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Strategies for an Uncertain World: Indian Perceptions and Responses

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SYNOPSIS

*Although the United States has successfully overcome COVID-19 and shown, through its response to the Ukraine war, that it remains a formidable global force, Indian policymakers remain sceptical about its reliability as a security partner. On the other hand, Indian policymakers are concerned that Russia's long-term decline as a result of the Ukraine war could push Moscow deeper into Beijing's embrace, which would be inimical to Indian interests. **SINDERPAL SINGH** fleshes out these Indian perceptions and the policy responses arising from them, notably building middle power coalitions.*

COMMENTARY

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war have brought unprecedented changes in global politics. For many, both these events mark the beginning of a key epoch since the end of the Cold War. For Indian policymakers, these events have caused increased uncertainty in Indian foreign policy, but they also offer India certain opportunities.



In the face of unprecedented global events such as the pandemic and the Ukraine war, India has much to consider in shaping its foreign policy. *Image from Unsplash.*

The United States Is Back ...

The United States' ability to continue playing a leading role in global affairs came under much scrutiny, specifically during Donald Trump's presidency. The administration's seemingly chaotic response in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as President Trump's apparent drive to roll back earlier US global commitments signalled, to many, the United States' declining influence globally. This was compared to China's early handling of the pandemic, which had then been considered a success of state policy. President Trump's increasingly strained relationship with US allies, specifically those in Europe, was also contrasted with China's seeming success in making more inroads into countries outside East Asia. However, the Biden presidency significantly reversed these trends. The United States managed to gradually return to relative normalcy while China remained stuck in a zero-COVID policy that continued to impact its economy, raising questions about the success of Chinese state policy.

However, the Ukraine war and the US response to it fundamentally changed international perceptions about the United States' ability and will to exert influence globally. The longer the conflict dragged on, the clearer it became, specifically to Indian leaders, that Europe needed the United States to defend the continent. The earlier European misgivings about the United States were put aside as Washington increasingly demonstrated that it was key to the defence of the European continent. In this instance, the United States seemed, in Indian perceptions, to have demonstrated once again that it was a decisive force on any major global issue it chooses to be part of. For Indian leaders, this was a positive development. Indian leaders since Manmohan Singh have staked domestic political capital to radically transform the India-US relationship. The Narendra Modi government continued that trend and in fact significantly upgraded the bilateral relationship, specifically in the defence and security realms, within the context of its own increasingly deteriorating relationship with China. Indian leaders will thus continue to invest in improving the bilateral relationship given the United States' demonstrated ability and will to come to Ukraine's aid and commit to Europe's defence. India's future, from New Delhi's point of view, lies with the United States and its allies, both in Europe and beyond.

... but Remains an Unreliable Security Partner

The United States might have re-emerged as the only power able to decisively defend Europe but prior apprehensions about the United States' reliability as a security partner persist, especially in India. Lingering memories of the Biden administration's hasty exit from Afghanistan six months prior to the Ukraine war could not but have reinforced scepticism among Indian political leaders about the reliability of US security partnerships. Indian leaders' response to this perception has been to actively invest in coalitions with like-minded middle powers, both in broad terms and in specific issue areas. The Quadrilateral Initiative (QUAD), which brings together two middle powers apart from India into a coalition with the United States, is just one example in which India has invested significantly over the past four years. Indian leaders also seek to build coalitions without the United States necessarily being party to them, such as the trilaterals with France and the United Arab Emirates, with Australia and Indonesia, and with Australia and France. In addition, India is attempting to build broader coalitions in functional areas to deal with the threat from China. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) is a key example of Indian attempts at building loose functional groups in the maritime security domain to counter China without necessarily confronting it. The IPOI has been strongly pushed by Indian officials and think-tanks, especially within Southeast Asia, in order to get a larger group of countries to be part of such coalitions that do not always include the United States.

Managing Russia's Long-Term Decline

Indian leaders recognise that Russia will experience relative long-term economic, political and military decline as a result of the Ukraine war. They also appreciate that India's long-term economic and strategic needs will be best served by closer links with the United States and Western Europe rather than Russia. However, they also worry about the implications for India with Russia's decline over time. In addition to short-term considerations related to the ability to acquire weapons parts as well as cheaper energy supplies from Russia, Indian leaders fear the implications of a declining Russia pitted against the United States and its allies in Europe. One possible implication would be Russia's increasing dependence on China, both economically and militarily. China remains India's single biggest external threat, and increasing Russian dependence on China will entail significant negative implications for India. Indian leaders have decided not to publicly criticise Russia, in part to provide a declining Russia with diplomatic and strategic options besides China. At the very least, they hope to prevent a Russia-China strategic partnership, which can be utilised against Indian interests. At the same time, Indian leaders are able to demonstrate a certain level of strategic autonomy despite the country's growing military and strategic relationship with the United States and its allies. This position is useful domestically as well as it resonates with certain political constituencies, especially as India's general elections loom in 2024.

As chair of this year's G20 summit, India is very keen to use this platform to reduce Russia's diplomatic and economic isolation as much as possible. New Delhi understands that this is going to be an uphill task, but it will aim to demonstrate, to Moscow at least, that India continues to be a friend to Russia even with its close relationship with the United States and its allies. This will become an increasingly

difficult position to maintain as the conflict in Ukraine drags on but at this point, it seems to be the best position for India's leaders.

Conclusion

In the words of India's foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, an uncertain world provides India with both challenges and opportunities. India's leaders are seeking both to build on the country's growing relationship with the United States as well as extend India's own global presence beyond this relationship through various coalitions with other countries that have their own apprehensions about China's intentions and behaviour. India's key challenge will be dealing with Russia's long-term decline, which could have negative impacts on India. It will aim to ensure that Russia's long-term dependency on China is reduced, at least to the extent that a Russia-China strategic partnership does not impinge negatively on Indian interests.

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