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## **India's Quest for a New Worldview**

*By P. S. Suryanarayana*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*In seeking a new worldview, India established a techno-strategic partnership with the United States in June 2023. Delhi also engaged China and Russia in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in July while preparing to host the leaders of the G20 countries in September. And with France recognising India's relevance in future global governance, Delhi's quest for a new worldview received a further boost.*

### **COMMENTARY**

China and India – the world's oldest and most populous nations – see themselves as indispensable players in any process of crafting a new world order in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With the United States and China locked in a fierce competition to lead future global governance, Washington and Delhi are drawing closer to face Beijing's challenge.

US President Joe Biden and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, meeting in Washington on 22 June 2023, agreed on the outlines of a bilateral techno-strategic partnership. For Delhi, long tied to its norm of strategic autonomy, the new partnership marks a leap of faith in the US which wants to remain second to none as the global hegemon. As for Washington, the reliability of Delhi as a partner has yet to be tested.

*High Tech Is Foreign Policy* – this was the title of a 1989 article by former US Defence Secretary Harold Brown (cited by Chris Miller in *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology*, 2022). Both Washington and Delhi seem to regard this as a mantra for their new strategic connectivity.

### **Logic Behind the US-India Techno-Diplomacy**

A calibrated shift from rigorous strategic autonomy to high-tech connectivity with the

US seems to mark the beginning of India's quest for a new worldview. In the past, Delhi often avoided bilateral links that could have led to a binding alliance with any big power.

Delhi sought Washington's military assistance during the Sino-Indian war in 1962 and signed an India-Soviet treaty in 1971 to safeguard against a perceived US-China-Pakistan challenge. Those were exceptions that did not result in any binding alliance. In the case of the recent US-India technology deal, the outcome of its implementation will depend on the *future* course of domestic politics in both countries and their respective future ties with China.

Subject to any near-term improvement in US-China ties, the [Joint Statement](#) issued after the Biden-Modi meeting placed Washington and Delhi near the threshold of an alliance. This is hardly surprising because the core interests of both India and the US converge in their competition with China, notwithstanding Delhi's historically close relations with Russia.

Biden's recent gesture to Modi amidst the US' rivalry with Beijing is reminiscent of the US-China rapprochement of 1971 to checkmate the Soviet Union. In offering India "strategic technologies", the US' gameplan is to accelerate India's growth as a powerful rival to China. This new plan is certainly *not* the same as the nearly [two-decade-old US idea](#) of making India "a major world power".

Following its good-neighbourhood policy, India's imperative is for a stable relationship with China despite their boundary disputes and competitive nationalisms. Nonetheless, the bipartisan view in Washington sees India as a potential high-value partner because of its wariness of China. Reinforcing the US bipartisan view is the bet that India is placing on tapping American technologies through joint projects.

### **Progressive Transformation of Ties**

The foundation for this new US-India high-tech partnership can be traced to their agreement on [civil nuclear cooperation](#) in 2005. After several follow-on initiatives by both sides, the legitimacy of India as a state with atomic weapons was endorsed by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 2008. China accepted the US-piloted consensus on that sensitive issue at the NSG after being unenthusiastic for the most part.

The next transformative step was Washington's designation of Delhi as a "[major defence partner](#)" in 2016, a move intended to place India almost on par with US military allies. In September 2018, the US and India launched the annual [2+2 Dialogue](#) among their foreign and defence ministers. Closely related to those developments, Delhi signed the "foundational agreements" with Washington for trustworthy military cooperation outside the ambit of an alliance.

Looking ahead in May 2022, the two countries announced a bilateral "initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology" ([iCET](#)). With the iCET radiating security-related priorities, Biden and Modi declared on 22 June 2023 that "[technology](#) will play the defining role in deepening our partnership". The iCET pathway on bilateral projects is

entirely different from the governance of critical technologies being attempted by the Quad – a strategic security dialogue comprising the US, Japan, India and Australia.

### **The Anticipated iCET Dividend**

In a “[trailblazing](#)” corporate defence MoU, a US firm agreed to co-produce jet engines for India’s light combat aircraft and to transfer the relevant technology to India. Unmanned but armed aerial vehicles of US origin would be assembled in India.

Another bilateral focus area is “enhanced underwater domain awareness” for maritime security. A key highlight is the US Space Force’s agreement with India to research and develop artificial intelligence (AI) and semiconductors.

Foremost in the civil-military agenda is the intended US-India cooperation to stay ahead in the domain of semiconductors. A US company would set up a semiconductor assembly and testing facility in India. Another US firm agreed to “accelerate India’s semiconductor education and workforce development”. The two countries have also signed an MoU on Semiconductor Supply Chain and Innovation Partnership.

US-India joint development and commercialisation of AI and quantum technologies were also identified for action. A coordination mechanism was formed to prepare a bilateral agreement on quantum information science and technology. Yet another area of interest was US-India research and development in the 5G/6G telecom sectors.

### **Engaging Other Actors Too**

Coincidentally, on 4 July 2023, the US’ national day, India hosted in the virtual format a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). For reasons beyond Delhi’s control – arguably the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, and China’s reassessment of India – this summit was not held as a high-profile in-person event. An opportunity for a much-delayed in-person bilateral meeting between Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping was lost.

Nonetheless, the [SCO summit](#) helped India to demonstrate that its foreign policy would not be all about high-tech connectivity with the US. Modi presided over the admission of Iran, an adversary of the US, as a full-fledged SCO member. He was keen to project Iran’s Chabahar Port, which India developed, as a regional facility.

As guest of honour during the Bastille Day celebrations in Paris on 14 July, Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron agreed on a “[Horizon 2047](#)” framework of Franco-Indian partnership. This document is seen as France’s recognition of India’s relevance to future global governance. The year 2047 would mark the centenary of India’s independence and 50 years of Franco-Indian strategic ties.

An “[agreement in principle](#)” was reached for India to buy the French Rafale Marine fighter jets and Scorpene-class submarines. France is a key source of military hardware for India which remains the [largest major arms importer](#) accounting for 11 per cent of the global total for the period 2018-2022. In 2021, the value of the global total was at least US\$127 billion.

## Conclusion

Will this westward outlook influence India as it prepares to host a summit of the Group of Twenty (G20) influential economies in September 2023? Xi has already urged India and other members of the SCO to “[make our foreign policies independently](#)”. His entreaty appeared to be aimed at India’s new techno-strategic partnership with the US.

For Delhi, the upcoming G20 summit will be a global moment. The painful economic consequences of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and the global debt crisis for which China is blamed in some quarters, will test India’s leadership at this summit. This challenge could, if met skilfully, sharpen Delhi’s focus in seeking a new worldview.

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