the 'India out' campaign making way into Bangladesh's politics. For India, reversing the situation and safeguarding its interests while expanding its influence in South Asia will remain a key issue going forward.

India's complicated ties with Five Eye countries

There is growing contention between India and the Five Eye countries^a over a range of issues including India's intelligence operations, the health of Indian democracy,¹² and the rise of Hindu nationalism.¹³ For China, which is particularly concerned about a collusion of American and Indian interests against its own, there is opportunity in these evolving differences. Accordingly, Beijing is crafting the narrative that India has become a lonely rising power: that New Delhi has lost its traditional friendship and goodwill with China as well as Russia; at the same time, it has not been able to gain strategic trust from the United States and its allies.¹⁴

Overall, it can be concluded that under PM Modi, significant efforts have been made to bolster India's position in its rivalry with China. There remain many hurdles, however, for India to cross to stand up to the China challenge.

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a These are Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Russia

A Tightrope Walk

Nandan Unnikrishnan and Rajoli Siddharth Jayaprakash

The year 2014 witnessed new developments for India and Russia: the former saw a new government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi take charge in May, and the latter saw deteriorating ties with the West over the Ukraine crisis. Ten years on, the heads of both states are the same, and the Ukraine crisis, which began with the takeover of Crimea in 2014, has escalated into a full-blown war.

In 2010, India and Russia signed a strategic partnership aiming to increase bilateral trade to US\$20 billion by 2015.¹ Trade did not pick up till 2022, however, when India became a major buyer of Russian energy. India has since emerged as a prime refiner of Russian oil that sells the products to the rest of the world.² Indian companies continue to do business with Russia in areas that do not attract secondary sanctions.

Key Trends

Enduring relations in a changing world order

There were visible trends in Russia-India relations over the two terms of PM Modi, strongly related to geopolitical developments in Eurasia including the heightening Russia-West and Sino-Indian rivalries. In the years that PM Modi served his second term, these contestations deepened, and the strengthening of Sino-Russian ties following the February 2022 eruption of the Ukraine war has emerged as a concern for New Delhi. Analysts speculate that with India's growing closeness to the West, Russia's role in India's foreign policy calculus is declining.³ Further, the Indo-Pacific geography has gained greater traction over the years in India's foreign policy. For Russia, however, the 'Indo-Pacific' remains an "artificially imposed" construct that aims to contain China. Yet, from a structural point of view, the importance of Russia as a partner in Eurasia remains relevant for New Delhi.

Military-Technical cooperation and connectivity

In the past decade, military-technical cooperation has emerged as a pillar of India-Russia relations. The acquisition of the S-400 missile defence system in 2018 was a diplomatic victory for New Delhi as it secured a CAATSA (Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) waiver from the United States.⁴ India also signed deals to purchase and produce AK-203 rifles, Igla portable Surface-to-Air missiles, Ka-226 helicopters, and stealth frigates from Russia.⁵ Negotiations are continuing for the lease of another nuclear-powered submarine. From a Russian perspective, the negative aspect is the declining overall percentage of Russian equipment in the Indian armed forces.

Nuclear energy cooperation is emerging as another significant area of cooperation. In 2023, an agreement was signed to build, by 2027, four more 1,000-MW nuclear reactors at the Kudankulam power plant in Tamil Nadu.⁶

Similarly, India's interest in the Russian Far East has heightened in the past decade. The prime minister announced a credit line of US\$1 billion for developing the Russian Far East in 2019, incentivising Indian businesses to work in the Russian Far East. Both sides have shown interest in operationalising the defunct Soviet-era

Chennai-Vladivostok economic corridor. India is also in talks with the Eurasian Economic Union to conclude a free trade agreement.⁷

Backing each other's national interests

In 2019, Russia was the first P-5 country to support the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. It also expedited shipments of weapons to India after the Galwan clash in 2020. Russia supported India's membership to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and joined calls for reform at the UN Security Council. India, for its part, has neither condemned the Russian incorporation of Crimea or the war against Ukraine.

Persisting Challenges

Increasing Russia-China bonhomie

Russia's relationship with China has improved amid Western isolation, causing worry for New Delhi. With no signs of this cooperation declining, it is critical to keep Russia as far as possible from China through trade and other economic engagements while cooperating closely in multilateral forums on issues of mutual interest such as Afghanistan and the Arctic.

Impact of sanctions on bilateral trade

Sanctions make it more difficult for India to develop economic ties with Russia. The basket of Indian exports to Russia is small because exporters are struggling to identify goods of interest to Russia. Challenges have also emerged in settling payments because of Western sanctions on Russia. Despite efforts to diversify, trade remains concentrated on arms and energy; while energy trade has skyrocketed between India and Russia since 2022, owing to energy imports, experts opine that it is not sustainable in the long term.⁸ Thus, India and Russia will have to find alternatives.

Decline in defence imports

Military technical cooperation has long served as a foundation of India-Russia relations. However, due to New Delhi pursuing diversified military imports, as well as promoting domestic production

through the 'Make in India' initiative, defence imports from Russia have dropped from 62 percent in 2017 to 45 percent in 2022.⁹ Considering this decline, India needs to find alternatives to its defence imports from Russia. Further, supply-side issues persist with delivery delays.

For PM Modi, India-Russia relations have been important. Beyond historical undertones, the relations manifest India's aspirations for a multipolar world order. The perceptions of a waning partnership cannot reduce the importance of Moscow in India's calculus. India will continue to carefully monitor the situation and calibrate its policy as required.

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The European Union

A Blend of Optimism and Tension

Shailee Malhotra

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has ended its historical neglect of Europe and strengthened its ties with the European Union's (EU) and its 27 member states. This is partly due to a common interest in containing China, and also to India's enhanced diplomatic outreach to European sub-regions and smaller countries. For four consecutive years, 2021-24, the chief guests at the annual Indian flagship conference on geopolitics and geo-economics, the Raisina Dialogue, organised jointly by the Ministry of External Affairs and ORF, have been top European leaders. Yet sticking points in the relationship remain, especially with the EU-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the EU's Carbon Adjustment Border Mechanism (CBAM) which adversely impacts exports from developing nations, and differing perceptions of the emerging world order.

Key Trends

Going Strategic

In recent years, the Europe-India partnership has moved beyond its traditional focus on economics to embrace a strategic dimension as well. Shared threat perceptions around China's assertive behaviour—for India, the Galwan valley clashes of 2020 between the Indian and Chinese armies, and for Europe, Beijing's divide-and-rule tactics and supply chain disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic—have contributed to this strategic shift.

Against this backdrop, several dialogues have been institutionalised. Some of these are the EU-India Connectivity Partnership, which forms part of the EU's wider Global Gateway strategy; the EU-India Trade and Technology Council; and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

The EU-India agenda has widened to include issues of maritime security, defence, artificial intelligence, climate change, critical and emerging technologies, and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, based on a resurgence of values-based partnerships with ‘likeminded’ nations.

Moving Beyond Traditional Capitals

India’s ramped-up engagement with Europe, moving beyond the traditional capitals of Paris, Berlin and London, is another key trend. Substantial diplomatic outreach to other countries and sub-regions such as the Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland), the Visegrad 4 grouping (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) and the Slavkov grouping (Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria), combined with greater engagement with the EU in Brussels, has underpinned India’s ties with the continent during the Modi era. The aim is to harness the unique potential of these different countries and sub-regions. For instance, the partnership with the Nordic countries, which are globally renowned for their innovation, aims to benefit India’s development and meet its technological needs.

Cooperation over Divergences

Before the Modi era, a single unfortunate episode such as the 2012 Italian Marines crisis,¹ was enough to disrupt the entire EU-India

partnership, resulting in an indefinite scrapping of EU-India summits. In contrast, the Russia-Ukraine war, continuing since February 2022, has had minimal consequences for the EU-India relationship, despite the war being an existential threat for Europe and India’s ongoing trade and other ties with Russia. Indeed, both the EU and India have engaged in regular interactions and demonstrated a willingness to understand each other’s strategic outlooks, not allowing the full-blown war to hijack bilateral progress and cooperation in other areas.

Persisting Challenges

The CBAM Irritant

A pillar of the EU’s European Green Deal, the CBAM, currently in its transitional phase of application, has thrown up serious differences between India and the EU. By subjecting imports into the EU to an emissions-based carbon price, the CBAM aims to contribute to the EU’s goal of climate neutrality by 2050 through incentivising global industries to embrace green technologies and reduce emissions.²

While the EU asserts the CBAM's non-discriminatory nature and compatibility with World Trade Organization (WTO) rules, India objects to it on the grounds of it being protectionist, discriminatory, and a barrier to trade. At least 27 percent of India's iron, steel, aluminium and fertiliser exports, worth US\$8.2 billion, went to the EU in 2022.³ These sectors, all of which would be subject to the CBAM, could find themselves heavily disadvantaged through its implementation.

Cracking the FTA

Contemporary world events, such as Russia's war on Ukraine and China's pandemic-era weaponisation of trade, have laid bare the interconnectedness of geopolitics and geo-economics. Against this backdrop, the EU-India FTA negotiations were reopened in 2022, after a hiatus of nine years, with imperatives to diversify trade partners and stabilise supply chains at their core. As India's third largest trading partner, the EU accounted for 10.8 percent (€88 billion worth, or US\$95.5 billion) of total Indian trade in goods in 2021.⁴

Yet despite seven rounds of negotiations since the resumption of talks, key sticking points around greater mobility for skilled professionals, procurement, automobiles, and agriculture, await resolution. The EU's insistence on including non-trade chapters, such as labour and environmental

standards, remains an additional barrier. However, India's fresh approach, which has led to trade deals being concluded with Australia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA)— comprising Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland—has brightened prospects for an EU-India FTA as well.

Normative Tensions

Differing conceptions of the world order, stemming from India's view of itself as an emerging power and Europe as a traditional power, continue to pose challenges. India's calls for reformed multilateralism and a readjustment of power challenge European preponderance in existing multilateral frameworks. Such normative divergences were also evident in India's attempts to highlight the Global South's issues, contrasting with Europe's position at the heart of the Global North, that have fed into differing narratives on the Russia-Ukraine war and its implications.⁵

In addition, varying primary threat perceptions may pose challenges in strategic coordination. In Europe's worldview, Russia, which still retains its status amongst India's core allies, is the primary threat. For India, China is the principal threat, where Europe is treading a middle path. However, the China-Russia "no limits" partnership may see these two threats eventually converging.

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Japan

Aligned, Transformative, and Impactful

Pratnashree Basu

Under the Modi government, India-Japan relations have witnessed progress in multiple fronts. Unprecedented cooperation in areas such as defence, technology, infrastructure, and investment have fostered a robust bilateral relationship aimed at promoting regional stability and economic growth.

Key Trends

Shared strategic vision

India and Japan have demonstrated a shared strategic vision through their commitment to a rules-based, free, and open Indo-Pacific. Bilateral alignment is crucial for countering revisionist unilateral actions while upholding transparency, inclusivity, and ASEAN centrality in regional affairs. New Delhi and Tokyo have elevated their relationship into a strategic partnership¹ marked by enhanced diplomatic, military, and economic cooperation. Alignment on Indo-Pacific issues

has also been bolstered by the close personal relationship² between Prime Minister Modi and former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (now deceased). The sustained bilateral engagement under successive Japanese prime ministers Yoshihide Suga and Fumio Kishida is testament to the strong foundations of the shared strategic outlook of the two countries.

Expanded scope of bilateral ties

The two countries' bilateral ties are steadily expanding. Joint declarations and defence equipment agreements have led to stronger defence ties; the 2+2 defence and foreign ministerial dialogue has contributed to bilateral strategic depth, and the 2020 Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) has enhanced mutual logistics support.³ The Indian Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) have established cooperation in various domains in the Indo-Pacific, including maritime security and advancing the welfare of global maritime domains.⁴

The economic ties between India and Japan are also deepening. At present, some 1,400 Japanese companies⁵ operate in India, primarily in the automotive, electrical, telecommunications, and pharmaceutical sectors, with a cumulative Japanese foreign direct investment (FDI) of nearly US\$40 billion as of June 2023.⁶ Japan is India's largest bilateral donor, with significant Official Development Assistance (ODA) supporting key sectors like infrastructure, power, transportation, and the environment. Additionally, cooperative frameworks like the Japan-India Special Make in India Finance Facility,⁷ the India-Japan Clean Energy Partnership,⁸ the bilateral currency swap agreement,⁹ and the India-Japan Steel Dialogue¹⁰ have further deepened collaboration. The partnership extends to the technology and digital sector, evidenced by initiatives like the India-Japan Digital Partnership (I-JDP)¹¹ and skill development programmes such as the Japan-India Institute of Manufacturing (JIM).¹² The Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI)¹³ between India, Japan, and Australia also aims to reduce dependency on single supply chain sources.

Japan has also contributed to India's infrastructure growth through projects like the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail and India's metro rail projects.¹⁴ Space cooperation between the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), as well as environmental cooperation, and

educational and cultural exchanges contribute further to the bilateral connect. Additionally, there is a growing Indian community in Japan, with Nishikasai emerging as a hub for Indian expatriates.¹⁵

Striking a balance

The two countries have been able to balance their domestic agendas with achieving their shared broader goals of enhancing regional and global stability. For instance, their differing opinions on the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza crises have not impacted their bilateral ties nor slowed the momentum of their multilateral interactions. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's May 2023 visit to Japan¹⁶ for the G7 and Quad meetings underscored India's role in shaping discussions on global issues and enhancing regional security cooperation through Quad initiatives. India and Japan continue to be stabilising forces in advancing geostrategic coherence across the Indo-Pacific, with New Delhi being an indispensable partner for Tokyo's networked regional security outreach. The two have also extended their cooperation to developmental efforts in third countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, further cementing their bilateral strategic alignment.

Persisting Challenges

Gaps in economic ties

Existing trade imbalances and market access issues are affecting India and Japan's overall economic relationship. For instance, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) has yet to boost India's exports to Japan; trade deficits persist, and there has been no substantial improvement in trade indices.¹⁷ Market access issues, including non-tariff barriers and regulatory complexities, exacerbate the situation by impeding the flow of goods and services between the two nations. Reviewing the India-Japan CEPA¹⁸ can address concerns and support small Indian producers while promoting Japanese language learning, and easing visa restrictions will boost service exports and citizen exchanges. Given India's manufacturing and digital strengths, stronger economic ties will enhance the economic security of the region.

Managing Beijing

India and Japan share concerns about Beijing's assertive foreign policy, military expansion, and predatory economic strategies, which impact regional stability. Therefore, there is need for strategic coordination and balancing against Beijing through the alignment of bilateral as well as individual policies and actions effectively, especially in response to regional security dynamics and

in keeping with national imperatives. New Delhi and Tokyo have been simultaneously managing their economic dependencies on Beijing towards establishing and strengthening mechanisms to enable countries in the region to mitigate their economic and diplomatic risks.

Bureaucratic hurdles

Delays have impeded the translation of agreements into actionable outcomes. Overcoming administrative bottlenecks and streamlining decision-making processes are essential to accelerate progress and deepen cooperation in various sectors. Varied regulatory frameworks complicate joint projects and require extensive dialogue for alignment. Both countries need a stable policy environment to foster confidence and commitment, with long-term strategies and consistent policies aimed at mitigating political and economic fluctuations.

While challenges impede the realisation of the relationship's full potential, the overall trajectory of the relationship remains positive, with both nations committed to further enhancing their cooperation for shared gains and regional stability while supporting each other's aspirations as global partners.

II

India in Pivotal Geographies

South Asia

Prioritising the Neighbourhood

Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy and Shivam Shekhawat

The past decade has seen a significant shift in India's engagement with its South Asia neighbourhood. Under the Modi government's 'Neighbourhood First' policy, India has moved away from its preoccupation with Pakistan to focus on the bigger security threat that is China.

Key Trends

In the last ten years under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India pushed for increased connectivity, opened itself to extra-regional powers, and more seriously confronted China's challenges. These trends can enable India to leverage new opportunities with its neighbours in the coming years.

Shifting away from preoccupation with Pakistan

India has decoupled itself from Pakistan and shifted its attention towards China. Immediately after coming to power in 2014, the Modi government initiated positive engagements with Pakistan.¹ However, the relationship declined after the Uri and Pathankot attacks and the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. Consequently, New Delhi shifted its attention to other regional and sub-regional initiatives such as BIMSTEC in order to engage with its neighbours, circumventing the obstacles to regional integration posed by Pakistan. At the same time, clashes with China at Doklam in 2017 and Galwan in 2020² compelled New Delhi to strategically and militarily refocus on its other border. It has also become increasingly concerned about China's growing influence in the South Asian region.

Increasing cooperation with partners in the region

The South Asia region has seen an increase in the activities of extra-regional powers like the United States (US), which aim to serve as alternatives for regional countries in order to counter China's influence. India has become more receptive to these powers and demonstrated a willingness to work with some of them, especially its Quad partners. In 2022, Nepal ratified the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact with the US,³ which aims to improve road quality and facilitate cross-border electricity trade between India and Nepal. The US is also assisting in the development of the West Container Terminal in Colombo.

Making a case for connectivity

As a key aspect of India's Neighbourhood First policy, connectivity has become integral to the country's outreach in the region. The government remains committed to enhancing regional integration by refocusing its attention on connectivity and capitalising on India's ability to act as a bridge between countries. Countries in the region, in turn, have responded well. In January 2024, India signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Nepal for the export of

10,000 MW of electricity to India from Nepal.⁴ The two countries also signed a tripartite power trade deal along with Bangladesh, under which Nepal will supply up to 500 MW of hydropower through Bangladesh using India's transmission lines.⁵ New Delhi has also focused on sub-regional initiatives to increase connectivity.

Persisting Challenges

Partisan foreign policy

Partisan foreign policy in the region is fuelled by domestic politics, nationalism, and China's increasing footprint. Parties like the Bangladesh National Party, Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist), Progressive Alliance of the Maldives, and Sinhala parties in Sri Lanka have compounded the challenge on multiple levels. Domestically, these parties continue to criticise India-friendly regimes and politicise Indian projects and initiatives to promote nationalist sentiments and appease their voter base. Geopolitically, they use China to embolden their anti-India stance and reduce—or, in some cases, reverse—their engagements with India. Despite India's increasing accommodation of these parties and their pro-China tilt, New Delhi's stable neighbourhood policy and connectivity efforts remain at the mercy of elections and new governments in the region.

Entry of extra-regional players

India's openness to extra-regional players in its neighbourhood may not be beneficial. In the last few years, countries in the region have been receiving attention from India, China, and other new players, which has created new opportunities, trade, and development partnerships in the South Asian region. This can strengthen the agency of these countries and lessen their dependence on India. The changing dynamics in the region are reflected in Russia's outreach to Pakistan,⁶ the US's outreach to Bangladesh⁷ and Sri Lanka⁸ despite concerns of democratic backsliding, and the Maldives' increasing relations with China, Türkiye, and the US.⁹

Climate change

Climate change is likely to be the most important long-term challenge in South Asia, as it is with the rest of the world. In the last few years, the region has witnessed an increase in floods, droughts, glacier bursts, and ocean warming, which will have strategic repercussions for India. These climate change-induced events affect food security in the region and could promote illegal fishing, especially between Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and India. Pressures on water sharing, especially in the case of India-Nepal, India-Bangladesh, and India-Pakistan, will exacerbate existing irritants. Furthermore, as smaller countries continue to face the impacts of climate change, India's connectivity and mega infrastructure projects might become more politicised and receive harsher criticism for damaging local ecosystems. India will also be expected to increase its facilitation of renewable energy trade and play a more proactive role in dealing with climate challenges.

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Indo-Pacific

A Strategic Embrace

Sayantana Haldar and Abhishek Sharma

Over the past decade, the Indo-Pacific region has moved to the centrestage of Indian foreign policy. In 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated India's views on the 'Indo-Pacific' framework in a speech at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore.¹ The prime minister referred to the Indo-Pacific as a "natural region", one that is free, open, and inclusive in the pursuit of opportunities for progress and prosperity. In this context, some key trends and challenges that continue to guide India's focus on the Indo-Pacific merit attention.

Key Trends

ASEAN Centrality

India's Indo-Pacific outlook bears certain continuities in its broader strategic and security objectives. Since 2014, India has made significant efforts to reinvigorate its engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by elevating its 'Look-East' policy to 'Act-East'—a

critical bedrock of India's view of Southeast Asia in its broader Indo-Pacific outlook. Importantly, a key dimension of India's Indo-Pacific outlook pertains to positioning ASEAN at its heart. Modi's emphasis on locating cultural and civilisational linkages at the core of its push for ASEAN centrality has remained a cornerstone of its Indo-Pacific outlook.

Towards the Pacific

As India moves the Indo-Pacific to the mainstream of its foreign policy and security thinking, the country is broadening the geographic scope of its strategic footprint. Indeed, historically, the Indian Ocean has served as a key theatre in the pursuit of India's strategic interests; in more recent years, New Delhi has increasingly sought to deepen its strategic engagement in the Pacific. This has been operational in two ways. First, India has expanded its activities as a maritime security player in the Pacific, primarily in the South China Sea region. Second, New Delhi has shown keenness on engaging more extensively within the Oceania and Pacific islands states. It has elevated the country's

ties with Australia to one of ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’; initiated the creation of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation; and bolstered its engagements with middle powers in the Indo-Pacific such as South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Japan.

Maintaining Strategic Autonomy

A distinctive feature of India's approach to the Indo-Pacific pertains to the remarkable continuity in its efforts to maintain strategic autonomy, a normative objective of its foreign policy. Historically, India has refrained from joining full-fledged military or diplomatic alliances in order to exercise strategic autonomy in its foreign policy. This was evident in Modi's articulation of India's views of the Indo-Pacific as a theatre of opportunities and not a grouping directed to dominate against any nation. For India, cooperation and collaboration have remained within the realm of strategic partnerships aimed at pursuing issues of common interest. However, despite the overarching emphasis on cooperation, critical challenges have remained in certain domains.

Persisting Challenges

An Absent Multilateral Approach

The institutionalisation of multilateral and regional initiatives in the Indo-Pacific has received little attention from New Delhi. In these efforts, a particular focus on maritime multilaterals and multilaterals requires greater synergy. Multilateral initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) require reinvigoration. The absence of strong regional maritime institutions and multilaterals poses challenges to security and stability in the region. It impedes Indian foreign policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific, primary of which are promoting multi-alignment and strengthening regionalism, both rooted in India's vision for a multipolar Indo-Pacific region.

Deficiencies in Defence Diplomacy

Defence diplomacy is an area that India has yet to explore. Although some positive developments with Indo-Pacific states have taken place, as in the case of the Philippines,^a challenges remain

a Amidst ongoing tensions in the South China Sea, India delivered BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to the Philippines as part of a deal signed in 2022.

in adding momentum to efforts for collaboration with like-minded countries in areas of maritime security, joint military exercises, and defence cooperation. The decision to deploy new defence attachés in countries of strategic significance like Djibouti, the Philippines, and Mozambique is a first step that could foster military-to-military relationships and defence cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.²

Securing the Neighbourhood

The Indo-Pacific, with its large maritime geography, requires an approach rooted in strategic partnerships. India needs to manage its maritime neighbourhood much more actively while engaging non-resident states with shared democratic values and mutual interests. A holistic partnership will help safeguard India's interests in its neighbourhood and counter any domestic spillovers to the economic and security domain that may pose a serious challenge to India's interests in the IOR.

Conclusion

Being a vital stakeholder in the maritime security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region, India has been one of the first responders to both conventional and non-conventional security challenges confronting its neighbours. It has played a critical role in keeping the sea lanes 'free and open' for all countries in the region, as displayed in the Red Sea crisis which started in November 2023.^b

However, as challenges increase both in near and extended maritime neighbourhoods, India will have to step up its Indo-Pacific cooperation directed by its Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision, Indo-Pacific outlook, and Act-East policy by further strengthening and engaging with like-minded maritime partners, keeping the Indo-Pacific secure and stable for all.

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^b In November, 2023, Houthi rebels hijacked an Israeli cargo ship in the Red Sea area in an effort to express solidarity with Palestine amidst the ongoing war in Gaza. This caused major disruption in the shipping routes for trade, adversely affecting interests pertaining to energy security.

The Middle East

Reviving Lost Momentum

Kabir Taneja

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, over the past ten years, India's relations with the Middle East, particularly its partners in the Arab world, have witnessed a meteoric rise. This is the result of cooperation across areas, from economics and politics to security and governance.

Within this context, India's relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) stand out. Since 2015, Modi has visited the UAE seven times. Beyond the UAE, Modi's visits to Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Israel, Iran, Jordan, and even Palestine (Ramallah) have lent a level of personal leadership to a region where such gestures make an impact.

From an economic perspective, India's founding role in geopolitical architectures such as the India-Israel-US-UAE (I2U2) minilateral and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) herald a new era of cooperation between the two regions.¹ Under Modi, the Gulf has been

increasingly viewed as a viable long-term economic and political partner in a global order that is in need of an overhaul.

Key Trends

Upturning Geoeconomics

For India, economic growth is paramount, considering both domestic challenges, such as poverty, and geopolitical challenges, such as being situated between two erratic nuclear states, Pakistan and China. Gulf economies, which have three wealth funds more than or close to the US\$1-trillion mark, are critical partners in achieving this growth.² A number of these funds come from the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia and are already investing in the 'India story', with an appetite for deeper connections in the future.

Revising global governance and multilateralism

India and the Gulf states are in agreement in certain aspects of their vision for the future of global governance. India and the UAE, among others, believe that an overhaul is imminent, specifically of the post-Second World War architecture of the United Nations Security Council. Within this context, both India and the Gulf states view themselves as centres of influence within a multipolar order. Cooperation is therefore considered to be a natural progression.³

Security with a difference

While India's security and military cooperation with Arab partners has become more robust over the past decade, the other two 'poles of power', Israel and Iran, have contributed to the opportunities and challenges to this cooperation. India is Israel's top export destination for defence, anchoring the national security ties of both countries. With Iran, the Chabahar Port and the North-South Transport Corridor as well as access to Afghanistan and Central Asia are core common interests. The Taliban-run interim government in Afghanistan announcing a US\$35-million investment in Chabahar Port highlights Iran's

importance to India.⁴ New Delhi views Iran from the perspective of, primarily, its 'neighbourhood first' policy, and only thereafter within the context of its Middle East policy.

Persisting Challenges

Rebuilding momentum for I2U2 and IMEC

The ongoing Israel-Hamas war has posed a setback to both I2U2 and IMEC. While there are some exchanges, institutional development is at a standstill. Getting momentum back into these projects will be a complicated exercise, demanding political capacities from the highest offices.⁵ However, partners in India and Europe can take the lead to enable Gulf states to catch up as geopolitical realities ease.

Managing the Iran-Israel shadow war

The Israel-Iran shadow war has resulted in geopolitical and geoeconomic uncertainty in the region. Although seemingly a regional issue, it has pan-regional consequences, as witnessed in the Red Sea in the past few months, where the Indian Navy deployed significant capacity to provide cover to commercial shipping and combat increasing piracy off the east African coast.⁶

Big-power contestations

Positioning India in global geopolitics is going to be hard work, as highlighted by India's Minister for External Affairs S. Jaishankar on multiple occasions.⁷ While China remains India's primary strategic challenge and the US its main developing strategic partner, managing multipolarity within a bipolar order of power between the US and China will test New Delhi's diplomatic and

political acumen, determined by factors such as maintaining its relationship with Iran. The successes of the past decade have predominantly been on the bilateral level. Therefore, the future of India's success in the Middle East will largely depend on its management of multilateral fissures and unilateral opportunities, underscored by real-world, pragmatic, and efficient economic and political deliverables.

Africa

A New Heft

Samir Bhattacharya

Historically, Africa has taken precedence in India's foreign policy. In the past 10 years, the Modi government has shown an unprecedented commitment to strengthening India's long-standing ties with Africa, demonstrated by more than three dozen high-level visits and the opening of 18 new diplomatic missions across the continent.¹

When the prime minister addressed the Ugandan parliament in 2018, he outlined ten Guiding Principles² for India-Africa engagement; it represented India's first true "Africa Policy". It is an Africa-driven strategy, establishing the principle of "Africa for Africans" as the cornerstone of India's future relations with the continent. India's commitment towards Africa found its highest expression when in September 2023, under India's presidency, the G20 included the African Union (AU) as a permanent member of the grouping.³

Key Trends

Trade and Connectivity

Trade has long been a pillar of India-Africa relations, and in the last 10 years, the value of this exchange reached almost US\$100 billion, representing a growth of 9.26 percent in the financial year 2022-23.⁴ Particularly, since 2018, there has been a significant upward swing in India's exports (except during the COVID-19 pandemic), and in 2021-22, it surpassed all past figures.⁵ This can be attributed to the increasing awareness of Indian businesses towards the African market and various financial support schemes provided for export promotion by the government of India, especially towards Africa. This trend has helped India and Africa diversify their trade destinations and, in the process, mitigate their exposure to global volatility and adverse terms-of-trade shocks resulting from

conflicts in different parts of the world. India also initiated a comprehensive developmental strategy, emphasising maritime connectivity through SAGAR.⁶

Knowledge Diplomacy

India stepped up its knowledge diplomacy with Africa by opening Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras in Zanzibar and a National Forensic Sciences University campus in Uganda.⁷ Another important element of India's knowledge diplomacy in Africa is telemedicine and teleeducation. To make it more accessible to African people, India launched a pan-African e-Network Project. In October 2019, India also developed e-Aarogya Bharati, a web-based platform designed to widen the reach of medical education; it has benefitted 15,000 African students so far.⁸ India has strengthened Africa's capacity in the areas of health and education through these initiatives.

Security Cooperation

In the past four years or so, India-Africa security cooperation has grown, presenting unparalleled potential.⁹ India provides regular trainings to military personnel in various African countries and the two sides are also increasing their marine cooperation. The first field exercise uniquely for

African countries, dubbed "AFINDEX," was held in Pune in the state of Maharashtra, in March 2019.¹⁰ The first India-Africa Defence Ministers' Conference (IADMC) was held in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, in February 2020 as part of the DefExpo military exhibition. Through IADMC, the Modi government institutionalised India's defence cooperation with Africa. India has also prioritised the manufacture of defence equipment. Mauritius, Mozambique, and Seychelles emerged as the top three importers of Indian weapons between 2017 and 2021.¹¹ This indigenous Indian defence technology will undoubtedly benefit other African nations as well.

Persisting Challenges

Lack of a 'whole-of-Africa' approach

The modus operandi of India's engagement with Africa is bilateral and a "whole-of-Africa" approach to addressing different African-related concerns is conspicuously missing. India needs to chalk out a continental or regional strategy and coordination agenda to interact with Africa as the continent prepares for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Incorporating multiple facets of diversity

India must consider the multifaceted diversity of the continent while engaging with Africa. India would be facing massive challenges in determining its strategy in engaging at the pan-Africa level with different governments of the continent, which are at different stages of development, while also taking into account the different social and cultural aspects.

Time for the 4th India-Africa Forum Summit

While the AU's admission into the G20 could offer India an additional platform for engagement at the continental level, it cannot replace the India Africa Forum Summit (IAFS), India's unique and exclusive outreach initiative for the continent.¹² The last summit took place in New Delhi in 2015. In the short term, India must host the fourth summit, building on the achievements of the previous summits and catering to the requirements of the evolving multipolar world order.

Conclusion

With a US\$3-trillion GDP, Africa is home to a number of the fastest growing economies in the world.¹³ Moreover, with a median age of 19, it is a youthful continent.¹⁴ Africa will make up around 25 percent of the world's workforce, approximately 600 million by 2030 and, consequently, will be a massive consumer market. Similarly, as the world's fifth largest economy,¹⁵ India also enjoys goodwill among the people of Africa, owing partly to initiatives like the International Day of Yoga, the International Solar Alliance, and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. India views Africa as its neighbour beyond the horizon, and in the future, their cooperation will be critical for each other's growth story.

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Central Asia

India's Strategic Pivot

Ayjaz Wani

The establishment in 1991 of India's diplomatic relations with the five Central Asian Republics (CARs)—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan—marked a significant shift in its foreign policy. In 2012, India's 'Connect Central Asia' policy was created as a response to escalating great-power contestations. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, India's relations with Central Asia have acquired reach and depth, reflecting the region's growing security significance beyond the strategic, economic, cultural, and political domains.

PM Modi's first visit to the CARs in 2015 was a success, resulting in the signing of 22 agreements in defence, military cooperation, culture, trade, and tourism. The visit paved the way for many high-level exchanges at bilateral and multilateral forums, including the 'India-Central Asia Dialogue' at the Foreign Ministers' level in 2019 and, finally, a summit between the presidents of CARs and Prime Minister Modi in 2022.

Key Trends

Direct Connectivity

Despite progress in India's relations with the CARs, there remain challenges, particularly in connectivity, primarily due to the China-Pakistan alliance and China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Yet, Prime Minister Modi's emphasis on the need for direct access to the hydrocarbon-rich Central Asian markets, bolstered by resilient, reliable, and diversified supply chains, remains a source of hope for regional stability. His efforts to expedite work on the Chabahar Port project and the Eastern Corridor of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)—a vital link connecting Mumbai directly to Central Asia via Chabahar—have been commendable. India's decision to join the Ashgabat Agreement in 2018 to counterbalance China's assertion to facilitate connectivity within Eurasia and synchronise it with INSTC and Chabahar Port is a significant step in this direction.

Unlike China's BRI, India's quest for better connectivity to the region is premised on territorial integrity and upholding the sovereignty of the member states. The CARs perceive connectivity projects initiated by India (such as the Chabahar port) as a game changer for the region.¹² With India's sustained economic growth, the Central Asian countries consider it a crucial player in the Eurasian region.

Convergence on terrorism

An advocate of counterterrorism convergence with Central Asia, Prime Minister Modi has raised state-sponsored terrorism issues within the region. The Central Asian leaders—bilaterally and through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)—have also echoed India's concerns against terrorism in the region. India effectively unmasked Pakistan's covert state support of terrorism, making the CARs rethink their approach towards Islamabad. India's counterterrorism policy, which focuses on promoting regional cooperation, intelligence sharing, and capacity building, has been instrumental in addressing terrorism in the region. India's counterterrorism approach received a stamp of approval from the Central Asian leadership in 2022 when all the regional leaders ignored Pakistan's invitation to the Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Countries in Islamabad and chose to attend the third India-

Central Asia Dialogue in New Delhi, as the dates of the two events coincided.³ Additionally, agreements on counterterrorism, security cooperation, and defence between India and the CARs showcase the deep inroads made by New Delhi during the last ten years.

Growing engagement on Afghanistan

India has maintained its official position on Afghanistan, advocating for “an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled process for enduring peace and reconciliation.”⁴ India's consistent support, focusing on infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and capacity building, has fostered the trust of the Afghan people. The Taliban government, too, has recognised India's positive and people-centric approach and welcomed India's proposed US\$25-million developmental aid package for Afghanistan.

The CARs have voiced their support for India's approach to Afghanistan and recognised it as a balanced and constructive stance that could contribute to regional stability and peace. The leaders agreed to continue their close engagement on Afghanistan and established a joint working group at the senior officials' level.

Persisting Challenges

China's growing influence amid Russia-Ukraine War

Russia's focus on Ukraine and its waning influence in security and defence in Central Asia has given China an advantage in Central Asia. The war in Ukraine has created a promising situation for Beijing's foreign policy objectives amid growing tension with the West. Beijing's efforts to promote its governance model, security doctrine, and surveillance techniques could have far-reaching consequences on India's interests in the region. Beijing has increased its defence sales to the region. Over the years, increased connectivity and the completion of gas and oil pipelines have multiplied the trade between China and the Central Asian countries, growing from US\$24.7 billion in 2015 to US\$70 billion in 2022.⁵

Growing threat of terrorism

The region is marred by terrorism given its porous borders and proximity to Afghanistan. In the wake of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, global terror outfits like the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) seized the opportunity to revitalise itself and establish a presence in the

CARs. The growing geopolitical contestations and Israel-Hamas conflict, particularly the ongoing strife in Gaza, have sparked calls for Jihad in the region.⁶ Given the dysfunctional legal system, widespread corruption, and authoritarian governments, the increasing terrorist recruitment in Central Asia poses a security threat to the entire Eurasian region.

Minimal trade and investments

Though India has expedited connectivity with the region, the trade between New Delhi and the CARs remained minimal. Indian investments have enormous potential in Central Asia and are crucial for security, connectivity and trade. Indian tech firms and startups can do wonders in the fields of IT, healthcare, and education. This can counter Chinese influence and will grow India's stature in the region, strategically and economically.

Latin America

In Search of a New Dynamism

Hari Seshasayee

Political will and renewed dynamism in bilateral trade have given a fillip to India-Latin America ties over the past decade, with 2022 seeing the highest level of bilateral trade¹ as well as an unprecedented eight visits to the region by India's foreign minister S. Jaishankar in the past three years. India's relationship with Latin America over the past decade has been characterised by three specific trends.

Key Trends

Heightened political will

India-Latin America ties have historically been underpinned by economy and the political relationship has come second. This trend is changing, however. Since 2021, India's foreign minister has visited eight countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region, including the first ever bilateral visit by an Indian foreign minister to Paraguay, Colombia, Panama, and the Dominican

Republic.² Such heightened political will has been reciprocated through ministerial visits to India from Latin America.

Trade restructuring

In 2014, India's bilateral trade with Latin America stood at US\$49.03 billion. Trade fell to a low of US\$28.4 billion by 2016 and plateaued until 2020. However, India-Latin America trade has experienced a subtle restructuring after the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, India-Latin America trade peaked at US\$50.61 billion; compared to 2014, India's exports to the region increased by more than 50 percent. Imports, particularly of crude petroleum oil, decreased following the US's secondary sanctions on Venezuela. This dynamism in trade can be attributed to increased India-Brazil trade, an uptick in commodity prices, and the re-ordering of global edible oil trade due to the Russia-Ukraine war.

Renewed bilateral ties

For most of the 20th century, the geographical distance between India and Latin America posed an obstacle to deeper bilateral ties. However, this distance has been bridged by globalisation and increased trade linkages as well as platforms like the Voice of Global South Summit and the G20. India's bilateral relationship with the three G20 Latin American countries—Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico—are now managed directly by India's foreign minister, whereas they were previously under the purview of the Minister of State for External Affairs.

Persisting Challenges

Despite positive trends in India-Latin America ties, challenges persist.

Outdated perceptions

India and Latin America are still in the process of “discovering” each other. Indians continue to see Latin America in outdated ways—i.e., if an Indian is even remotely aware of Latin America, they would likely still describe the region as a land of military coups and skyrocketing inflation, or else a land of football and salsa. Yet, today, the majority of Latin American countries are democracies

facing economic challenges that are familiar to India. Most Indians would perhaps also not be aware that Latin America has a GDP per capita of US\$20,760—more than double that of India's US\$10,120. Similarly, while Latin Americans are becoming more familiar with India, especially due to the increased coverage of India by international news outlets, misconceptions related to India's poverty and a nostalgia for its civilisational past persist.

Commercial obstacles

The lack of free trade agreements (FTAs) between India and Latin America is a disadvantage to their ties; the India-Chile and India-Mercosur agreements are preferential trade agreements that are narrow in scope and need to be expanded. An India-Peru FTA that is likely to be signed in 2024 or 2025 could provide some optimism. The lengthy, indirect shipping routes between India and Latin America is also a persisting challenge, as is the lack of financing options for companies interested in doing business.

Political momentum

It remains to be seen whether the recent increase in political will between India and Latin America will continue through the next decade. Although India is already in the global spotlight, the Indian political establishment remains preoccupied with

matters closer to home, especially within Asia. It remains to be seen whether New Delhi will continue to deepen its political relationship with Latin America.

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III
India
and the Global Order

The UN and WTO

Negotiating for the Global South

Angad Singh Brar

India has a consistent, entrenched faith in the United Nations (UN)-led multilateral structure and the trading architecture enabled by the World Trade Organization (WTO). The decade beginning in 2014 witnessed three meta trends in India's engagements with these two multilateral institutions. India ideated its vision for more democratic multilateral institutions while actively negotiating for the Global South. The decade also saw India continuing its deep engagement with the UN and WTO as a multilateralist, despite structural disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the US's withdrawal from agencies like the UNESCO and UNRWA and disruption of WTO's dispute resolution mechanism.

Key Trends

Defending multilateralism

India became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) for 2021-2022 after 184 out of 192 member states supported its campaign. As the president of the UNSC in

August 2021, India adopted the 'New Orientation for a Reformed Multilateral System (NORM)' as an overarching approach to realise a multilateral system that represents all stakeholders.¹ India convened an Open Debate in the Security Council on NORM and mainstreamed the concept of a participative and credible multilateral system into global discourse. India also hosted a virtual Global South Summit in January 2023 to highlight the need for a more fair global governance setup.²

India has also been working to assert the centrality of the WTO in international trading. It opposed the adoption of Joint Statement Initiatives (JSIs) at the 2017 Ministerial Conference as they bypassed consensus-based decision-making that remains the hallmark of a trading system hinged on the WTO.³ This year, India partnered with South Africa to successfully oppose⁴ the addition of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement into the WTO as the agreement was negotiated outside of the WTO ministerial mandate.⁵

Negotiating for the Global South

The decade 2014-2024 saw India increasingly becoming a voice for countries of the Global South. India navigated its own rise in the global order while speaking for the aspirations of developing countries. In 2015, the Paris Agreement adopted a bottom-up approach where contributions from developing countries were “nationally determined” and not imposed by the Global North. India mediated between the North-South divide as a member of both the G77 and the G20, and negotiated the inclusion of the principle of ‘Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities’ (CBDR–RC) in the agreement.⁶

Beginning in 2024, India has adopted a similar stance as it negotiates the Plastics Treaty under the aegis of the UN Environment Programme by stressing on the inclusion of CBDR while facing resistance from European and other Western countries.⁷ A similar Global South-oriented strategy is also being implemented in the case of negotiations on the Global Pandemic Treaty at the World Health Organization (WHO) where India seeks equity among developed and developing countries in Pathogen Access and Benefit-Sharing (PABS).^{8,9} Such stance continues India’s partnership with African countries at the WTO where they demanded waivers of intellectual property rights so as to enable local production of COVID-19

vaccines and an inclusion of provisions ensuring technology transfers by developed countries, to which the Global North still shows resistance.¹⁰

Deep institutional engagement

The past decade saw India’s engagement with the UN deepening while the United States under the Trump administration exerted pressure on the multilateral governance architecture. India got elected to at least 23 UN bodies, including the International Seabed Authority (ISA) Council, International Law Commission, International Court of Justice, and Executive Board of UN-Women. In 2017, India launched a US\$100-million ‘India-UN Development Partnership Fund’, the first single-country South-South cooperation initiative at the UN.¹¹

India also succeeded in getting the International Solar Alliance registered with the UN as a treaty-based intergovernmental organisation in 2018, and in 2021, campaigned at the UN General Assembly for granting the alliance an Observer status at the UN. It increased its stake at agencies like the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and gained a seat in its governing body, the Advisory Commission, by increasing annual support to US\$5 million since 2018.¹²

At the same time, India's multilateral engagement faces three core challenges, as outlined ahead, which will continue to affect the country's policy space while it navigates the workings of global governance institutions.

Persisting Challenges

Geopolitical strains

Geopolitical strains remain a key challenge to India's realisation of a reformed multilateralism. The period between 2014-2024 saw deep fissures breaking out between the now dyadic Russia-China, and the Western world. These, coupled with India's border dispute with China, have impeded pathways towards consensus and cooperation at the multilateral front. This is seen in the incidence of coordinated voting patterns of Russia and China at the UNSC, particularly targeting the rules-based multilateral order designed by the West.¹³ At the WTO, India has itself adopted a less cooperative stance towards China by questioning its status as a developing country.¹⁴

A fissured Global South

As a multilateralist negotiator, India faces a steep challenge as the voice of a unified Global South as Brazil broke ranks with it in 2019 by giving up its status as a developing country at the WTO. India's stance against plurilateral negotiations at the WTO is also at odds with a substantial number

of developing nations. In the case of the UNEP negotiations on the Plastics Treaty, India's stance is at odds with that of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) as these states want the treaty to regulate the entire life-cycle of plastics,¹⁵ while India maintains that plastics pollution arises from inefficient disposal of plastics and not from plastics production.¹⁶ India's reluctance to link environment and trade at the WTO also puts it at odds with these states. India must walk a tightrope while negotiating its own national interests as it also upholds the broader interests of the developing world.

Balancing multilateral shockwaves

Navigating global cooperation at a juncture where the US rethinks its commitment to multilateral institutions like WHO, WTO, UNESCO, and UNRWA, will remain a key challenge for India's multilateral policy. The US threw the WTO's Appellate Body into a paralysis in 2019 as it blocked appointments to the body. In the case of UNRWA, the US posed an existential threat to the multilateral agency by suspending its funding twice in the last seven years.^{17,18,19} WHO and UNESCO also witnessed a temporary US withdrawal during Trump's presidency.²⁰ In an event of a return of the Trump administration, India must strategise towards cushioning against such multilateral shockwaves.

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Climate Diplomacy

Domestic Challenges, Global Leadership

Aparna Roy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration has been praised by the United Nations¹ for taking affirmative action to mitigate and adapt to climate change and working towards environmental security. According to the 2023 Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI), India is the only G20 country on track to achieve its climate targets.²

India has launched three global collaborative platforms, highlighting how climate action can be effectively aligned with development goals. The International Solar Alliance was established in 2015 for the enhanced deployment of solar energy technology;³ the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), launched in 2019, aims to build resilience into infrastructure systems;⁴ and the 'Lifestyle for Environment' (LiFE) mission of 2021 encourages community engagement and lifestyle modification.⁵

The reconstituted Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change, which is aimed at streamlining efforts to address climate change, highlights the government's revised approach to climate action since 2014.⁶

Key Trends

Three key trends highlight the evolution of India's climate diplomacy over the past decade.

Leading a just energy transition

India has surpassed its target of achieving 175 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2022, with a capacity of over 190 GW as of 2024.⁷ This growth has been largely supported by solar and wind power. India's revised targets include reducing emissions intensity by 45 percent and generating 50 percent of its electric power from non-fossil-

fuel sources by 2030.⁸ India also aims to achieve net-zero emissions by 2070.⁹ The country has further committed to ensuring a fair and equitable clean energy transition, particularly in developing countries.

Despite progress in reducing its carbon footprint and improving energy access, India's energy sector has the highest share of carbon emissions in the country, making India the third largest emitter globally.¹⁰ As the fastest growing developing country, India's energy mix remains carbon-intensive, with coal accounting for approximately 70 percent of electricity generation.¹¹ Unlike developed nations, which have mature greenhouse gas (GHG) infrastructures, India is yet to build its GHG inventory.¹² Encouraging energy-efficient development with high renewable-energy penetration could minimise new demand for oil or coal. In order for India to serve as a template for a low-carbon growth model that other emerging economies can replicate, the incoming government will need to address this gap and secure more financial and technological resources to improve its targets.

Reimagining future cities and infrastructures

Globally, India is the third most vulnerable nation to natural disasters. Extreme climate events have led to infrastructure losses exceeding US\$48 billion in the country in recent decades. India's economic loss from climate extremes

have increased by¹³ 45 percent in the last two decades.¹⁴ Many of India's infrastructure projects, such as those under the Gati Shakti Yojana, which aim for integrated planning and fast-track implementation of infrastructure connectivity projects,¹⁵ are expected to last for at least 50 years. The impacts of past and present climate change are estimated to persist for a century,¹⁶ affecting India's infrastructure development. The launch of the CDRI in 2019 arose from a recognition of the scale of the challenge and with the aim of protecting vulnerable infrastructures and economic progress from climate extremes.

The adoption of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) has improved productivity and reduced carbon emissions across development sectors in India.¹⁷ At COP28, Prime Minister Modi and Sweden's Prime Minister H.E. Mr. Ulf Kristersson initiated Phase II of the Leadership Group for Industry Transition (LeadIT 2.0) for 2024-2026.¹⁸ The initiative aims to promote inclusive and equitable transition within industries, facilitate the co-development and transfer of low-carbon technologies, and provide financial support for industry transitions in emerging economies. They also introduced the Industry Transition Platform to foster collaboration among governments, industries, technology providers, researchers, and think tanks.¹⁹ India can

contribute to enhance the technological capacity of vulnerable regions by developing market rules and physical infrastructure, promoting climate-compatible development, and enabling the high penetration of new and emerging technologies.

Unifying role at climate negotiations

Over the last decade, India has played a responsible and unifying role at COP negotiations and in defining the “rule book” for implementing climate actions.²⁰ Modi has consistently advocated for the developed world’s commitment to provide technology and finances for climate action to developing countries. Mobilising adequate finances to implement mitigation and adaptation efforts is crucial for securing the long-term interests of developing countries and creating a global unified response to climate change.

Persisting Challenges

Lack of a decentralised approach in international climate governance

Global climate negotiations emphasise mitigation while overlooking essential adaptation measures and mechanisms critical for developing countries, such as addressing loss and damage. Developing nations also need to prioritise building resilience in

their development gains to withstand the impacts of climate change. India needs to reshape its climate diplomacy in foreign policy, moving away from a state-centric to a decentralised approach that addresses the specific resilience and adaptation requirements of diverse communities, particularly in developing and least-developed countries.²¹

Archaic principles and power struggles

International climate change politics is influenced by material structures, archaic principles, and power struggles,²² which impede the collective efforts for climate change mitigation and adaptation that are essential for bridging financial and technological disparities among nations. Despite growing attempts to collaborate on climate action, geopolitical and geoeconomic divisions persist; one example is the United States’ withdrawal from climate initiatives, which has affected overall collective advancement.

Collective efforts for securing the interests of the most vulnerable

India could create a framework that reflects local, regional, and national efforts on projected risks and policy requirements.²³ This framework should focus on securing the interests and voices of the

most affected communities and transforming global climate politics by highlighting strong bottom-up policy frameworks at the international level. While progress is being made in alignment with the Paris Agreement, a more concerted approach is required, especially in developing countries, where socio-economic, political, and ecological variables are less clear.²⁴ As a leader in global climate governance, India needs to create

frameworks for other developing economies to foster climate-compatible development, lead energy transitions, and reduce socio-economic disparities and technological divides.²⁵

(This article derives from: Aparna Roy, 'Climate Change Agenda' in Harsh V Pant and Kabir Taneja, Eds., "Looking Back and Looking Ahead: Indian Foreign Policy in Transition Under Modi," *ORF Special Report No. 93*, July 2019, Observer Research Foundation.)

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The Global Nuclear Order

Steadfast Commitment to Disarmament

Kartik Bommakanti

The global nuclear order has experienced both gains and setbacks. From India's standpoint, the gains have come from United Nations (UN) resolutions relating to nuclear disarmament. Over the last decade, India has upheld its longstanding position that it supports only universal, non-discriminatory, and verifiable nuclear disarmament. India has also continued to garner support for its membership to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Finally, a tripolar nuclear competition between the United States (US), Russia, and China has emerged.

Key Trends

Nuclear Disarmament

On 5 December 2013, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) unanimously adopted Resolution 68/32, which declared 26 September every year, beginning 2014, as the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.¹

The resolution further called for raising public awareness about the threats and dangers posed by nuclear weapons and securing the “common goal of nuclear weapons-free world.”² Despite Resolution 68/32 being passed when the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) was in power, the Modi government, which took office in May 2014, has commemorated the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons every year since 2014, upholding India's consistent and consensus-based support for global nuclear disarmament at the UN and in the Conference on Disarmament (CD).

NSG Membership

Over the last decade, India has gained increasing support for its membership to the NSG, as indicated by joint statements between India and NSG member states³ during Prime Minister Modi's foreign visits. Even the People's Republic of China

(PRC) expressed interest in engaging in civilian nuclear cooperation with India between 2015 and 2019,⁴ prior to the ongoing border crisis between China and India. While New Zealand, Turkey, and Austria are resistant to India's membership,⁵ the PRC remains adamantly opposed to India's entry into the NSG unless Pakistan is also granted membership as both countries are non-signatories to the NPT.⁶

Tripolar Nuclear Contest

The expansion of the PRC's nuclear capabilities has strategic consequences. Beijing is accumulating a large nuclear arsenal⁷ and is believed to have the world's fastest growing nuclear stockpile. Despite its moratorium on nuclear testing since 1996, China likely conducted sub-critical nuclear tests at its Lop Nur nuclear facility, as indicated by its refusal to share data from its International Monitoring Stations (IMS) with the International Data Center,⁸ which falls under the aegis of the Preparatory Commission of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) in breach of its obligations. In late 2023, it became evident that the PRC was preparing for additional tests at the Lop Nur nuclear test range.⁹ While the emerging tripolar nuclear contest between the US, Russia, and the PRC has implications for India, New Delhi under the Modi government has not expanded India's nuclear arsenal.

Persisting Challenges

Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)

India has made it clear that it will not support initiatives like the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).¹⁰ It refused to participate in negotiations involving the TPNW and opposed being party to the Treaty, reiterating its longstanding position that it only supports universal, verifiable, and non-discriminatory disarmament. While 160 countries supported the Humanitarian Initiative under the TPNW, the remainder opposed it or abstained, comprising all nuclear-armed states and their dependent states, including most North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries.

INF Treaty

In August 2019, the US withdrew from the Cold War-era Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The move was welcomed by many of the US's NATO allies who feared Russia's nuclear capabilities. Russia's conduct since 2014, especially in Ukraine, reinforced the necessity of abandoning

the INF Treaty and compelled the US and its NATO allies to begin developing and deploying short- and medium-range missiles. While the US under the Biden administration has sought to revive nuclear arms control with Russia, the latter has demurred. Moscow views Washington as attempting to exploit its current weakness arising from the Russia-Ukraine war and thus refused to de-link broader tensions with the West for nuclear arms control.

Nuclear Threats

In the last decade, New Delhi under the Modi government has opposed nuclear threats made by nuclear-armed states such as Russia; for instance, New Delhi has discouraged Moscow and its adversaries from using nuclear weapons during the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. As India's defence minister Rajnath Singh stated to his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu, "The prospect of the usage of nuclear or radiological weapons goes against the basic tenets of humanity."¹¹

Emerging and Critical Technology Moving to the Centrestage of Diplomacy

Sameer Patil

In the past decade, technology, particularly critical and emerging technologies, has played a prominent role in India's global engagements. The country is actively seeking partnerships with advanced tech powers such as the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) through platforms like the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) and the Trade and Technology Council (TTC).^{1,2} This approach is aimed not just at strengthening international partnerships but also enhancing domestic tech capabilities and positioning India as a provider of digital public goods to the world. India's tech diplomacy is not limited to major powers but extends to the Global South and emerging economies, which are emerging as vibrant hubs of tech activity and are key players in the digital domain. This inclusive approach to tech diplomacy positions India as a rule-maker, and not just a taker, in the evolving landscape of global tech governance.

Key Trends

Harnessing bilateral tech partnerships for self-reliance

Since 2014, India has strengthened its relations with tech powers, which has facilitated its access to advanced technologies. An example is the India-US partnership, which spans several critical and emerging technologies and was solidified with the signing of iCET in May 2022.³ The agreement mobilises innovation communities in both countries to develop key technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, advanced wireless, high-performance computing, space technologies, biotech, and next-generation telecommunications.

Stronger tech ties with the US, in turn, have paved the way for India to sign similar agreements with US allies, including the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, and France. India has also activated the TTC mechanism with the EU.⁴ These strategic partnerships unlock India's access to advanced technologies while fostering domestic innovation in critical sectors like semiconductors, strengthening the *Aatmanirbhar Bharat* goal of self-reliance.

Participation in tech-focused minilaterals

In the last decade, New Delhi has expanded its engagement with minilaterals, primarily concentrating on tech cooperation. For instance, Quad cooperation on technologies has been evolving since 2017, ranging from research for developing 5G/6G technologies and quantum computing to determining the standards for emerging technologies.⁵ Likewise, the I2U2 grouping combines the innovation ecosystems of India, Israel, the UAE, and the US to develop solutions such as green and climate-smart technologies.⁶ These minilateral forums have allowed India to cooperate with other countries on technology without entering into full-fledged alliances.

Fostering global conversations on the responsible use of technology

Even as New Delhi pushes for strategic partnerships, it has appreciated the need to shape global conversations on the responsible use of technology. Consequently, it has taken the lead in prioritising these issues in the diplomatic agenda. At the G20 Digital Economy Ministers' Meet in Bengaluru in August 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed developing a framework for the safe and responsible use of AI.⁷ This idea also featured in the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration in September 2023.⁸ Indian diplomatic officials have also repeatedly advocated for responsible state behaviour and legal frameworks in cyber affairs to maintain cyberspace stability.⁹

India's Digital Public Infrastructure highlights this, with the open-source, interoperable stack being pitched to countries seeking to harness digital tools for national economic development.¹⁰ India has also advocated for 'accountable tech' in the operations of Big Tech and social media platforms—i.e., tech companies must be accountable to the geographies they serve.¹¹

Persisting Challenges

Polarisation between major powers

The US-China tech rivalry and the broader polarisation between the Western and Eastern camps in tech and cyberspace poses a significant challenge. The two camps have fundamentally different visions of cyberspace governance, with the West advocating for a multistakeholder approach and the Eastern camp, led by Russia and China, preferring a dominant role for state actors. This polarisation has impaired India's diplomacy, especially its efforts to shape the responsible use of technology.

China's Digital Silk Road initiative

Through the Digital Silk Road (DSR) initiative, China has used its domestic tech capabilities and encouraged tech companies to influence developing digital economies in the Indo-Pacific and Africa with an aim to create a parallel tech empire.¹² China has also pushed this tech as a part of smart-city solutions within the Belt and Road Initiative. This has sparked concerns that Beijing is seeking to promote authoritarian uses of technology—a fundamentally agnostic vision compared to India's tech diplomacy, which promotes openness and inclusivity.¹³

Perception of 'digital sovereignty'

India also faces the perception challenge. Western observers often misinterpret its focus on accountable tech as a symbol of “digital sovereignty”.¹⁴ India's data localisation policy is also perceived as contrary to the principle of allowing the free and open flow of data. However, this Western perspective overlooks a crucial point: India and many emerging economies have economic development and societal goals distinct from those of the Western world and which shape their approach to technology.

These challenges notwithstanding, tech diplomacy has allowed India to shape a tech agenda that promotes a forward-looking vision for inclusive digital development and ensures that the interests of the Global South are protected. New Delhi is emerging as a responsible power that sits at the table of global conversations aiming to shape the tech domain in the coming years.

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Development Cooperation

A New Agenda in India's Economic Diplomacy

Swati Prabhu

Development diplomacy has witnessed an upswing in the last decade, with the shifting global order and revamping of strategic outlooks. Though development cooperation and aid usually highlight a traditional donor-recipient relationship, there has been an overhaul in recent times. Partnerships are now directed at creating cooperative frameworks for the socio-economic upliftment of developing economies.¹ However, countries also view these opportunities as ways to build diplomatic goodwill and increase outreach in the long run. In this context, India's role as a pertinent development partner has been globally recognised on multiple occasions.

New Delhi has been extending technical support, sharing its developmental experience, and building the capacities of other developing countries even before its independence. Its partnerships are demand-driven, organic, and need-based, distinct from Chinese and Western

models.² This is apt for the Global South, which is seeking a viable ecosystem for innovative solutions and long-lasting alliances.

Key Trends

Voice of the Global South

The vulnerability of low-income countries, least developed countries (LDCs), and small island developing states (SIDS) has been exacerbated by the ongoing polycrisis.³ The sustainability challenges for these countries in terms of financing for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has increased tremendously, from US\$2.5 trillion in 2020 to US\$4.2 trillion in 2023.⁴ In this context, India's support for the Global South was one of the key highlights of its G20 Presidency in 2023.⁵

Development takes centrestage

Traditional security debates have historically dominated global discourse. However, over the past decade, India has brought non-traditional security and development challenges into international focus. By initiating discussions around development during its G20 Presidency, New Delhi paved the way for inclusivity and equity towards reforming existing global norms. Leading the conversation on Southern-driven partnership, India is also offering low-cost development solutions as a viable alternative to the Western donor-led model.

Redefining economic diplomacy

India has been aiming to diversify its development diplomacy portfolio.⁶ While development partnerships have long been equated with economic diplomacy, India is rethinking its diplomacy model. In the past few years, New Delhi has signed multiple Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), such as the India-Mauritius Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA) in 2021⁷ and the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)⁸ and the India-Australia Economic Cooperation and

Trade Agreement (CECTA) in 2022.⁹ The most recent addition is the Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA) between India and the governments of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) states in 2024¹⁰ and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which was announced during India's G20 Presidency.¹¹ By establishing economic corridors and removing trade barriers, India is signalling its readiness to dive into the shifting currents of international markets.

Persisting Challenges

Tapping into philanthropy for development finance

One of India's foremost challenges is bridging the gap in sustainable finance. Recent trade deals will allow India to attract investments and finance, especially from the private sector. In 2022, total net private wealth stood at US\$454.4 trillion, which is expected to increase by 38 percent in 2027 to reach US\$629 trillion.¹² Philanthropy can steer additional finance for Agenda 2030, and India's diverse philanthropic circle is crucial in this regard.

Balancing security with sustainability

Geopolitics and geoeconomics are essential components of the current development landscape. India confronts an uphill task when dealing with countries in certain geographies, such as the Indo-Pacific, where resources are scarce and capabilities to access resources are limited.¹³ Formulating a strategy for this region will be paramount for New Delhi, with several countries attempting to boost their outreach while others in the region figure out how to effectively manage this interest.¹⁴

Connectivity is critical

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant breakdown of critical supply chains, bolstering connectivity has become critical. Connectivity in all forms, from physical to digital, is key for bridging the gap in sustainable development. Therefore, India needs to focus on building the ‘multidimensional resilience’ of developing countries through enhancing digital infrastructure, establishing low-cost energy pipelines, building transways and roadways, transferring electricity, and enabling people-to-people contact. This would also facilitate resilient and robust societies in the near future.¹⁵

Connectivity

Searching for Resilience and Reach

Prithvi Gupta

India's economic development in the past decade has been accompanied by a renewed focus on bolstering its global and regional connectivity, notably through the 'Act East' and 'Neighbourhood First' policies.¹ New Delhi's connectivity strategy focuses on building resilient supply chains, bolstering economic security and regional integration, and increasing the country's contribution to international trade.

Key Trends

India's neighbourhood focus, global connectivity endeavours with like-minded partners, and aid facilitation in its neighbourhood, are key policy trends that should continue into the second part of this decade.

Neighbourhood First

India's approach to achieving regional cohesion in South Asia involves building multimodal connectivity links. Bilateral economic cooperation through connectivity initiatives, grants, loans, LoCs, and consultancies has positioned the country as a reliable and resilient development partner in the region. Between 2014 and 2024, India provided financial support to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka through grants/loans and 37 LoCs worth US\$9.57 billion² and US\$14.4 billion,³ respectively. New Delhi's aid impacted 150 projects across critical sectors like power generation, transport and port infrastructure, oil and gas pipelines, and communications infrastructure.^{4,5,6} Resultantly, in 2023, India had the largest development portfolio in Bangladesh (US\$10 billion),⁷ Bhutan (US\$6.3 billion),⁸ and Nepal (US\$1.65 billion).⁹

Multifaceted development aid

New Delhi has also built social infrastructure in its neighbourhood. Under the High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) programme, the Government of India has completed approximately 1,250 projects worth US\$225 million in Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Nepal in the agriculture, rural and urban development, health, and education sectors.¹⁰ In the past decade, India signed 10 HICDP Memoranda of Understanding with these partner countries.¹¹ HICDPs are key to India's development assistance strategy. These grassroots projects emphasise local governance, capacity building, and participatory decision-making in beneficiary communities. They foster trilateral cooperation among local governments, Indian embassies, and communities, in alignment with each population's priorities. HICDPs also further infrastructure development, especially in border regions, towards improving the livelihoods of disadvantaged populations in India's neighbourhood.

Alternative transit corridors

Beyond South Asia, India's global connectivity ambitions envision a multimodal East-West Asia corridor going through South Asia. Connectivity linkages with the east through Myanmar, Thailand, and Bangladesh, and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)¹² and

International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)¹³ in the west are key to this ambition. India collaborates with like-minded countries to operationalise these alternative transit corridors. India's bid for resilient connectivity linkages includes the IMEC agreement signed during the New Delhi G20 Summit;¹⁴ the India-Iran Chabahar Port long-term operation contract,¹⁵ which is key for operationalising the INSTC; the development of the Sittwe port in Myanmar, instrumental for operationalising the Kaladan Multimodal Project;¹⁶ and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.¹⁷ These alternative transit corridors will diversify India's trade routes and supply chains to reach various destinations. For instance, the Chabahar route is a long-term alternative to the Suez Canal, and corridors with Southeast Asia will de-risk connectivity with ASEAN.

Persisting Challenges

To maintain its momentum, New Delhi needs to continue working with like-minded partners in South Asia and beyond while bolstering regional trade connectivity, countering the Belt and Road Initiative,¹⁸ and instituting bilateral reforms in project implementation.

Poor regional trade

India's challenges in regional connectivity are primarily economic. In 2021, trade among South Asian countries accounted for 5 percent of the region's total trade.¹⁹ Border tariffs and security issues make it cheaper for Indian companies to trade with South American countries such as Brazil than with its immediate neighbours. The World Bank estimates that South Asian trade is performing at half capacity.²⁰ A trust deficit among South Asian nations, fragile regional security, and the lack of effective regional Free Trade Agreements are issues that India will need to address alongside ramping up regional connectivity infrastructure.

Finance and implementation hurdles

India's overseas projects suffer from delivery deficits, slow implementation, and bureaucratic delays. Issues such as those related to land acquisition, difficult working conditions, statutory delays, visa issues, handover delays, inefficient dispute resolution mechanisms, and inadequate fund disbursement require bilateral redressal. These concerns have delayed, for example, the Nepal Police Academy project, the Nepal-India Integrated Check Posts, the Payra renovation project in Bangladesh, the Chabahar Port agreement with Iran, and the Afghan Salma Dam.²¹

The BRI conundrum

Chinese companies have developed considerable overseas infrastructure and addressed the problems that are being faced by India's overseas development. Beijing also incentivises trade in return for adding projects to the BRI portfolio. Between 2010 and 2024, China invested nearly US\$150 billion in India's neighbourhood and as of 2023, its completed projects' contract turnover in South Asia stands at US\$200 billion.²² China's major investments are in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka in the transport, energy, and finance sectors.²³ India's flanking neighbours—Pakistan (US\$73.4 billion) and Myanmar (US\$26.2 billion)—have received the lion's share of Beijing's South Asian loans and investments.²⁴

Chinese state companies also manage seven South Asian ports and 10 ports in the greater Indian Ocean region,²⁵ of which they built 11. Chinese state companies manage the crucial Hambantota and Gwadar ports in India's neighbourhood. Gwadar, while financially unviable, is located in the Gulf of Oman, an essential maritime corridor for India's energy security. Close to 235 million metric tonnes of oil worth US\$130 billion are imported to India annually through this route.²⁶

China's investments in India's neighbourhood are not limited to hard infrastructure. China also has stakes in the Dhaka and Karachi Stock Exchanges and settles trade with Bangladesh and Pakistan in Renminbi.²⁷ Chinese investments in India's neighbourhood need to be countered by New Delhi because they are strategic rather than economic and enhance Beijing's regional influence.

For India, the next decade will witness both obstacles and opportunities. In order to realise its connectivity ambitions, the country needs to address its internal challenges related to bureaucracy and finance, regional issues of political trust, and larger external challenges caused by geopolitical turbulence. ORF

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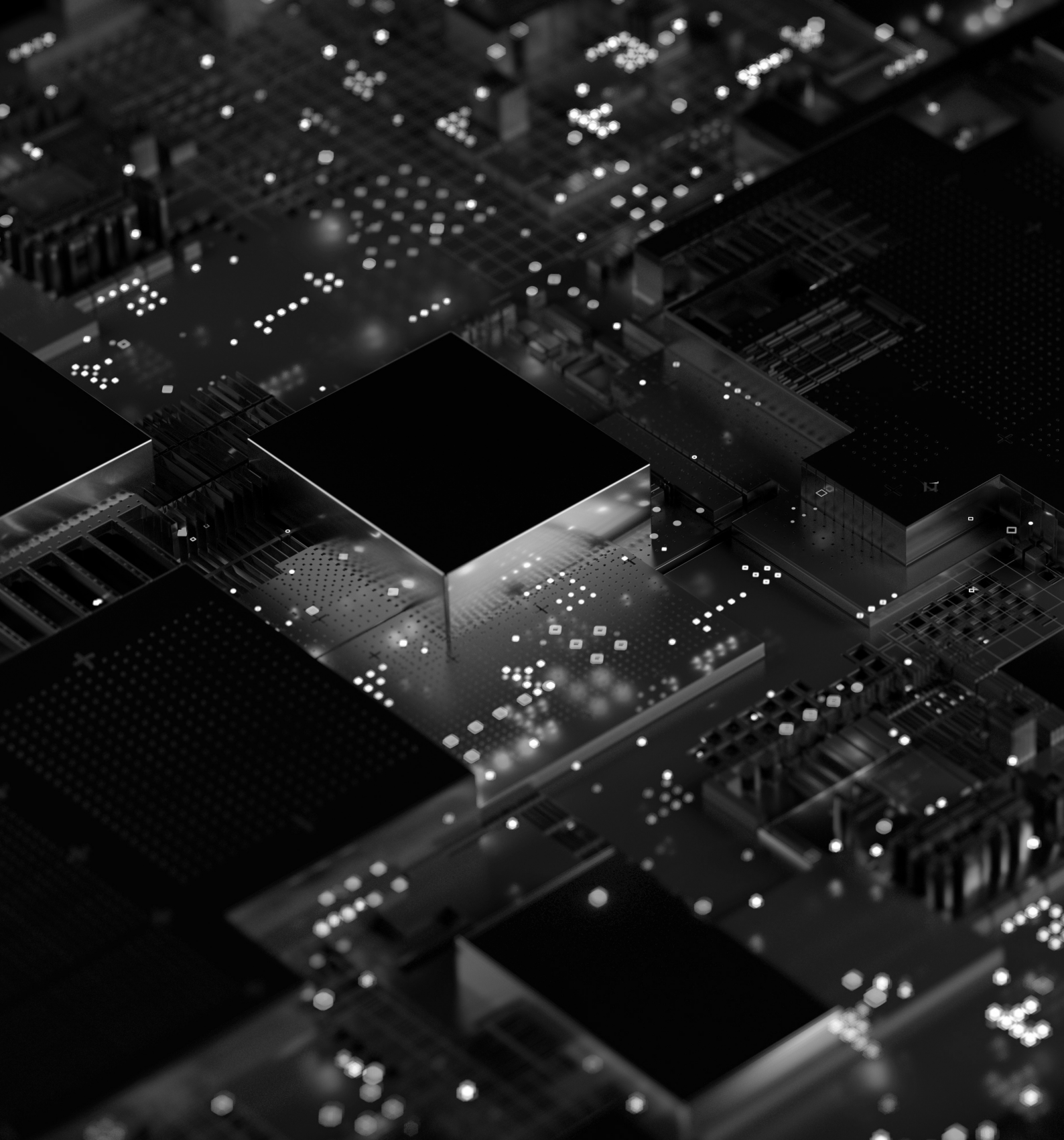
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