

India and the Indo-Pacific: Opportunities and Challenges in the Post-COVID Order

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In December 2022, the World Bank revised upwards its GDP growth forecast for India to 6.9 per cent for 2022-23,¹ underlining the fact that the Indian economy was showing higher resilience to global shocks. In its India Development Update, the World Bank said the revision was due to higher resilience of the Indian economy to global shocks and better-than-expected second quarter numbers. Earlier India had emerged as the world's fastest-growing large economy and replacing Great Britain as the world's fifth-biggest economy.² The long term trajectory of Indian economy seems set with India expected to emerge as the world's fourth largest economy, overtaking Germany, by 2027. It would be even more remarkable as of the four top economies, three are expected to be in the Indo-Pacific by 2027 – China, Japan and India.

Indian policymakers too have underlined India's emerging role as the "second most important driver of global growth after China" with India's growth financed primarily by domestic savings. Compared to 18 per cent for China and 16 per cent for the US, India's share of global GDP already stands at 7 per cent.³ This is happening at a time when the global economy has been facing negative headwinds as a result of rising food and energy prices, China's zero Covid strategy and Russia's senseless war against Ukraine. The Indian economy has continued to be resilient partly because of government intervention and partly because of its unique structure.

This is certainly not enough and, as has been pointed out by many, India's per capita income remains far behind nations that is overtaking in economic growth rates. And a sustained policy effort would be needed to ensure that the present trajectory continues and does not merely be seen as a post-Covid bounce. Serious reforms are needed to make India more investor friendly, particularly at a time when China has run out of favour. As investors seeks new venues, Indian policy makers should be bold enough to take advantage of this unique moment in India's political economy.

This economic trajectory of India also gives India a distinct place in global politics today. There is a reason why the West, despite its differences with India over Ukraine, has

continued to substantively engage with New Delhi. In fact, India's ties with the West have grown significantly amidst all the negative press India has received in the West. Where journalists remain prisoners of their short term outlooks, policymakers in the West recognise the real story – the rise of India as a credible geopolitical and geo-economic player in the 21st century.

Even as the courtship with the West continues, India has continued to maintain its partnership with Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to show to the West that despite western sanctions, he is not alone. He has the support of big powers like China and India. New Delhi wants to have its channels of communication open with Moscow, given their defence ties as well as regional security convergence. But also because New Delhi would like to make an effort till the last moment to ensure that China-Russia axis does not become a fool proof alliance. The future will be decided by how Russia fares in its war with Ukraine and India will have little control over the outcome but so long as the window is open, New Delhi is likely to continue to make this effort.

China too finds itself in a bind and India's stiff resistance to its aggressive pursuit along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) since 2020 has put paid to the Chinese Communist Party's narrative that its time has arrived. India's standing up to China has ignited a process of a broad pushback across the Indo-Pacific and beyond. And with a plethora of domestic challenges being faced by Beijing, there is once again a premium on internal consolidation.

India, as a consequence, finds itself in a "geopolitical sweet spot" that it should make the most of. In the past, New Delhi's inability to exploit the extant balance of power to its advantage cost it dearly. A prudent nation should be able to identify the opportunities in the existing structure of global politics and shape its external engagement accordingly in the pursuit of its interests. Pursuing unrealistic ideational constructs can often do more damage to a nation's standing.

For India today, the most serious challenge is the rise of China and how it has managed to constrain India's options. New Delhi's first priority in the coming years will be to internally consolidate its capabilities so that it can stand up to Beijing's aggression on a more sustained basis. This will have to be supplemented with building serious partnerships that are capable of adding value to India's growth story. As a large part of the world sours on China, there is a need to become an attractive partner. This will require making some choices – choices that

New Delhi has often been shy of making. The basis of these choices should not be to make world multipolar or enhance any chimerical strategic space. The only basis should be how these choices strengthen India's long term capabilities to emerge as a singular player on the global stage in its own right.

In its essence, this paper explores India's position in the Indo-Pacific in the post-COVID world order. It first focuses on India's challenges exploring ideas like great power competition, regional geopolitical tensions and economic slowdown, the prospect of deglobalisation, climate change vulnerabilities, and the potential weakening of the global multilateral order. Subsequently, this paper underscores the opportunities that lie ahead for India which include its rising influence in its neighbourhood, its contributions to global supply chain resilience, its G20 presidency and opportunities for economic diplomacy, its transition to renewables, the potential expansion of cooperation with the West, particularly the US, and most importantly, its emergence on the world stage as a global leader.

Challenges for India:

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on geopolitics in the region and globally. The effects of the pandemic led to a "freefalling" deterioration in US-China relations. Both China and the West have suffered tremendous losses due to the pandemic, China has emerged better off in relative terms. The West has taken a bigger hit in terms of its domestic crisis management, effective disease control, and economic performance. It has also suffered from a lack of leadership credibility in the developing world as experienced during the competition over vaccine doses between the global South and the global North.⁴

Notwithstanding these manifold challenges faced by the west, China's domestic mismanagement of its COVID response was substantially revealed by a major U-turn on its 'zeroCOVID'⁵ policy in early 2023. Followed by widescale domestic protests against Beijing's brutal pandemic measures in the latter half of 2022, the Chinese government buckled under domestic pressure and retracted its zero-COVID policy amidst a wave of rising domestic Omicron cases. This mismanagement led to certain Chinese cities reporting infection rates of nearly 90 per cent, with an estimated half a million deaths and a weakening overall economic outlook.⁶

Even though blaming China for domestic policy failures due to the public health crisis was primarily followed by the Donald Trump administration, the Joe Biden administration has

proven that the strategic competition will persevere. Not only has the rhetoric sharpened, but also expanded to a range of issues - technology, supply chains, human rights, defence, and trade. This has greatly fuelled China's "wolf warrior" diplomacy and confirmed the perceptions of being "contained" by the West.⁷ This has also convinced China that the power equilibrium between the U.S. and China is changing fast and China's rise is inevitable.

This great power competition has remained most notable in the Indo-Pacific where the United States (US) and its allies attempt to contain China's emergence.⁸ The growing importance of regional groupings like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the emergence of AUKUS (a trilateral between the United Kingdom (UK), USA and Australia), and the escalation of tensions in Taiwan, highlight several issues of strategic competition within the region.

India is wary of the expansion of Beijing's footprint in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the Indian Ocean, as it wishes to retain its traditional dominance in this geostrategic sphere. However, rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific and India's participation in the Quad and similar initiatives pose a two-fold challenge for India. On one hand, it risks escalation with China by getting drawn into silos in great power competition and on the other the increasing presence of extra-regional players in the region makes it difficult for India to claim the Indian Ocean region as its exclusive sphere of influence.

Notwithstanding this great power competition, the Indo-Pacific region is also rife with geopolitical tensions and crises that pose significant challenges for India. The military Junta coup in Myanmar and its subsequent bent towards China is one of the biggest challenges for India in the region. Myanmar acts as a lynchpin in India's Act East Policy. Therefore it is vital for New Delhi to engage with the Junta administration despite its support for democratic processes and regional stability. The other major geopolitical challenge facing India is the growing Chinese presence in the South Asian region. Instances of high-risk Chinese investments, soft power mechanisms, and debt trap diplomacy are littered across South Asia. Countering these developments and regaining lost political goodwill in South Asian capitals is thus high in New Delhi's priorities.

The Taiwan Strait crisis and the South China Sea conflict highlight the aggressive tendencies within China's One-China principle and its bullish behaviour in the Eastern Indo-Pacific. Not only does this raise tensions, lead to greater involvement of extra-regional players, and

disrupt trade supply chains (particularly the semiconductors supply chains), but also raises alarms for India about similar aggression on the LAC. Managing China's expansion within the region through alliances and strategic partnerships without risking full-blown conflict is the major test for India.

On the other hand, New Delhi also has to manage the ripples of the conflict in Ukraine. India has so far been successful in balancing its ties with both Russia and the West, however, the task is likely to get trickier with both sides digging in their heels. The war in Ukraine is also impacting fuel and gas prices in Asia and leading to inflation, energy shortages and high economic costs for energy-importing nations like India.

These factors have combined to further shackle the regional economic growth and cause an overall economic slowdown in the neighbourhood. Adding to this, the global inflation and spikes in energy prices have caused grave economic burdens on the economies of the region, many of which were already still struggling to cope with the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic. India's neighbourhood has been hard hit by this economic malaise. Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh have all sought IMF loans in the face of a foreign exchange crisis.⁹ Governments in Nepal, Bhutan, and Maldives are also experiencing such economic pressures and are trying their best to forestall a crisis situation like elsewhere in the neighbourhood.

Such instability continues to provide an opportunity for Beijing, which has had a longstanding interest in the region to gain more leverage, or tighten its grip on the reins, to gain geopolitical victories in the region. With China's looming shadow over South Asia, India's credentials as a regional leader in the subcontinent are threatened. Steering the region out of this instability is the paramount challenge in the short term for India and its own security and geopolitical calculations.

However, this will perhaps be challenging in the face of an economic deglobalisation which has only been further catalysed by the many by-products of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic and great power rivalry have worked to fast-track forces of deglobalisation by accelerating local production, shortening supply chains and increasing the crystallisation of camps/silos. Increasingly, nationalistic politics are also on the upturn in most parts of the world resulting in the protectionist and domestic orientation of national policies. This is a challenging development for New Delhi as its economy has benefited

greatly from globalisation, particularly its export of services and the inflow of FDI, which has led to a steadily growing GDP since the 1990s.

Thus, any acceleration of deglobalisation poses a challenge to India and its continued economic growth. While India's portfolio of services exports is likely to remain more resilient to deglobalisation as compared to the export of manufactures, its economic growth is likely to take a hit. Additionally, the solidification of the world into economic camps is another challenge for India. Especially considering, with its withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2019,¹⁰ India currently remains non-aligned to any regional trade bloc. Traditionally non-aligned in its foreign policy, India finds growing convergences of interests with the USA (particularly with regards to China), however, its partnerships with Russia and trade with China continue to be vital. Despite the Galwan crisis,¹¹ Sino-Indian trade has expanded over 27 per cent, rising from US\$ 71.66 billion in 2015 to US\$ 91.2 billion in 2022.¹² Avoiding hurdles to free trade would thus be one of the key challenges for India.

Added to this complex geopolitical environment is the reality of complex climate change vulnerabilities. The Indo-Pacific is the most populous region on the planet – and it is also the region which is most vulnerable to the impact of climate change. By 2050, many parts of Asia will see increasing average temperatures, heat waves, extreme precipitation and droughts.¹³ From Singapore to Seychelles, the littoral states in the region are faced with the threat of submersion, and loss of life and property. On the other hand, heat waves and droughts are resulting in food insecurity and the drying up of rivers in India and Pakistan among many other nations. The increasing militarization of the Indo-Pacific could also contribute to the undoing of climate change commitments and threaten marine ecosystems and fisheries.

For India the challenges in this domain are multifarious. Not only does India need to ensure effective governance of maritime resources, but it also needs to reduce its carbon emissions and ensure that the concerns of its island partners are addressed. As a major security provider in the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Navy also needs to take steps toward reducing its carbon footprint. Making this even more challenging is the backdrop of a dangerously weakening regional and global multilateral order.

The COVID-19 pandemic put a magnifying glass on the extant multilateral order, which was found lacking during the crisis. In the post-Covid landscape there has been an increasing tilt towards minilateralism and plurilateralism. The pandemic, Russia-Ukraine war, South China Sea maritime boundary disputes, and several other instances have showcased the limits of multilateral organisations and put their effectiveness up for debate. There is a more urgent push than ever for reforms of these institutions to make them more representative of contemporary global realities.

Although India has been an ardent supporter of multilateralism, it has at the same time also been seeking reforms like the expansion of the UN Security Council's permanent membership. The challenge that faces India in a weakening global order is two-fold; (1) to seek minilateral partnerships to ensure its strategic concerns are addressed outside of the multilateral order, and (2) to have a constructive voice in the reshaping of multilateral institutions in order to gain more leverage and reflect its emerging leadership on the global stage. New Delhi has been calling for a 'reformed multilateralism' through which the United Nations Security Council should reform itself into a more inclusive organisation representing the contemporary realities of today. India's demand for this structural overhaul of global multilateral institutions incorporates institutional accountability and a wider representation of the developing countries. Quite evidently, these several challenges and the transitioning global order present cross roads for India. It is imperative for New Delhi to effectively address these challenges and capture the potential opportunities that have been born out of them.

Opportunities for India:

Ironically one of the biggest opportunities for India has emerged out of the instability in its neighbourhood. With Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka all facing economic and security threats, India has the opportunity to extend an olive branch once again and reiterate itself as a reliable partner to these states. The current geopolitical and geoeconomic situation in South Asia can enable India to revitalise relations within its neighbourhood and check the inroads China has made in the past decade. Financial assistance to the Maldives and Sri Lanka, reviving the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and bilateral/trilateral dialogues within South Asia are some of the means through which India is attempting to attain this goal.¹⁴ Testament to India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy has been its conduct at the forefront of Sri Lanka's economic crisis. Not only did India

provide financial aid worth US\$ 4 billion over 2022, but it also was the first creditor nation to support Sri Lanka's debt restructuring by providing assurances to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which paved the way for Sri Lanka in securing its IMF programme.¹⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic also brought to the foreground the chokepoints in the globalised manufacturing and sourcing supply chains of major conglomerates around the world. By highlighting their extreme reliance on certain markets and countries for these needs, the pandemic has resulted in a greater desire for diversifying supply chains to make them more resilient to external shocks. India, as an emerging economy, stands to benefit greatly from such a transition. Not only does India provide companies with a large market in itself, but it is also endowed with an abundant young, educated/skilled, English-speaking labour force. India also possesses a substantive and heterogenous transport infrastructure which is one of the biggest in the world.

Accentuating these challenging conditions for global supply chains has also been the general disillusionment of the global economy and industry by Beijing's increasing opaqueness. India thus has the opportunity to attract manufacturing units of major companies that are seeking to make their supply chains more resilient. By offering a favourable, stable and secure investment environment to such companies India can boost its FDI and further galvanise its impressive economic growth.

New Delhi has steadily expanded its use and access to technology in spheres like defence, telecommunications, nuclear, emerging technology, high tech manufacturing, and space, and continues to partner with the West on the development of such strategic technologies.¹⁶ These include partnerships like the EU-India Trade and Technology Council (TTC) announced in 2022¹⁷ and the subsequent Indo-US initiative for Critical and emerging Technologies (iCET) signed in 2023.¹⁸ The former has a great focus on trade, green technology, and digital governance, while the latter aims to expand collaboration in security, defence, and emerging and critical technologies.

Furthermore, bringing India to the forefront has been its G20 presidency. India recently took over the mantle of the G-20 Presidency from Indonesia and is presented with a big opportunity to shape the agenda for global cooperation. The G-20 grouping accounts for more than 80 per cent of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 75 per cent of global trade,

and 60 per cent of the world's population.¹⁹ These underlie its importance, opening several possibilities for facilitating cooperation and tackling global issues.

India's presidency follows shortly after its emergence as the world's fifth-largest economy in the world. This fortuitous moment allows India to be at the helm of a troubled global order and advocate for New Delhi's brand of multilateralism. India is aiming to steer the diverging great powers back to the negotiating table at the G-20 and in so doing, it will be looking forward to bolstering its credentials as a leading power on the global stage.

India's G20 Presidency will be aiming to move the world away from polarisation towards a greater sense of solidarity. Its own reality of being a multicultural democracy should guide it well in bringing together highly diverse stakeholders to cogitate, and act, on global challenges. The theme of G20 India 2023—Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: One Earth, One Family, One Future—encapsulates India's conceptualisation of the global order and its own role in it.²⁰ And New Delhi has shown that it does not dwell merely on rhetoric. In 2020 as COVID-19 first surged, it insisted on the need for the international community to work together and help those struggling with the least resources even as developed nations focused inwards, some of them hoarding enough vaccines to inoculate each adult five times over.²¹

At a time of grave worldwide crisis, New Delhi has effectively used all the instruments and platforms available to India to make a case that instead of nations becoming more and more inward looking, global engagement should be the norm. This is also an attempt to fill the leadership vacuum in the global order when both China and the US have exposed their vulnerabilities. India has shown that a nation with limited capabilities can also emerge as a leader by outlining the concerns of like-minded countries and working with them to build capacities in smaller states.

The G20 is unique in so far as it brings together the developed and the developing nations to discuss and create solutions to global governance challenges. India can effectively bridge this divide by forging a consensus on key global issues. New Delhi has been vociferous in giving voice to the aspirations of the Global South, at a time when few global powers have neither the time nor resources to cater to the most vulnerable—occupied as they are with their own domestic woes. The pressures of global disruption are being absorbed most by the poorer economies and few powers are willing to consider their challenges with the seriousness they deserve. By hosting one of the highest-profile international gatherings ever at a time of great

turbulence, New Delhi is signalling its readiness to think big and deliver big—something that much of the world had long expected from India.

Another great opportunity lies in India's transition to renewables. The current hike in fossil fuel energy prices that have been brought about by the Russia-Ukraine War has forced energy import-dependent countries to rethink their acquisition strategies and future energy security. The heavy financial strain of energy imports has stumbled several economies in South Asia. Reconfiguring the energy mix to add significant renewable sources has thus emerged as a major priority. In such an external climate where the benefits of renewable energy to the economy and security of the nation are apparent, India has the opportunity to push its green energy initiatives to the masses with greater vigour. India is working judiciously to reach its 2030 commitments and spearheading global initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance while championing the cause of developing nations at climate summits.

A serious reorientation of India's energy mix away from fossil fuels will likely provide resiliency to the economy and reduce geo-political dependencies. Increasingly, there is also more momentum around the cause of climate change around the world and greater availability of climate finance. Therefore, presenting India with an opportune moment for advancing its green energy transition and emerging more energy secure in the post-covid geo-political and geo-economic landscape.

More generally, a growing convergence of interest with the USA in particular and the West in general also marks a significant opportunity for India. As much as the great power rivalry risks dragging India into either of the camps, it also provides India with a useful counterbalance. The improvement of defence and security partnership with the USA is a crucial means for India to offset Chinese belligerence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific since assistance from Russia in this domain is less forthcoming. It also allows India to reduce its over-reliance on Russian military hardware. On the other hand, India's geostrategic location and its economic rise serve as important levers to counter Chinese growth. This effectively allows India the strategic manoeuvrability to pursue an independent foreign policy guided by its own national interests, while allowing it to reap the benefits of greater cooperation with the west.

For India, this is an important moment in regional political evolution. In its 75th year after independence, its centrality in the wider Indo-Pacific is today well-established. New Delhi

wants to play a “leading role” in the international system so that it can shape global outcomes, rather than merely being a recipient of the frameworks set by others. In the Indo-Pacific, a large part of its foreign policy today is to find opportunities in a challenging environment to shape global outcomes. One of the ways in which India, along with others, have responded to this is to push the envelope on building issue-based coalitions amongst like-minded nations. The plethora of minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific today underscore the stark void in this vast geography when it comes to institutionalisation. And in the absence of major power consensus, the ideas of middle powers like India have found greater receptivity.

The Indo-Pacific Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the Quad, involving the US, Japan, India and Australia, has the been most talked about platform in this regard. Its dramatic resurrection since 2017 and a growing profile has conveyed a new sense of purpose to the wider region, reassuring some and creating anxieties for China.²² With two summit level meetings in 2021, one virtual and one in person, within a matter of six months, the agenda of this nascent platform has been widening to include some of the most critical issues of our times such as vaccines, emerging strategic technologies, infrastructure connectivity and maritime security. But it is the commitment of India, Japan and Australia that ultimately convinced the US to invest in this initiative.

Yet, even as India is setting up new terms of engagement in the wider Indo-Pacific, the evolving South Asian landscape has meant maintaining stable relations with old partners like Russia. New Delhi understands the critical role Russia plays in the regional and global balance of power. India hosted the regional dialogue on Afghanistan in November 2021, which saw Russian participation with Iran and the Central Asian Republics. The convergence on Afghanistan and the threats emanating from there is remarkable given that Moscow was quite supportive of the Taliban in the initial days. There is quite a distance from wanting to see the Americans out to managing the negative externalities emanating from the Taliban takeover. And not surprisingly, Russia has moved closer to Indian assessment of the regional security.

As the global structural realities undergo a fundamental transformation with the rise of China and its assertive pursuit of its ambitions, both Moscow and New Delhi are trying to figure out their responses. Despite the Cold War historical legacy, Russia has moved quickly to cement ties with China. India, too, has witnessed the withering away of the ‘hesitations of history’

when it comes to the US and the wider West. Unlike in the past, India's growing weight in the global order ensures that its ability to navigate great power politics is much stronger now.

As it balances China's rise and builds a strategic partnership with the US, India remains keen to invest in a stable relationship with Russia. The India-Russia engagement of today is responding to today's geopolitical imperatives, not of the past. Devoid of yesteryear's sentimentalism, this is a relationship that is grounded in pragmatism, which ensures that while New Delhi can do little about Moscow's gravitation to Beijing, it can insulate its own burgeoning ties with the US from the overweening presence of Russia.

India's past diffidence in making certain foreign policy choices is rapidly giving way to greater readiness to acknowledge the need for a radical shift in thinking about internal capability enhancement by leveraging external partnerships. Non-alignment is finally giving way to a 'new balance' in crafting partnerships that can serve vital Indian interests.

All these factors discussed above have contributed to India's emerging credentials as a leading power on the global stage in the post-COVID global order. India has continued to witness steady economic growth, helped fellow nations in economic and public health emergencies, emerged as a global commons provider through its vaccine diplomacy, taken up the mantle of global agenda setting in key domains, championed the cause of the developing world in multilateral institutions and pursued an independent foreign policy in times of great power rivalry and conflict. Time and again, these have proven India's resolve to contribute and foster a stable multilateral international order that provides benefits to all. In doing so, India's ascent as a global leader is apparent. The current global disarray and future challenges are likely to provide India with further opportunities to cement this status.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a watershed moment for the global order. The post-COVID international landscape has been marred by increasing geo-political and geo-economic tensions. In the Indo-Pacific, an emerging theatre of global competition, several of these have culminated to present India with a series of challenging questions. These include navigating great power rivalry, conflicts, economic crises, deglobalisation, and adverse climate events, all against the backdrop of a weakening multilateral order.

However, each of these challenges is equally offset by opportunities for India. Most notably these include the chance to regain trust and leverage in its neighbourhood, gain from the relocation of global supply chains, expand cooperation with the west, push its agenda for clean energy transition and solidify its credentials as a global leader while steering international discourse and cooperation. Successful navigation of these challenges and opportunities by India in the Indo-Pacific could thus elevate its status in the global order and ultimately provide it with crucial strategic gains.

This is an inflection point for the global order and for India. India is on the cusp of achieving something dramatic: not only a top-tier economic power that is also a multicultural democracy but also a top-tier geopolitical player that can lead, not simply balance. The choices that New Delhi will make over the next few years will define the contours of that rise.

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²¹Harsh V. Pant and Anant Singh Mann, 'Medical Diplomacy | India Underlines Its Credentials as a Responsible Global Leader', *Moneycontrol*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/opinion/medical-diplomacy-india-china-covid19-who-aid-a-responsible-global-leader-5410381.html>.

²²Harsh V. Pant and Anant Singh Mann, 'India's Malabar Dilemma', *Observer Research Foundation*, no. ORF Issue Brief No. 393 (August 2020), <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-malabar-dilemma/>.