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## India's Quest for Multipolarity

By P. S. Suryanarayana

### SYNOPSIS

*A constellation of great and major powers, each with or without allies and partners, is India's preferred configuration for a potential rebalancing of today's world order. The search for multipolarity of this kind seems to be Delhi's strategy to overcome China's opposition and become a peer role-player in global politics.*

### COMMENTARY

INDIAN PRIME Minister Narendra Modi hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin in Delhi on 6 December 2021, four days before participating in US President Joe Biden's 'Summit for Democracy'.

In so doing, Modi signalled India's strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the United States and its designated adversary, Russia, which saw Biden's call for democracy as a polarising international ploy. Delhi is also engaging Beijing, a rival neighbour, despite their ongoing military crisis and despite Biden's focus on competition as the main highlight of his China policy.

### Norms for a Niche Role

Besides strategic autonomy, India considers its democracy as a legitimate asset for a niche position in a potential multipolar world. Addressing Biden's video-linked summit on 10 December, Modi said "[the democratic spirit is integral to our \[Indian\] civilisation ethos](#)". His assertion was based on the historical evidence of a few pockets of republican polities in ancient India. Unlike China, which argues that "[\[t\]he US is not a beacon of democracy](#)", India does not contest America's democratic credentials.

In Beijing's current worldview, US ambition for global leadership "[violates the democratisation of international relations](#)", too. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi

expressed this view at a video-linked ministerial meeting of the Russia-India-China (RIC) forum on 26 November 2021. Hosting the meeting, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar criticised Beijing for its actions which, in his view, prevent the emergence of a world order in tune with today's realities.

In a tweet attributed to him, Jaishankar said: "UN reform is being blocked using a smokescreen of consensus as the only way forward. As a result, [the international community is being denied its democratic rights](#)".

Decoded, Jaishankar's case was that China's constant campaign for universal consensus for United Nations reform would hurt the interests of many including India. They can achieve their aspirational roles through the democratic will of a majority under the UN Charter, instead of waiting for no-objection messaging from every member. This forms the crux of Modi's drive for new globalisation.

### **India's Apple Cart at the UN?**

Urging a reform of the UN Security Council, India seeks the kind of role which the existing permanent members enjoy in that apex forum. If successful in this endeavour, Delhi believes, it can enhance its political and strategic relevance to globalisation.

India seems to hope that its aspiration will not threaten Washington's and Moscow's core positions in the future strategic globalisation. To ensure this, Modi seeks good relations with both America and Russia.

However, the apple cart of Indian aspirations at the UN might be toppled in circumstances beyond Delhi's control. Not clear, at this writing, is whether the US will impose severe sanctions on India for buying Russia's high-tech S-400 air defence system.

If the US triggers sanctions, in disregard of India's strategic autonomy, both countries will need to rethink their relations for the longer term. Another factor that could determine or undermine the prospects of India-friendly multipolarity is the unsettled Sino-Indian relationship.

### **A Call for Decentralised Globalisation**

In economic globalisation, China has in recent years acquired unprecedented centrality of power and initiatives. In the eyes of countries like India, such centralisation has not fostered the diversified global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Disappointed, Jaishankar has, therefore, drawn attention to "the dangers of over-centralised globalisation" in "economic terms". In his view, "[a world of more decentralised globalisation](#)" could ensure resilient supply chains to meet future crises. Supply chains and COVID-19 vaccines, besides new technologies and climate change are on the agenda of the Quad, which comprises the US, Japan, India and Australia. However, even before the first in-person summit among the Quad leaders, Beijing denounced the forum as "[a small clique against China](#)".

It is difficult to imagine the Quad as a 'pole' in its own right in a future world order. The

US is still the central 'pole', with unmatched strategic and economic strengths and with allies around it, in the existing system. There is no multiplicity of major players in the present global dispensation.

As America's allies, Japan and Australia will, therefore, have a delicate choice to make if they wish to see the emergence of a large multipolar world. India is alone among the Quad countries in seeking a multipolar system that could reflect today's realities.

China is already one among the few dominant 'poles' in the current global pecking order. During the continuing worldwide COVID-19 crisis, too, Beijing's centrality to a potential global economic recovery is evident.

### **Nuances of Seeking Multipolarity**

The almost complete rise of China as an economic and strategic powerhouse seems to drive Modi's foreign policy choices. Delhi is convinced of Beijing's unwillingness to endorse India's 'rightful' place in a global order. Their unsettled equation across their bilateral military and economic spectrum also limits India's influence.

Jaishankar has, therefore, criticised "[the untenability of unilateralism from whichever quarter](#)". This is a code for, firstly, the US domestic laws to impose sanctions on other countries, and, secondly, India's perception of Beijing's oriental unilateralism with Chinese characteristics.

A case in point is Delhi's opposition to Chinese President Xi Jinping's active promotion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor without consulting India. The corridor passes through areas that India deems as its sovereign domain.

The art of diplomacy is to resolve or rise above intractable differences. For India and China, therefore, Russia's continuing promotion of the RIC forum could be useful. Beijing makes common cause with Moscow vis-à-vis the US right now.

Modi, too, may look for Russian support if Delhi's ties with Washington worsen. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has actually called for "interaction" among the RIC troika for "creating a fairer and more democratic multipolar order".

However, it will be difficult for Modi to rely on Russia, China's close partner, to stabilise and normalise the Sino-Indian relations. India is caught between the RIC and the Quad. A high degree of composite national power and skilful diplomacy will be needed to make the best of both these forums.

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