



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

The World in Conflict

The Global Scene and India's Positioning

Author

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Cover Photographs:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with US President Joseph Biden at White House Arrival Ceremony, in Washington, D.C. on June 22, 2023. (Source: [PM India/Official Website](#))

External Affairs Minister of India, Dr. S Jaishankar, calls on Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin, Russia, on December 27, 2023. (Source: [Dr. S. Jaishankar/Official Twitter](#))

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr. Anthony Albanese, at Hyderabad House, in New Delhi on March 10, 2023. (Source: [PM India/Official Website](#))

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This is the first in a series of annual assessments by the DPG Senior Faculty of significant developments in the international arena during the year 2023.

A Dark Year

2023 saw the world drifting down a dystopian path, as challenges to peace and stability became more formidable. Brutal conflicts of primacy, dominance, primeval hostility, terrorism and retribution raged, generating pervasive and unprecedented volatility in the globalised international system.

As the New Year commences, the multiple crises that are ongoing portend continuing and possibly even greater global turmoil ahead. The world has entered a period of difficult transition, with long-term stability likely to return only after the changes in the power balance between nations and regions that have taken place since 1945 have been accommodated, and the growing multipolarity that is manifesting itself is reflected in renewed and rebalanced institutions of global governance.

Multiple Conflicts

The conflicts that we are witnessing today are diverse and cut across multiple domains.

There is a steadily escalating struggle among great powers for dominance; a deep-rooted, intra-civilisational conflict to settle European security issues on the battlefield (known in the West as "Russia's war on Ukraine"); conflict triggered by horrific terrorism perpetrated by Hamas that endangers stability across West Asia and India's vital security interests; conflict of China's military expansionism and creeping grey zone pressures across continental and maritime Asia; conflicts of assertion and coercion by the great powers to impose their narrow interests on the vast unaligned majority of nations; conflict within the creaking structures of un-reformed and unrepresentative multilateral institutions, mainly to the detriment of emerging powers and developing nations; conflict between net-zero climate evangelism (which is stalling) and a global public pushback against self-defeating and wasteful energy policies; and conflict of self-serving, one-sided narratives flowing from

the powerful Western media claiming to represent the interests of the “international community”, which are being viewed with diminishing credibility and growing scepticism across broad sections of the globe.

The US-led West has anchored the post-World War II global order, and still controls virtually all the critical levers of power – institutional, financial, economic, technological and military. But power equations are not set in stone, and this is not the world of 1945, or 1991, or 2008. The erstwhile overwhelming power of the West – Europe in particular – is diminishing in relative terms. This process has been underway for decades, as the balance shifts from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Even the US is no longer in a position to dictate outcomes. A new global landscape is emerging.

The principal challenge to the still prevailing, but increasingly struggling, Western order emanates from the authoritarian powers of the Eurasian landmass. China seeks to impose its own hegemony in the Indo-Pacific and globally; Russia is refusing to cede strategic space along its periphery to the Western alliance. The China-Russia axis is growing stronger in its combined resistance to Western dominance. Neither China nor Russia are isolated, or can be.

This leading cause of global disruption is clashing against the determination of the revitalised West to maintain its unquestioned primacy over the world order, notwithstanding the rapidly advancing trend of power rebalancing and increasing multipolarity to which this paper has already referred.

Thus, this is also becoming a conflict between *resisting or accommodating reform*. The lead will have to come from the guardians of the current order in the West.

In terms of the wider dispersal of power, no region of the world will have a greater impact on the future course of global order than Asia and the Indo-Pacific, the new hub of the global economy, which also lies at the heart of great power competition. It should follow that the secular shift of economic power and geopolitical heft from Europe to Asia can no longer be denied in the key institutions of global decision-making.

The past year has also been marked by growing internal tensions, political polarisation and ideological intolerance among the world's advanced democracies that is adding to global uncertainty, not least as the US appears headed towards the most contentious presidential election in its history this year. There are internal upheavals and dissensions among the opponents of the West as well. Russia has witnessed an attempted military coup, which was short

lived, and concerns are growing about economic decline and regime stability in authoritarian China.

India's Positioning

Meanwhile, the ship of the Indian state has held steady on the strength of decisive and pragmatic leadership, robust economic growth, expanding comprehensive power, and growing influence in regional and global arenas. Indian diplomacy, in particular, has been highly focused and effective throughout India's presidency of the G20, playing a successful role in forging a G20 consensus on seemingly intractable geopolitical issues, bringing the spotlight back on economic growth and development, and amplifying the voice of the Global South.

As India forges ahead, maintaining strategic independence and omnidirectional partnerships along the "Vishwamitra" (universal friend) template is likely to become ever more difficult to sustain in a divided world. India has shown the capacity not only to seek convergences with many, but also to effectively reach across to those with which it has differences. If there is anything that the litany of criticism of India's "balancing act" in the Western discourse confirms, this is the right positioning of choice that best safeguards India's long-term interests as an emerging power. India's path must remain distinctly its own.

Pursuit of War

Europe

Over the past year, it has become increasingly clear that the pursuit of war, whether to commit aggression or to inflict military defeat on adversaries, has highly unpredictable and unanticipated consequences, and can never make securing peace easier. And yet, despite the unspeakable horrors that have unfolded in the Ukraine war, resort to military force seems to have become the preferred arbiter and determinant in international relations. Dialogue and diplomacy, recourse to which ultimately offers the only rational solutions, stand relegated.

Hundreds of billions of dollars in economic and military support have flown from the US and Europe into Ukraine, amidst a constant drumbeat of the impending defeat of the West's arch-enemy, Russia. This European war has now been exposed for what it actually is, a direct conflict between the West and Russia seen as existential by both sides, with Ukraine acting as the West's proxy even as it suffers devastation reminiscent of World War II.



Victory, however, is proving elusive for the West and Ukraine. Russia, with its vast natural resources, more ample manpower, autonomous technology, and military capability, has weathered crippling Western economic sanctions and reconfigured itself into a wartime economy. It is paying a heavy price for its aggression against Ukraine, but as support for unlimited (“as long as it takes”) aid to Kyiv diminishes in the US and Europe, Russia is still demanding peace on its own terms: the “denazification, demilitarisation of Ukraine and its neutral status”.

For now, this European conflict appears set to continue in 2024. Perhaps it is time for the bitter adversaries to start thinking beyond more war, but whether they will only time can tell. The fact that both sides have fought this to a stalemate, as well as domestic and election year pressures, may help provide an opening.

West Asia

Following Israel’s massive military response to an unprecedented and horrific terrorist onslaught by Hamas on Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, the Palestinian enclave of Gaza is being reduced to rubble, with an equally horrendous loss of even more civilian lives. This new conflict has destabilised all of West Asia, which now faces an uncertain future. The Israeli Prime Minister has defined three prerequisites for peace between Israel and its Palestinian neighbours in Gaza: “Hamas must be destroyed, Gaza must be demilitarised, and Palestinian society must be deradicalised”. This implies a prolonged conflict.

India was among the first nations to categorically condemn the Hamas atrocity and express solidarity with the people of Israel. Given India’s growing ties with the region, India has maintained its focus on the early restoration of peace and stability, continued humanitarian assistance, and a negotiated resolution that includes Palestinian statehood.

The humanitarian disaster unfolding in Gaza has increasingly isolated the US, as the Biden administration throws its full support behind Israel even while publicly pressing Israel to desist from the course of escalation. With the Houthis in Yemen now threatening maritime shipping in the Red Sea, a widening war between Israel and pro-Iranian groups spread across the region remains a distinct possibility. Disruptions of trade and energy flows in the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz will have far reaching consequences for the global economy.

There is a view in the US that “The struggle for the Mideast, which is likely to escalate, is part of the broader struggle for Eurasian control that pits the US and its allies against revisionist China, Russia and Iran.”¹ However, embroiling the US in yet another conflict serves the interests of Russia in Europe and China in the Indo-Pacific. Iran and Turkey are the major regional beneficiaries.

Indo-Pacific Challenges

The current US focus on Ukraine and Israel carries the risk of drawing its attention away from the Indo-Pacific, where the principal and pacing challenge to US primacy lies. China is continuing to advance its initiatives to reshape regional and global order, and is steadily gaining political influence through economic inducements and BRI-financed infrastructure building. China cannot but be pleased with the continuing US preoccupation with conflicts in Europe and West Asia, much as it had gained precious time to grow its power from the two-decade-long US “war on terror”.

It is by now clear that the nations of South East Asia will not come together to collectively push back against China’s unilateral assertions, even while some of them may recognise that China is not a benign actor and has hegemonic ambitions. ASEAN nations are irredeemably divided and agnostic on regional geopolitics, as they seek principally to ensure that maritime territorial disputes or great power rivalry do not endanger their expanding economic ties with China. Xi Jinping visited Hanoi in December 2023 to draw red lines and caution Vietnam in view of its moves to upgrade partnerships with the US and Japan during the year.

The Philippines remains the only outlier, reinforcing security arrangements with the US and its regional allies. The fact that the Philippines is facing criticism from some of its ASEAN partners for standing up to China over protecting its own sovereign rights in the South China Sea speaks for itself.

As US attention remains diverted elsewhere, one can expect that the coming year will see a determined push by China to assert ever greater physical and military control over the entire South China Sea. As it pursues its grey zone expansionism, China’s refrain against “outside powers” interfering in the South China Sea will grow. This is a fundamental challenge to the credibility and reassurance of US power, on which the US cannot afford to be found wanting if it is to retain its regional primacy in East Asia.

¹ Seth Cropsey, “America Needs a Middle East Strategy”, *The Wall Street Journal*, December 26, 2023.

Once China's complete dominance over the South China Sea becomes a fait accompli, the expansion of its power into the Indian Ocean will rapidly accelerate. There is a certain inevitability that in the near future, the US will need to invest greater resources in its naval presence in the Indian Ocean region.

The Taiwan issue will, of course, continue to simmer in the coming year, impacted in part by the outcome of Taiwan's presidential election (where politics has shifted decisively away from China), as well as domestic politics in the US. Following the temporary thaw signalled at the XI-Biden summit in November 2023, China can wait things out over its quest for Taiwan reunification, but it will seek to control and dominate the South China Sea, and thereby ASEAN, first. China's expansionist pressure on Japan's Senkaku Islands will also intensify.

Distortions in the Global System

Resort to war is not the only problem troubling the world. There are other major distortions in the global system which need to be addressed.

Selectivity and double standards are steadily eroding the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and undermining respect for international law. Aggression, occupation and subjugation must be unacceptable everywhere. Respect for the norms of the UN Charter and international law, including sovereignty and territorial integrity, must be applied universally. The guiding principle for peace must be mutual and equal security, not unilateral pursuits.

It is unfortunate that today's multilateralism is failing to deliver on wider global purpose and the common interests of humanity. Un-reformed global institutions, which are allowed to work only when the controlling powers so decide, do not reflect contemporary reality.

It is no surprise that as East-West polarisation deepens, so does the North-South divide. The vast majority of nations are increasingly alienated by great power conflicts and rivalry, and resisting pressures to take sides.

As India's leadership of the G20 has shown, dialogue and diplomacy provide the only effective solutions in a divided world, and respecting various viewpoints is the fundamental basis of cooperation, not setting the agenda and expecting others to fall in line. There is an urgent need to establish new benchmarks that can eventually reshape a global order that is increasingly multipolar, balanced, equitable and democratic. As stated earlier, this will

require the reordering of the global hierarchy to accommodate the aspirations of the vast majority of emerging and developing nations.

Finally, the structural deficiencies and inequities of the global economic system also require to be addressed. The re-imagining and democratisation of globalisation will entail considerable economic rebalancing, diversification of production, rebuilding of national capacities, securing of trusted supply chains, and strengthening of economic resilience.

India's Partnerships and Challenges

United States

After three quarters of a century, India has completed a major foreign policy transition of its own. The US is now India's leading strategic partner of choice in the international space, with intensifying cooperation across a broad swathe of geopolitical, economic, technological, security, defence and people-to-people ties. There is considerable maturity, stability and bipartisan support for the continued strengthening of this relationship, despite occasional differences. This trend appears set to continue over the coming decades of the 21st century, and augurs well for Indo-Pacific and global stability.

Apart from geopolitical convergences in the Indo-Pacific and robustly expanding trade and economic relations, the new centrepiece of the India-US partnership is cooperation across the entire range of critical and emerging technologies, from defence to semiconductors, quantum computing to artificial intelligence, space to advanced telecommunications, biotechnology to critical minerals, digital public infrastructure to advanced materials. The growing bilateral engagement on iCET between industry, academia and government stakeholders is directly led by the respective National Security Advisers.

It will be vitally important for the two countries to make a success of high technology cooperation, considering not only the vast potential, but also the three decades and more of technology denial that India was subjected to by the US after 1974, while its doors were opened to China in the early 1980s.

On the margins of this remarkable progress, there are segments of the US establishment, strategic community and media that remain stridently hostile to India. Their main line of criticism is directed at both external and domestic policies pursued by India. On the former, India is seen to have been (wrongly) given a pass on its refusal to publicly condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine, and on its sourcing of discounted energy supplies from Russia. On

the latter, there is constant criticism of perceived democratic backsliding and erosion of minority rights in India.

India neither lays claim to a perfect polity, nor does it believe in grandstanding over its democratic credentials. Its success as a democracy has reverberated not only in its neighbourhood, but also far beyond. These attacks in the US commentariat are justifiably being seen in India as deliberate and motivated attempts to malign the country as it shows growing coherence, national purpose and self-confidence.

It is clear that on the issues of democracy and human rights, many in the US (and the West) continue to misread India. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, India has remained one of the few countries in Asia which share universal values with the West. But the realisation is yet to dawn in the US (and the West) that the aspirational India of today has no desire to be seen or accepted as a cultural extension of the West. Indians are increasingly asserting their own civilisational heritage and traditions of diversity, tolerance and pluralism, which have formed the bedrock of Indian society for several millennia. If there is a dissonance here, it is caused by the tendency of the West to judgementally impose its "values" in a multicultural world which is unwilling to accept this imposition.

Russia

An extended visit by the Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar to Russia towards the end of 2023 sent an important signal to the West that the longstanding strategic partnership between India and Russia will remain stable and resilient, based on strategic convergence and shared interests in the geopolitics and security of Eurasia, energy and defence cooperation, rapidly growing trade and investment ties, and joint connectivity initiatives. India and Russia also anchor multipolarity in BRICS, and share a long tradition of multilateral cooperation.

China

2023 saw ample rhetoric in the US and Europe about "derisking" and not "decoupling" from China. However, in terms of practice the West's engagement with and fascination for China may have abated but remains intact, as does the desire for continued economic "interdependence" with China. This is particularly so for Europe and Japan, but also extends to large segments of the US business community. China's rise has, after all, largely been facilitated by the West.

It is significant that during the course of the year, China reached out with overtures to virtually all major neighbouring nations of Asia – except India. As the military standoff along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh enters its fourth winter, the process of disengagement of forces at two disputed locations remains pending. India has made it clear, repeatedly and categorically, that its relations with China will not return to normal until peace and tranquility along the LAC is completely restored, and China returns to full compliance with bilateral agreements. China has to take the call whether it wishes to re-engage with India on the basis of mutual respect for each other's core interests, sensitivities and aspirations.

India needs to remain clear-eyed that for the foreseeable future, China will be a major adversary across all domains, and will use every opportunity to coerce and contain India. The only option for India is to hold firm and strengthen its deterrent power. Economic decoupling from China will take time, but is already underway in terms of policy.

Japan

Over the year, India and Japan sought to retain strategic intimacy and trust in the post-Shinzo Abe era. The relationship remained far below potential, and not for want of trying by India. Japan needs to be very clear about the direction, strategic content and priority of its relations with India, which is presently not quite the case.

The Kishida administration pivoted towards a "Free and Open International Order" (FOIO), which was curiously explained as embracing the Global South, but in effect marked a deliberate move away from Abe's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) construct, partly as a palliative gesture to China, and mostly to align Japan more closely with the West's interests in Ukraine.

Japan's diplomacy during the year was overwhelmingly focused on the G7, NATO and Ukraine, with an added outreach to ASEAN. Overall, the unmistakable impression was that Japan's closer alignment with the West overshadowed attention to Asia, something that did not go unnoticed in India.

By the end of the year, inconsistencies and contradictions in Japan's strategic posture also began to surface. There was no progress in the provisioning of financial resources to implement the upgradation of military deterrence as called for under the new National Security and National Defence Strategies announced a year ago. Japan, on the other hand, supplied billions of dollars worth of economic and (non-kinetic) military aid to Ukraine, and at the end of the year also decided to transfer Patriot PAC-2 and PAC-3 missiles (and possibly

155 mm ammunition) to the US by amending its arms transfer regulations to allow exports of Japan-produced military hardware to patent-holding countries. The intention was to back-fill US stocks, enabling onward transfers of these weapons from the US to Ukraine.

This was read by some in the strategic community as a signal of Japan's prioritisation of the West's interests in Europe over its own security and Indo-Pacific deterrence against China. Ironically, the LDP-led ruling coalition's junior partner Komeito still continued to claim that "as a nation of peace, we will not contribute to international conflict."²

Going forward, if India and Japan are to provide mutual reinforcement as strategic partners and bolster regional stability, they will have to be better aligned on the critical security issues of the Indo-Pacific.

Australia

Among India's Quad partners, its relationship with Australia showed promise during the year as strategic engagement advanced across the board, from growing trade and economic relations to a new pact on migration and mobility, multiple military exercises to the regular staging of aircraft deployments from each other's bases. Two bilateral summits in March and May were followed by the inaugural India-Australia 2+2 Ministerial Meeting in November 2023. With nearly a million persons of Indian origin in Australia, people-to-people relations will play a significant role in taking this relationship forward. Australia opened a new Consulate in Bengaluru, India in Brisbane. Australian universities are taking the lead in opening campuses in India, with education and skill development being a key growth area that will help cement bilateral ties at the grassroots.

² Yusuke Takeuchi, "Japan to allow arms exports to patent-holder nations", NIKKEI Asia, December 14, 2023.



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