

Introduction: finding your place in the world

India (or Bharat), despite its vast territory and the fact that it is the most populous country in the world, remains an unknown quantity. This lack of knowledge is compounded by a series of clichés that prevent a better understanding of the country. On the one hand, there is a view that undervalues its potential based on poverty, overpopulation, its heterogeneity and the omnipresent role of religion. On the other hand, emphasis is placed on its material capacities, which are gradually improving. This Asian giant is already the world's fifth largest economy (replacing its previous colonising power, the United Kingdom) and maintains a high growth rate; it has the fifth largest nuclear arsenal in the world; and it has recently succeeded in sending a space mission to the moon, making it the fourth country to do so.

Between these two visions of India, the middle ground is unknown. For the sake of clarity, theories of middle powers and superpower candidate countries fall short of providing us with the necessary clues to better understand them. With changes in the global scenario and the fluidity of factors used to define middle powers in the 21st century, it is difficult to categorise on the basis of clear-cut criteria.

For Cooper and Dal (2016), a country's inclusion in the G20 can help define its entry into this category. These scholars describe the third wave of middle powers, in which each state displays different types of capabilities. In addition to the classic factors of size (territory and population) and technological development, other elements can be added to contribute to a classification. Struye de Swielande (2019: 20) defines five characteristics that indicate a middle power: capabilities, self-concept, status, regional impact and systemic impact. This author also places these countries in an intermediate sphere between the big powers and the small countries, holding an intermediary position that gives them access to the big ones, and simultaneously allows them to be close to the small ones and establish networks with like-minded countries. In structural terms, much of their power can be inferred from their position or location in these networks and their relations with other states.

Lee, Chun, Suh and Thomson (2015: 6), in terms of diplomacy, believe that middle powers need to possess material capabilities that place them in an attractive position, so that they can establish a network or community of like-minded countries. In terms of

capabilities, the influence of a middle power is defined in the context of a broad network, in which each of these states can exercise its influence and pursue its objectives.

India has particularities between a middle, regional and global power. In economic terms, it maintains high growth (7.2% in the fiscal year 2022/23), but this coexists with the fact that it is still a low-income country (GDP per capita of 2,256 US dollars by 2021, according to the World Bank). It is the seventh largest country in the world (3.287 million square kilometres) and the largest in terms of population (over 1.4 billion), with estimates that it will soon overtake China¹. India also has the fourth largest military force (army) in the world. Given its position in the Indian Ocean, its naval fleet has room for improvement, as it is still far below the capabilities of China, its main rival in Asia.

India's growth necessitates greater demand for energy and, in turn, greater international outreach in search of contacts and networks to provide those resources. The ability to establish links and project power beyond its neighbourhood, where its hegemonic position is unchallenged, and an international environment conducive to a more significant global role for India, have led to an increase in its presence.

Considering India's projection, its role in the world is hybrid. In a multicomplex global framework (Acharya, Estevadeordal and Goodman, 2023), its hard characteristics are insufficient to define its role in the world. Thus, in addition to its large size (territorial and its Exclusive Economic Zone, EEZ), population and privileged position in the Indian Ocean, it is necessary to include its capacity to interact with other countries and to be present in different regional and international organisations.

While not all middle powers are also regional powers, India is the largest and most central country in South Asia, which has historically allowed it to be a hegemonic player in its neighbourhood. However, its position is being challenged by China's increased presence.

Finally, in addition to the aforementioned factors (materials, location, favourable international historical moment), two other factors must be added. One is that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government aims to project more power, and the other is the population's desire for India to occupy a more relevant place in the international arena. This combination of elements places India in an atypical position among middle powers.

¹ The actual number of inhabitants is unknown, as the last population census, which should have taken place in 2021, was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Indian vision: redefining terms

In recent years, with the turn of the century and the rise of the Asian continent, studies are being developed that seek to do greater justice to the role of non-Western countries². It is now accepted, albeit reluctantly, that International Relations is the most Western and 'white' of all academic disciplines. Knowledge creation has traditionally served to describe the world and countries' relations with each other from a power perspective. Given the emergence of formerly colonised countries as fully-fledged actors, a revision of these theories is called for.

One way of interpreting India's behaviour from its own tradition draws on the classic work *Arthashastra* (or the science of material gains) attributed to Kautilia. This text is sometimes erroneously cited as a timeless theory of Indian thought (Buzan and Acharya, 2022: 33). The *Arthashastra* is considered a realist treatise written around the 4th century BC, which, among other topics, includes formulas and methods for accumulating power, wealth and expanding territory³ and for domestic and foreign policy; when to keep the peace and when to attack the enemy; and for settling relations with friendly and enemy countries, a topic in which the doctrine of mandalas is introduced, through which it is deduced that neighbours tend to be enemies, while neighbours of enemies can be friends (Ibid., 35).

Kautilia is also called the Indian Machiavelli, with the difference that the former wrote his treatise more than a millennium before the latter. However, it is necessary to question the timelessness of the work or the tendency of some scholars to frame it as a defining "Hindu" theory of contemporary Indian behaviour. To the denunciation of Orientalism (Said, 1978) in any analysis of what is done in this imagined East, we must also add the essentialist tendencies that may define interpretations of Indian leaders' behaviour.

Another classical source that has influenced Indian thought comes from the Maurya dynasty (320-185 B.C.). Ashoka, the third emperor of the dynasty, reconciled in his concept of *dharma* the element of conquest of empires with the ethics and humanitarian morality of Buddhist doctrine. The term *chakravartin*, which includes the element of the circle or wheel present in both Hinduism and Buddhism, is related to the god Vishnu and

² The West and the West understood as the set of countries under the sphere of power of the United States and led by it. It is not so much a consensual fact as an identity construct.

³ A much broader idea of territoriality that differs from the Westphalian concept.

the maintenance of order in the world (Buzan and Acharya, 2022: 39). Ashoka, as a historical reference, is credited with an ancient theory of human rights, the first social contract and religious tolerance, where some see a hint of secularism (Bhargava, 2015). In any case, according to these classical references, Indian history offers not only elements of spirituality, but also of rationality. India is no more religious than other nations, presenting a mix of reason and mysticism, even if the stereotype emphasises the latter. Following independence in 1947, another cliché is to exaggerate the extent of non-alignment. As a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), created after the Bandung Conference in 1955, Nehruvian thinking, by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (in office from 1947 to 1964), determined India's position in the first decades of independence.

For some, India's membership of the NAM has to do with its inability to make decisions. That India observes without taking sides is a common accusation (*India is sitting on a fence*). However, to understand the reasons why it does or does not take sides, it is necessary to understand the basis of its foreign policy, how it sees the world and its role in it. To this end, it is necessary to know what the Delhi government's geopolitical codes look like and how this understanding is reflected.

Geopolitics is another of those concepts that is difficult to define. The idea refers to the geography of international politics, especially the relationship between the physical environment (location, resources, territory...) and foreign policy behaviour (Sprout and Sprout, 1960, cited in Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992: 191). To avoid interpretations that attribute to geography (as a determinant element) most of the analytical burden, it is necessary to take into account other factors, such as the weight of perceptions and visions of leadership.

In his description of US foreign policy, Gaddis (2005) coined the term "geopolitical code" to define the assumptions about global interests, potential threats and decisions made by a given government. These codes are part of leaders' visions, imaginations, narratives and representations. In the words of Flint (2006: 55), geopolitical codes are "the way in which a country orients itself towards the world".

These codes include interpretations of who are allies and enemies, how to maintain these allies and cultivate others, how to counter enemies and the threats they pose, and how

these calculations are justified to the population and the international community (Mamadouh and Dijkink 2006). The best way to understand India's position, therefore, is to analyse the discourses of its leaders and how they justify the foreign policy decisions they make.

India's foreign policy priorities

Since achieving independence, India has sought a role of its own in the world. Its membership of the NAM was not purely ideological, but part of a strategy of a still disadvantaged post-colonial state focused on nation-building and internal consolidation. At such a time, Nehru wasted no time in taking sides with both blocs (at least formally), adopting a classic policy of balancing power in a bipolar world (Pant 2011: 16). The initial role that the prime minister assigned to India, according to the types defined by Holsti (1970: 280), was that of a subsystem leader (South Asia), independent, active and liberator-supporter, avoiding formal alliances and compromises with the great powers.

However, this Nehruvian idealism is being replaced by a *realpolitik* characterised by greater pragmatism, aimed at improving relations with the major global powers (Tandon 2016: 352). There are still legacies of the past that have not been discarded, such as the anti-hegemonic and pro-multipolar stance, especially that of countries that were colonised in the so-called 'global south'. In part, this idea is present in the expression "the world is one family" (*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*), whose origin can be traced to the *Upanishads*. However, the expression, which has been used by virtually all leaders, can have different meanings and connotations depending on the time and interests at stake.

A cornerstone of foreign policy is to maintain one of the dogmas of non-alignment: strategic autonomy, or the ability to make decisions freely. The real shift in India's foreign policy came after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when it began to embrace a market economy and open up to the world. Since the 1990s, foreign policy priorities have been defined in parallel with economic development priorities. In addition to development preferences, there has been a transition from non-alignment to a leadership role, which nevertheless retains features of traditional strategic discourse.

Changes have thus been taking place since 1991, and several prime ministers have led this shift to a more ambitious role, with Narasimha Rao (1991-1996), Atal Bihari Vajpayee

(1996; 1998-2004) and Manmohan Singh (2004-2014) preceding Narendra Modi (since 2014). The so-called Manmohan doctrine was marked by the need to secure new markets and energy resources for the industrial sector, the priority of economic growth, improving security and raising its global profile.

What is most remarkable about Modi's performance is his personalistic and even paternalistic way of leading India's turnaround. As mentioned above, rather than possessing his own doctrine (Hall, 2015), Modi has continued the changes of his predecessors. One of the pillars of this new foreign policy, a continuation of the Manmohan doctrine, is the belief that closeness to the United States should be the pivot on which to build the foreign relations pivot (Mohan, 2019: 304).

Modi has been defined as the most hyperactive prime minister in his foreign visits, with more than 130 trips between 2014 and 2023 (including a hiatus due to the Covid-19 pandemic) to 61 different countries, according to his own website. Some of these appointments have been international events (United Nations General Assembly, G20, BRICS summits or the Shanghai Conference Organisation), but in general, the priority destinations show that Asia is at the top of India's agenda of priorities.

The Neighbourhood: India as a hub in South Asia

Cooper (1997) finds that the 'new' (referring to non-Western) middle powers lie on an axis of diplomatic style that is more combative than accommodative, and on another axis of diplomatic activity, where one pole is multilateral while the opposite is regional. In his view, these new powers are more combative and regional (quoted in Struye de Swielande, 2019: 25). Nevertheless, India escapes yet another classification, given that it itself combines the opposite poles of this spectrum.

Equally, other factors need to be brought into the equation, starting with the characteristics of the leadership, such as its "beliefs, interests, personality, ambitions..." (Ibid.: 26) and the role played by perceptions (of capabilities or security). One of the fundamental axes in India's foreign policy is the 'immediate neighbourhood', a policy that has both domestic and security implications.

The perception of insecurity characteristic of South Asia, with Pakistan and China as immediate enemies, as well as multiple instances of internal insurgencies, determine the

priority of stabilising domestic politics. The need to secure a peaceful neighbourhood deciphers India's relations with the rest of South Asia. Since independence, its role with smaller neighbours has been highly influential on their politics, societies, economies and cultures.

India has 75% of South Asia's population and land mass, 70% of GDP and a central location (Menon, 2021: 61). The usual stance of neighbours is to resist Indian hegemony. The Association of South Asian States (SAARC, created in 1985) is composed of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives. Afghanistan and Myanmar can also be considered part of the neighbourhood.

Threats along its borders have been a constant source of concern for the Delhi government. Dysfunctional relations with some of its neighbours, especially after China's entry as an observer member of SAARC in 2005, have hampered both domestic and foreign agendas. The arrival of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the region came at a time when relations with some neighbours were not at their best.

The politics of the immediate neighbourhood

The *Neighbourhood First Policy* is theoretically aimed at fostering peace and cooperation with its neighbours. India links regional stability to its own. For Mohan (2007), no country can be a genuine power in the world without being one in its own neighbourhood. From the outset, therefore, the idea has been to keep neighbours under its sphere of influence, as relations with the smaller Himalayan states of Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim show.

Initially, Nehru applied the policy of the *Panchsheel* treaty (five principles) signed with China in 1954 with the rest of the neighbours. These five principles are 1) mutual respect for territorial integrity and national sovereignty; 2) mutual non-aggression; 3) non-interference; 4) equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; and 5) peaceful co-existence (Aryal and Bharti, 2023: 225). When Sikkim joined India in 1975, the others feared becoming protectorates or being absorbed as well.

Indira Gandhi's doctrine was intended to reassert its position vis-à-vis its neighbours, to be the dominant country. Military actions aimed at safeguarding what were perceived to be Indian interests include involvement in the 1971 war of independence in Bangladesh, the 1987 crisis in Sri Lanka, and the 1988 coup attempt in the Maldives. Neither the subsequent resumption of *Panchsheel's* principles by Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral (1997-1998), nor subsequent prime ministers managed to improve India's image in South Asia.

By 2014, India had all but lost its relationship with Nepal and Bhutan, two of the countries where it had the most influence. Modi tried to change the situation with conciliatory gestures, such as inviting the leaders of SAARC countries (including Pakistan) to the inauguration ceremony of his first term in office. There, he announced that he would build a 'peaceful, stable and economically interconnected neighbourhood' (Roy 2015: 1025). His government revised the traditional neighbourhood policy and shifted from an Asian policy (*Look East Policy*) to a more proactive one (*Act East Policy*). Its first state visits were to neighbouring countries, although these gestures were later inconsistent with the policy developed. India's inconsistency contributes to South Asia being one of the least integrated regions in terms of economic, infrastructural and human connections.

In a further contradiction, while the Delhi government preaches multilateralism at the global level, it manages its relations with its neighbours bilaterally. Similarly, the values of respect and equality that it claims internationally are not applied in its relations with the rest of South Asia. There are examples that indicate that its behaviour is causing its neighbourhood policy to open the door to greater Chinese intervention.

India's role in Nepal has been predominant. Nepal is landlocked and limited to the north by the great Himalayan peaks, and is dependent on resources coming by road through Indian border crossings. Politically, the government in New Delhi has also been very influential. After the Maoist war (1996-2006), India helped create the peace accords that ended the monarchy and installed a secular republic instead of a Hindu monarchy (Ojha, 2015).

The Kathmandu government's rapprochement with Beijing began with a visit by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also known as Prachanda, in 2008. It was the first time a Nepali in government did not inaugurate his term in office with a *de rigueur* first visit to India. Tension emerged with India's efforts to impose its conditions during the process of approving Nepal's constitution. To this end, New Delhi imposed a border blockade in 2015 that severely affected the Nepalese economy and provoked a humanitarian crisis. For Nepalis, this action highlighted the need to move away from dependence on Indian access, prompting further rapprochement with China.

Yet small countries question the wisdom of trading one big one for a bigger one. It is therefore becoming more useful to play the competition between the two and see what they can get out of it for their own benefit. China is building a range of infrastructure linking it to Nepal through new border crossings, including roads, a trans-Himalayan railway to

Lhasa, Tibet's capital, and an airport in Pokhara, the second largest city. But Nepal's entry into the BRI (May 2017) has not been without controversy related to population displacement, opacity of transactions and a clear trade imbalance in favour of Beijing. For example, the Nepalese government is investigating allegations of corruption related to the increased cost of the aforementioned airport (Wakabayashi, Sharma and Fu, 2023).

Prachanda visited India, this time in the first place, after his repeated election victory in 2023. India, disassociating itself from China, guarantees that its investment is free of traps. It is precisely the idea of the "debt diplomacy trap", coined by Indian analyst Brahma Chellaney, that is being exploited to welcome back those countries that fear a more assertive China. Thus, India has begun to purchase Nepalese hydropower to over \$1 billion by 2022 (Shivamurthy and Pant, 2023). Other ongoing projects include improving human exchanges, facilitating economic transactions, building energy infrastructure and improving border facilities.

Bhutan is even smaller and more dependent, with its relationship with India causing discontent among its leadership and population. The Timbu government sought India's support after China's annexation of Tibet. In 1949, the two countries signed the Treaty of Peace and Perpetual Friendship, which included Indian advice on Bhutanese national affairs, although India's advisory role was excluded from the agreement in 2007 (Kumar, 2019). Hydropower, as with Nepal, is one of the main resources in bilateral relations, although price is often a source of friction.

In 2017, China and India clashed militarily in the Doklam Valley, on land that the Bhutanese government claims with Indian backing. Beijing has not yet agreed its border with either Bhutan or India and both are the only two South Asians outside the BRI. However, since 2021, the Bhutanese government has initiated negotiations to end the border dispute with China. This is a stretch of almost 500 km that borders the Tibet region, one of the most important security concerns for Xi's government. India fears that Bhutan will reach an agreement that harms its interests and that China will take advantage of the treaty to continue expanding its cross-border constructions (behaviour it emulates on its border with Nepal) at the cost of the asymmetry of forces.

Bangladesh and India's relations were initially amicable, given the invaluable assistance of Indira Gandhi's government in the war of liberation in what was East Pakistan. The Modi government and the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), along with its coalition partners,

display anti-Muslim ideological traits. Since the BJP's first election victory in the aftermath of the Ayodhya mosque conflict (1992, Uttar Pradesh), the speeches of some of its leaders have become increasingly Islamophobic in tone, and the rejection of the Bangladeshi population has grown.

The revocation of the autonomy status of the Kashmir region and the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 provoked the Dhaka government, led by Prime Minister Shaykh Hasina, to show its displeasure (Aryal and Bharti, 2023: 229). The derogatory remarks towards "Bengalis" or "Bangladeshis" in the AAC reflected racist and anti-Bangladeshi language. The polemic was unnecessary, given the good relations between the two countries following the 2015 cross-border agreement. Support for Hasina's increasingly unpopular and authoritarian government after 15 years in office and winning a fifth term in the January 2024 elections, boycotted by a decimated opposition, damages India's image in Bangladesh. Hasina's detractors believe that she is only in power because of Indian support (Wadud, 2023).

As in the rest of the region, Bangladesh's relations with China have improved thanks to trade agreements, despite a clear imbalance in favour of Beijing. Since 2005, Chinese activity has included, among other things, projects to build eight friendship bridges, increased investment in energy infrastructure projects, arms supplies for its security forces and the creation of an industrial economic zone. India sees ports built or used by China as a threat to its rival to encircle and control its maritime access. In 2022, in a balancing act, Hasina granted India access to the ports of Chittagong (the country's main port) and Mongla, permits that China had held since 2019.

Hasina is also courting the United States, the main investor until it was ousted by China in 2018. Japan is also acquiring a growing role in the country's trade and security. The strategic position on the Bay of Bengal is key to the maritime connectivity of India's northeastern states, providing in turn an outlet to Nepal and Bhutan, as well as to China's southern provinces. The Modi government is showing unwavering support for Hasina in recognition of the key role this maritime enclave increasingly plays, especially with the coup in Myanmar and China's ascendancy over the Burmese military establishment.

India is convinced that China is a bad influence in Sri Lanka, another territory where Beijing is not only economically but also politically influential. As in Nepal's political class, the China effect pits different political clans against each other. On the one hand, there

are the Rajapaksa brothers, with their promises of Chinese-led economic development, and on the other, Mahipala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe, who strike a difficult balance between not antagonising Beijing and closer ties with Delhi.

It was this island that inspired the idea of the debt trap. The default led the Sri Lankan government to cede the management of the Hambantota port to Beijing for 99 years (from 2017), with the intention of turning it into a total logistics hub. The use of its facilities, such as the mooring of the Yuan Wang 5, which Delhi considers a spy ship, is a constant source of dispute (Tan, 2022).

China has had a presence in the Maldives since 1990. The Malé government is torn between Beijing and Delhi, two influences whose pressure adds to that of other countries that see the islands as an important enclave in the Indian Ocean. Maldivian political parties are also affected by the presence of China and India. For the elections in September 2023, some candidates used the pro-India angle, as did Ibrahim Mohammed Solih. On the other side, there is the anti-India stance, which is read as pro-China. The latter is the case of Abdullah Yamin Abdul Gayoun, who campaigned by wearing a T-shirt with the logo "India out", accusing Solih of compromising national sovereignty (Pal and Junayd, 2022).

The new president elected in September 2023, Mohamed Muizzu, who shared a campaign theme with Gayun, is set to push ahead with his plan to expel Indian troops from Maldivian territory, in addition to reviewing more than 100 bilateral agreements in areas of mutual security and defence (Ramachandran, 2023). For India, Maldivian territory is especially important, as it is close to the sea routes through which India's trade and energy supplies to the Persian Gulf countries pass. The Delhi government has provided loans to the Maldives for the construction of hospitals, military facilities, airports, and has been the main security provider for the islands, which lack the capacity to secure their EEZ from piracy campaigns and other threats. The maritime radar systems built by India, or the police and military training provided, can now serve its rival.

Challenges in the neighbourhood: Pakistan, the eternal spoiler

Despite differences with its neighbours and China's entry into many of them, the biggest antagonist in the neighbourhood is known to be Pakistan. One of the main stumbling

blocks to the stability of the Indian state is the multiplicity of internal conflicts. Insurgencies in Kashmir and the north-eastern states impede the internal stability needed to project greater power beyond its borders. This is a factor traditionally exploited by Pakistan. Pakistan's strategy along the Line of Control (LOC) is to boycott India's leadership on the continent and its claims to be a global player. To this end, it employs a series of attrition strategies that consist of promoting instability through the use of non-state actors.

The two nuclear powers have been locked in a decades-long standoff over the territory of Kashmir, over which they both claim sovereignty and over which they have fought four wars. For Pakistan, however, the confrontation with India is not only territorial but also existential. Its opposition to India is part of its identity, so that if the Kashmir dispute were resolved, its confrontation would remain unresolved. Only a change of national identity in Pakistan, which is very difficult, could facilitate a rapprochement. Moreover, every occasion on which the two countries have moved closer has been boycotted by these insurgent groups, which are active in the *Inter-Services Intelligence* (ISI) and the military, the real architects of Pakistan's foreign and security policy.

The Pakistan government routinely denies involvement in the multiple attacks on Indian soil that the *Lashkar-e Taiba* (LeT) and *Jaish-e Mohammad* (JeM) groups have carried out. In addition to the assault on the Parliament in New Delhi in December 2001, there is a long list of attacks, such as the attacks in Delhi in 2005 (LeT killed more than 60 Indian citizens in markets in the capital); Mumbai in 2008 (LeT in various parts of the port city and economic capital of the country, with 175 deaths and hundreds of wounded); and those in Pathankot (suicide attack by JeM, eight soldiers killed) and Uri in 2016 (JeM killed 19 Indian soldiers).

With the legislative change in the state of Yammu and Kashmir (Y&C), the Delhi government divided the territory into two (Y&C and Ladakh) and removed the special autonomous status under which the region was governed. The need to integrate the territory had to do with India's weariness with the dynamics of decades of confrontation, which, moreover, cost it more than 800,000 euros a day just for the protection of the Siachen glacier (Ballesteros Peiró, 2021). The clash in the Galwan Valley with China in July 2020 resulted in deaths (20 Indian and four Chinese soldiers) for the first time since 1975. With the 1962 war between the two countries in living memory, this event led India to fear a border war with two fronts, one Pakistani and one Chinese.

In addition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CECP), whose route passes through disputed territory in Kashmir (Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region), the construction of the port of Gwadar on the Baloch coast, close to Indian territorial waters, is of concern. Until now, India had managed to maintain its hegemonic position of access to the Indian Ocean vis-à-vis China, but with this port, the insecurity of land borders will be added to the maritime confines.

Part of Pakistan's instrumentality for China is its position on Afghanistan and its initial closeness with the Taliban leadership, especially after the final departure of US troops in August 2021. In Republican Afghanistan, India had a good relationship with Presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, and had managed to win the sympathy of Afghans through its many infrastructure and development projects, including the construction of the parliament building, roads, power lines, hospitals, etc. The Zaranj to Delaram road was intended to connect Afghanistan to Iran, provide alternative supply routes and help reduce its dependence on Pakistan.

After the first NATO troop withdrawal in 2014, China became more involved in Afghanistan through various infrastructure projects. Beijing acquired the operation of the Aynak copper mine in 2007 and the exploration of the Amu Darya riverbank reserves by the China National Petroleum Corporation in 2011. In May 2016, Afghanistan signed a memorandum of understanding with China for its accession to the BRI. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the CEPA could be extended to Afghan territory (Global Times, 2022).

The Beijing government participated in the resolution of the Afghan conflict through the Istanbul Process, which included India, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Russia and the Central Asian republics. Afghanistan, as a pivot between the three regions of the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, is a key country for the energy markets and the large Indian and Chinese demand. But ongoing instability, with a Taliban regime lacking international legitimacy, jeopardises Chinese investments and Indian interests.

India's policy towards Central Asia and Iran is also affected by the relationship with Pakistan. The collapse of the Iran nuclear deal, following the US withdrawal under President Donald Trump in 2018, broke much of India's projects. The sanctions waiver until 2019, under which the US allowed India to negotiate with Iran without being

sanctioned, was an opportunity to buy gas at a good price and expand its sources of supply. Both Tehran and New Delhi had come to expect that, should the Taliban return to power, their policies would be different from those of 1996. At the same time, the intention to expand its presence in Central Asia, with Russia's blessing, was thwarted after the invasion of Ukraine. This led to the abandonment of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) that would connect it from Iran, via the port of Chabahar, through Central Asia and Russia, to Europe.

From Local to Global: India's Role in the Great Global Competition

In the UN vote in March 2022, India's abstention was strongly criticised by the US and a number of European countries. The idea that the Modi government was not capable of choosing sides, as interpreted by Washington, was interpreted as a sign that India had not yet left the NAM orbit. The abstention was taken as support for the Moscow government, even though India and Russia had long been drifting apart.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, New Delhi's need to diversify suppliers to achieve strategic autonomy became more apparent. The interruption in the supply of components from China prevented the renowned Serum Institute and the Bharat Biotech laboratory, with a production capacity of 160 million doses per month, from manufacturing vaccines with which India projected itself as the "pharmacy of the world" (Morillas et al. 2021). Thanks to the *made-in-India* vaccines, Modi was trying to improve his image by prioritising distribution in his neighbourhood.

A similar situation arose after the invasion of Ukraine. It became clearer to New Delhi that dependence on Russian arms supplies could only damage its defence capabilities if China were to press again on the Himalayan border. The fact that no provocation was necessary for China to carry out a Galwan-like attack convinced the Indian government that it needed to conduct its defence policy more realistically and independently. This was the final push towards the United States.

India is trying to shape its relationship with Beijing and Washington and influence their behaviour according to its interests. It is not so much a matter of trying to get them to change their behaviour, but of taking into account what they are like and acting accordingly. That is why India needs to engage with both, without taking sides with either,

so that their respective relationships are better than the one they have with each other (Menon, 2021: 350).

The re-emergence of the Quad in 2017, along with the US, Australia and Japan, shows that while resistance to (non-treaty) alliances of this kind has been lost, foreign policy principles remain unchanged. In other words, India will continue not to choose sides, but will maximise its ability to engage with all countries according to its own interests. Beijing's miscalculation was to underestimate India's ability to reach out to the US, and to believe that non-alignment and its past hostility would trump interests.

Rapprochement with the US and the search for new strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific arena

The US's growing interest in India is unquestionable. The need to draw it away from Russia and make it useful against China is a priority for US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific. For India to be part of this balance of power, it needs to continue to enjoy room for manoeuvre. As this shrinks, New Delhi will become increasingly uncomfortable. However, the trend reversal is clear: the enthusiasm for the new relationship with Washington is unprecedented, as Modi has been able to flip the script and present the bilateral relationship as positive for India's autonomy.

The strategy, therefore, is far from that of non-alignment, being more one of "multi-alignment": having diversity of choice and maximising national interests according to a cost-benefit analysis. These networks of (more or less formal) alliances or partnerships reflect the growing multicomplexity of the international scene. A multiplicity of regional and global rules and institutions coexist in the contemporary world order, all of which play a key role in cooperation and the provision of goods (Acharya, Estevadeordal and Goodman, 2023: 2341). It is not so much that this system has replaced the hegemonic liberal order, but rather that they coexist in time and different spaces.

In this multicomplexity, great powers coexist with middle powers, regional powers and non-state actors, along with new ideas and ways of acting. Influence in this order is not only exercised through power, but through the capacity for interaction, defined by Buzan (2023: 19) as ways of observing international systems or societies according to the

physical and organisational capacity of a system to move ideas, goods, people, money and armed forces in that system, and the speed and cost involved.

While the US continues to deploy dominant power, other countries are able to develop their own capabilities with or without it. In this new environment, these countries will not try to replicate the role of the Americans in the world, but will cooperate with each other to achieve their goals, including reforming the architecture of international organisations to make them more egalitarian and favourable to the aspirations of emerging countries (Acharya, Estevadeordal and Goodman, 2023: 2363).

Partnerships will therefore not be made on the basis of ideas or norms, or at least not as a priority, but on the basis of common interests and concrete issues. This is why India can still be part of partnerships such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, despite its rivalry with China and its disenchantment with Russia; why it can still continue to cultivate its relationship with Russia (still expecting it to serve as a counterweight to China); and why it is part of partnerships such as the Quad, the I2U2 (India, Israel, the United States and the United Arab Emirates, UAE) or the BRICS.

This multiplicity of memberships is not contradictory to Indian behaviour, given that it is conducted on the basis of state interests. The sense is that it is not obliged to take sides in the Great Global Competition. In Ali Wyne's words, it is a kind of *zeitgeist* whereby the multiplicity of options serves the freedom of choice in foreign policy and thus escapes the script that imposes on it to take part in the competition (Goldberg, 2023).

The revival of the Quad was mainly motivated by the presence of Chinese submarines, at least since 2010, in Indian waters. It is seen as a turning point in India's realisation of the need to be a naval power. Thus, in addition to the Quad's multitude of purposes (healthcare, technology, combating climate change), security has been added as a key element. Maintaining maritime security is key to India's economic progress and to guaranteeing supply chains.

What was recently the Asia-Pacific is mutating into the geopolitical space of the Indo-Pacific, increasingly integrated into a single strategic system. What Buzan (2023) envisaged as an Asian 'supercomplex' in terms of security is also an Asian 'supercomplex' in terms of trade routes, energy flows, diplomatic ties and strategic connections. It is worth

remembering that two-thirds of the world's fuel and one-third of the world's trade passes through this space.

India has a good relationship with Southeast Asia, which has led to its strong presence in the region. Among all the Association of Southeast Asian (ASEAN) states, it has the best relations with Singapore and Vietnam. Also, within ASEAN, the US presence in the region has become more accepted and India's presence in the region is welcomed in the interest of preference by a multitude of actors.

In its penchant for bilateral, multilateral and plurilateral relations, India has signed strategic agreements with 31 countries and partnerships: South Africa (1997), France (1998); Japan and Russia (2000); Germany and the United States (2001); Iran (2003); the European Union (2004); China and Indonesia (2005); Brazil (2006); Nigeria and Vietnam (2007); Australia and Kazakhstan (2009); Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Malaysia (2010); Afghanistan and Uzbekistan (2011); ASEAN and Tajikistan (2012), Canada, UAE, Seychelles, Mongolia, Oman and the United Kingdom (2015) (Hall, 2016: 8); Israel and Rwanda (2017); and Egypt (2023) (Ballesteros Peiró, 2023: 136).

In foreign and defence policy, India holds 2+2 Dialogues with the United States, Australia, Japan and Russia and trilateral dialogues with Australia, Japan and India, initiated in June 2015 and focused on maritime security and freedom of navigation; US, India and Japan, from 2016, which included Japan in the Malabar exercises that India and the US had been conducting jointly since 1992; Australia, India and Indonesia, active since 2017; Australia, France and India (since 2020); India, Italy and Japan (since 2021); and UAE, France and India, conducting joint operations since 2022 (Ibid.).

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was the manifestation of the success of the G20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023. India's excellent relations with several Gulf countries, especially the UAE, were key to its inclusion in a project that was intended to be the competition to the BRI and an alternative to the failed INSTC. The project, with two corridors (east: from India to the Gulf; north: from Israel to Europe), maritime and rail, is in the air due to the war in Gaza. It is an initiative of particular interest to the US (predictably, the prelude to the Saudi signature on the Abraham Accords), which was intended to involve India more in the Gulf.

Of the European countries, France is the closest. France has been instrumental in supporting the development of India's civil nuclear programme, being the first to sign an agreement in 2008 and a memorandum of understanding in 2009 for the construction of six nuclear reactors in the state of Maharashtra (Kumar 2013). India appreciates France's endorsement of its inclusion in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, despite Chinese opposition, not to mention its support when it was sanctioned after the 1998 nuclear tests.

France has overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific. Not surprisingly, it has the world's second largest EEZ (after the United States), covering more than 2.6 billion square kilometres. Among other joint participation bodies, the French are part of two organisations based in India: the Indian Ocean Region Information Fusion Centre, which also includes Australia, Japan, Maldives, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Seychelles, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States (Ibid.); and the Indian Ocean Coastal Association. The French government has been conducting naval (*Varuna*), land (*Shakti*) and air support (*Garuda*) exercises with India since the 1980s. The two signed the Joint Strategic Vision for the Indian Ocean Region in 2018, with the aim of improving maritime infrastructures and facilitating joint use of their facilities (Ibid.: 139).

Conclusions

The inclusion of India in the study of middle powers poses a methodological challenge that such a classification exercise poses. On the one hand, we face the difficulties of applying theories to regions as complex and different as South Asia, and on the other, defining the theoretical limits of India's role in the contemporary world. The transformation from promise to reality is taking place, and this transition does not have the same appearance as it might have had in other geographies (especially the most studied examples of middle powers, such as Australia or Canada) and at other times (20th century).

The turn of the century has presented us with methodological and theoretical challenges in international relations. Not only is it necessary to define the role of countries from other geographies within a discipline accused of being fundamentally "Western", a white male, racist, male chauvinist resource - a debate that does not concern us in this study, but which is constantly present in India. We will not miss an opportunity to hear Foreign

Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar say that "Europe still believes that its problems are world problems but the world's problems are not its problems". Accusations that India was financing the war in Ukraine from the Russian side (by continuing to buy gas) are a source of allegations of hypocrisy from a West that, according to New Delhi, uses different yardsticks.

Returning to the factors described by Struye de Swielande, India has sufficient material capabilities; a self-concept that goes beyond considering itself as a mere middle power; a global status increasingly sought after by the US and its allies, as well as by other middle powers in the Indo-Pacific; a clear regional impact in South Asia that, despite dissatisfaction from neighbours, continues to show its hegemonic role; and a growing systemic impact, as shown by its participation in associations such as BRICS; a clear regional impact in South Asia which, despite the dissatisfaction of its neighbours, continues to show its hegemonic role; and a growing systemic impact, as shown by its participation in associations such as BRICS, Quad, or its drive to reform the United Nations and join the Security Council (with less success, for the moment).

India, which recognises itself as an increasingly relevant power outside its neighbourhood, is not content to have its choices dictated to it. To quote Jaishankar again at the UN General Assembly (September 2023), "the days of a few nations dictating the global agenda, while expecting others to abide by it, are over". The Indian leadership makes decisions for its own benefit, not for the benefit of others. Interpretations of its behaviour in the world reflect the global changes it leads along with a set of emerging countries, which seek to escape the pressure to take part in the Great Global Competition. Instead, they prefer to maximise their chances for their own interests. India is at the forefront of these changes and it will not be possible to understand its role in the world without a new interpretative framework that takes into account its own ideas.

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